

*Promoting Cross-Cultural Communication and Student Reflection through
Speaking Logs*

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Abstract

Many Japanese students enter university having had little to no interaction with native or foreign speakers of English outside of their classroom. In a university with international students there lies an opportunity for students to come into contact with people around their age from all over the world, creating the chance for intercultural exchange. However, outside of sharing a class together, it can be difficult for these two groups to interact. One way of changing this is through a weekly assignment called the Speaking Log. This assignment has students interacting with their international counterparts on a weekly basis in a loosely structured environment, discussing topics covered in class or of their own interest, and documenting and reflecting on the experience.

This paper will explain the assignment, discuss difficulties in implementation (as well as how to overcome them), but mainly show, through log entries of first year students, how students gain broader perspectives on topics both academic and personal, develop background knowledge and cultural awareness, and through repetition, reflection, and teacher feedback, students can come to change as language learners.

Also, as this is an ongoing assignment, the paper will look at limitations and ways in which the assignment can better implemented.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, international students, speaking logs

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Introduction

One of the goals of Japan's Ministry of Education (MEXT) (2012) is to graduate more globally minded citizens. One means of doing this is through the New Growth Strategy, the goal of which is to send 300,000 students and workers abroad and accept 300,000 students from abroad into their universities. With this in mind "both Japanese students and international students study hard in diverse environments so that they will be expected to play an important role in the world. (p. 1)" Much media attention and research focuses on the number of Japanese students studying abroad; however, there is considerably less attention given to the impact international students have on domestic students. According to a recent report by JASSO (2017), there were 171,122 international students studying at Japanese universities in 2016, which is an increase of 12.5% from the previous year. While there have been countless studies and reports over the years on the impact of studying abroad on Japanese students, there is a noticeable lack of literature on the impact of how interacting with international students impacts domestic Japanese students.

There is, however, a growing body of research from places like the US and New Zealand that suggests that regular interaction with international students has numerous positive effects on domestic students. Wilson (1993) found that regular interaction through a school-sponsored conversation partner program between domestic students enrolled in a teacher training course and international students lead to gains in both substantive knowledge and of a global perspective as well as the opportunity to develop interpersonal friendships (p. 26). To summarize a recent study from Duke University done by Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013), domestic students that had regular interaction with international students showed significantly higher levels of skill development in a number of areas including reading or speaking a foreign language, relating to people of different races, nations, or religions, learner autonomy, and problem solving. Likewise, Yefanova, Baird, and Montgomery's (2015) study done at the University of Minnesota highlights such gains as "an interest in studying abroad, world events, and foreign language learning...learning overt and subtle aspects of other cultures...developing multiple perspectives on course content, ...and learning to avoid tokenizing foreign "others." to name a few (p. 14). Another study done at the University of Kentucky by Jourdini (2012) had similar findings, and found that these benefits extended to not only the students but also the faculty. Additionally, one study done by Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson (2001 as referenced in Luo & Jamieson-Drake 2013, p.87), showed that regular discussions with international students lead to positive gains in critical thinking with Caucasian female students. Cheney (2001 as referenced in Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2013, p. 87) also found that regular interaction with international students created increased awareness of language usage in both English and the foreign language, and mentions that the increased cultural awareness gained from regular interaction with international students could benefit these US students when they entered the workforce.

Having international students on-campus provides domestic students with an opportunity to have an on-campus international experience. However, in order for this experience to have any significance, it must be regular. That is to say, if the domestic and international students cannot share a class together, other structured activities must be put into place. Ward (2001) suggests that these interactions will not

occur “spontaneously,” so it is up to the institution to facilitate these interactions. One method available is a weekly assignment called the Speaking Log.

The Speaking Log

The Speaking Log assignment is a weekly or biweekly homework assignment which asks the students to spend a minimum of 15~30 minutes conversing in English with international students outside of class. This can be done anywhere and by any means (i.e. via Skype, FaceTime, LINE Video Chat, etc.); however, most students tend to visit the student lounge where many of the international students gather between classes. The students are encouraged to go in groups at first until they build the confidence to go by themselves. They are given a sheet of paper, the Speaking Log, which explains the assignment, gives them a number of questions to discuss, and a set of questions to fill out after the conversation (see Appendix). While Questions 1~3 ask the students to summarize the conversation, Question 4 (Q4) asks them to reflect on the conversation (*How do you feel about the conversation? How was your speaking/listening?*) and Question 5 (Q5) allows the students to ask the instructor a question. Sometimes students ask for clarification (“What’s the difference between *impressed with* and *impressed by*?”), other times they might ask instructor for his thoughts on what they talked about (“What do you think makes a person successful?”), and very often at the beginning of the semester, it is used to ask for advice (“How can I keep a conversation going?”). Q5 is often used to personalize instruction, communicate directly with the students, and diagnose any problems students might have while doing the assignment. Often if many students ask the same kind of question, I can address it in class.

The questions for discussion are based on what is being covered in class, and is in effect, designed to give students an international perspective about the topics and, hopefully, deepen their interest in it. Additionally, at the beginning of the semester, there are also questions about studying language (“*How long have you been studying Japanese?*” “*What do you think is the best way to improve your Japanese?*”), studying abroad (“*What do you hope to learn while studying abroad?*” “*What made you decide to study abroad?*”), and the students’ lives abroad (“*What is something interesting you have done so far in Japan?*” “*What do you miss from home?*”). The aim is to give the students easier, more relatable content to discuss, and to find commonalities with their international counterparts in order to make future conversations more relaxed. These questions, especially the ones about language learning, are also designed to expose the students to different methods and attitudes towards language learning.

The comments in the following sections come from three classes of Japanese students enrolled at a private university in Western Japan in the second half of their first year. There were a total of 69 students (M=25, F=44). Based on an informal questionnaire given at the beginning of the semester, none of the students had any interaction with international students in the previous semester.

Cross-Cultural Communication and International Friendships

The most obvious benefit of this assignment is that it gives students an opportunity to speak English with people their own age from other countries. This gives students an opportunity to learn firsthand about different countries and their cultural practices. Because of the aforementioned questions about studying language and studying abroad, the most common topics the students wrote about seemed to be about school life and studying English and Japanese. These discussions tended to be about the difficulty of studying Japanese (“I helped him study for his Japanese test. He says Kanji is hard.” “He asked, why do you have to know Keigo?”) and their interest in different varieties of English. Several students enjoyed talking to a young man from New Zealand who taught them “Kiwi slang” while others wrote with interest about the differences between British and American English. Another popular topic was hometowns. While some learned about new places like Minnesota (“It has over 10 thousand lakes. It sounds very beautiful. I want to go there.”), others got first hand insights into places they already knew: “Before this conversation, I want to know London, now I want to know more and more. Now I want to go.”) They also picked up on things that might otherwise be taken for granted. For example, one student was very surprised that “brothers and sisters in America call each other by name”, rather than using a hierarchical naming system like Japan. Also, students enjoyed learning about the differences in holidays. This assignment was given during the Fall Semester, so many domestic students were excited to spend Halloween with the international students and to learn that not all countries celebrate the holiday. Many also learned about the differences in how people in different countries celebrate Christmas (or why they do not).

Through this assignment, it seemed that a number of the students developed actual friendships with international students and spent time off-campus with them. One student wrote about how she invited an international student to her house to have dinner with her family after showing him around her hometown of Nara. She wrote very proudly of her ability to guide someone around her hometown and explain things to him in English. Some students were able to learn about things in more hands-on/direct way. For example, one student befriended a student from Finland, who also happened to be a chef back home. He invited the student and several of her classmates over to cook a gourmet meal together. In another similar example, a student had dinner with a couple of students from Mexico, and they taught him how to make Mexican food and how to do a traditional dance, which the student seemed very much to enjoy. While the types of insights they are getting into these new cultures aren't as overarching as they might get in a classroom, they are personal and the students show a greater affinity for and desire to learn about these new cultures.

As for the questions on the Speaking Log that related to the course content, in general, the responses to these did not reveal much in terms of an obvious shift in understanding, nor did their write ups show any noticeable surprise at an international student's perspective. This is perhaps one way the assignment could be improved upon. The four chapters we covered in class focused on risk, altruism, charity, and measurements of success. Most students asked the topical questions during the assignment, but the students did not seem to find much interest in the international students' responses, and instead focused on personal information. Perhaps this is

because in a lot of ways the students had similar views or avoided some of the more direct questions (i.e.: “Would you give money to a homeless person on the street”).

Change as a Language Learner

Another major change that students made through this assignment was that there seemed to be a general attitudinal shift in terms of how the students perceived themselves as language learners. Many students tended to follow an arc of development through this assignment.

- At first, students seemed very nervous and critical of their speaking and listening skills: “It was fun, but I got nervous. So I could only one question. I am not satisfied with my speaking and listening.”
- “It was very difficult. I couldn’t hear him, and I couldn’t think of ideas to speak with him.”
- Q: “What topics do foreigners like?”

These comments were taken from the first assignment and were quite typical in their content. The students seem discouraged by their interaction, and in some cases see the international students as a sort of nebulous entity. This makes sense when considering that this was likely their first interaction with a person their own age in a foreign language, and although they have spent 6 years studying English in Junior and Senior High School, to quote Ikegashira, Morita, and Matsumoto (2009), “they mainly study grammatical points to prepare for the university entrance examinations. It is very rare for high school students to have oral communication classes. (p. 4)” In essence, they have gone from having never spoken with a person their own age in English, to starting a conversation with a stranger. This is why it is critical that the students do this assignment repeatedly. After repeated visits, and plenty of positive reinforcement and feedback via written comments on their logs and during class, they start to change their attitude.

- “I could make my ideas understood. It’s easier to hear.”
- “I listened to him carefully because he answered seriously.”
- “It is easy to talk for a long time when we have the common topic.”

Through my comments, I tried to emphasize that they were speaking to fellow language learners. This intimidated some students at first (“She said that she has only studied Japanese for four years, and she’s fluent. I’ve studied English for 6 years and I can’t speak. Why?”). In this case, the term “fluent” is likely relative, and it probably meant the international student was confident in the way she spoke. In my response to these comments, I encouraged the student to ask the students how they came to be “fluent,” and to remember that this international student most likely had a time when she was having trouble communicating in Japanese. The goal is that they come to realize that it’s common practice to be misunderstood, and that everyone seems to have trouble expressing themselves in a second or third language at some point.

Also because of the nature of this assignment, students must become more independent. The classroom situation is usually teacher lead and has a one-size fit all approach. This model offers structure, but it also affords the option to be passive by

letting others speak for them or dominate the conversation. At the beginning of the semester, these students went in groups at first, and several reported on feeling inadequate in the face of more confident and seemingly proficient classmates: “This time Nagisa talked a lot. She is very strong, so I want to be strong. I must study hard!”

Because these students are encountering confident and seemingly proficient international students and classmates, they develop an intrinsic motivation to study.

This usually manifested itself in pointed questions asked in Q5 (whereas, in the past it was left blank). They then take this advice much more seriously as there is an immediate use for it.

Towards the end of the semester, many of the students had made friends, or have gone and made themselves understood enough that their responses to Q4 seem to be much more positive as illustrated in the following comments:

- “I felt my listening skills improving.”
- “I often talk to him, so I feel comfortable.”
- “I think my communication skill in English is making progress.”

Also, many students have stopped using Q5 to ask for topics to discuss, and instead have more natural conversations about common interests:

- “We talked about backpacking in South America. We both like to travel, and he thinks South America is so different than his home Denmark.”

Problems and Possible Solutions

Some students tended to have trouble with this assignment. One of the aforementioned benefits of interaction with the international students was the possibility of learning about different cultures and becoming less ethnocentric, however, some students failed to learn about the other students’ country and culture. This almost always happened because of a combination of a few things. First of all, the student ignored some of the more pointed questions that were designed to get information about the international students’ country or their opinion on a topic, and instead asked questions about what the international student thought about Japan. Also, the student talked to a new international student every time (ignoring my advice against this) and so, in effect, they treated the assignment like an interview rather than a discussion/conversation. Informal interviews with these students revealed that they basically asked their questions about the student’s opinion of Japan and listened to their answers without commenting or adding anything to the discussion. When asked why they did not use the questions I provided, one student mentioned that they felt it difficult to initiate a conversation and talk about a topic like altruism. In other words, they felt more comfortable asking the international students about their impressions of Japan.

Some ways that I tried to get around this was to include questions on the worksheet that directly asked the student to find information about the international students’ country. (“*Recommend me something from your country: a book, a band, or a movie*”) I also addressed this issue directly in class. I even talked to some of the

international students to see how they viewed this assignment, and they told me things to tell my students. (“Don’t tell us you want foreigner friends.” and “Yes, we like Japan.”) They mentioned that they do like talking about things like Manga and Anime, but not about whether or not they can eat Japanese food. Overall this seemed effective, but there were still students that continued to ask the same questions up to the end.

Another issue was that some students had trouble understanding the international students because of things like speed and accents. To address this, I eventually paired the speaking log with an extensive listening activity and recommended sites like ELLLO.org as a means of listening to various accents. I also used this opportunity to reinforce the idea that English is spoken by people all over the world, and that it is important to hear it spoken by speakers from a variety of L1 backgrounds.

Limitations and Future Plans

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this assignment, as it was reported in this paper, is that it is done over a 15 week period, which if it is not carried over into the next semester, limits the students’ gains in cultural and communicative competency. Also, in terms of data collection, this article attempts to generalize the experience and development of three classes, and naturally, as a result, many voices are underrepresented. Also, the amount students wrote in the log was rather short, which surely contributed to the relative superficiality of some of the data. In the future, I would like to focus on a smaller group of students and analyze individual student growth over the semester. And, I would like to attach separate writing assignments where the students can go into greater detail about what they have learned. Finally, it would be worthwhile to replicate a number of the studies done in the United States and in New Zealand to measure more of the specific gains mentioned.

Conclusion

In an EFL context, it can be very difficult to get students speaking English outside of class, especially with native or non-Japanese speakers, however this assignment provides a meaningful way to do so. The Speaking Log gives them a chance to engage in cross cultural communication, reflect on their growth and identity as language learners, and get an idea what young people outside of Japan think about various topics.

At the beginning of each semester, I give my students a questionnaire to fill out that introduces themselves and gives me an idea of what they want to learn and why they decided to study at this particular university. A number of them mentioned that they want to study abroad and to make friends with people from other countries. Also, at the time of writing this paper, I am trying a version of the Speaking Log where the students speak with each other in English outside of class. This is because during the Spring Semester, the international students leave at the end of May, which is a little less than halfway through the domestic students’ semester. At least three students have mentioned that they like talking with their friends, but they think the assignment would be better if they got to do it with the international students. Others have written that the senior members of their clubs, my former students, told them that I used to make them talk to the international students on a weekly basis, and that they,

my current students, want to do the same. The takeaway here is that many of the students want to interact with the international students, but they cannot seem to do it on their own. They expect the instructor or the university to facilitate the interactions.

Wards (2001) extensive work on the interaction between international students and domestic students in New Zealand came to a similar conclusion:

Research has shown that the presence of international students, even in large numbers, is insufficient in itself to promote intercultural interactions, to develop intercultural friendships and to result in international understanding. Rather, situations must be structured to foster these processes (“Strategies”).

While this assignment is one step towards fostering these interactions, as stated, 15 weeks is really a rather short amount of time. Due to the nature of this assignment, any measurement of how much impact regular interaction has on things like cultural competence is going to be fairly shallow. Rather, the institutions themselves should do more to foster regular interaction with international and domestic students on an ongoing basis. It is worth noting that several students do continue to visit the international students lounge after the semester has finished and others have made efforts to continue the friendships that they have made. So, in this sense the Speaking Log may be seen as a good stepping-stone.

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Appendix

Speaking Log – Take A Risk!

The purpose of this assignment is to practice speaking outside of class. For this assignment, I would like you to talk with a native speaker. There are many in the CIE lounge! Please try to speak with one of them for at least 15 ~30 minutes. You can have a general discussion or find out what they think about one of the topics we are discussing in class. When you are finished, complete the following questions:

Some topics to help get things started:

- Why do you think people help each other?
- Is there any situation where you wouldn't help someone?
- Recommend me something good to watch/read/listen to from your country or hometown.

1.) Who did you speak with?(name, where are they from?) _____

2.) What did you talk about?

3.) What new words or phrases did you learn from this conversation?

4.) How do you feel about the conversation? How was your speaking/listening?

5.) Questions for the teacher:
