

[論 文]

English Proficiency Among the Japanese and the Dutch: A Comparison of English Classrooms and Language Environments Within the Two Countries

日本人とオランダ人の英語能力－両国の英語教室と言語環境の比較から

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Abstract

In recent years, Japanese citizens' need to communicate in English has become vital on a global scale. Recognizing this, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has implemented new strategies for English teachers in Japan. Most notably, MEXT has suggested the use of English-only in the classroom. Promoting an L2-only language environment above an L1 and L2 environment is embraced by some and questioned by others. However, Japan's English Language proficiency continues to trend downward in comparison to other countries. Prominent among these countries is the Netherlands; where English-only locales and situations are far more abundant than in other countries. This report seeks to first understand and compare Japan's English classrooms with those in the Netherlands. Then, results are shared of a study in which we attempted to mimic some of those L2-rich environments of the Netherlands for our own students. We sought to answer the question: "What happens to the relationship between the L1 and L2 when students listen and engage with English-only material outside of the classroom?" The results of our English Foreign Language study and considerations for further research are reported.

Keywords : EFL/English Proficiency/Dutch English Classrooms/Japanese English Classrooms/Young Adult Learners

I Introduction

NHK news recently reported that Japan's English Language proficiency level is the lowest it has been in years. The news report refers to a survey produced by Education First, (EF), a Swiss English Language education company. This year, EF reported that Japan's English language proficiency is ranked 92nd out of 116 countries. There have been numerous surveys in years past that ranked Japan's English proficiency level – but this year's survey sets Japan at a record low according to the NHK website (NHK, 2024). Considering this, EF's report is both confounding and concerning.

EF conducts their surveys and subsequent rankings based upon the average scores of their own "EF SET

PLUS" standardized test. This test is produced and available for free on their website. EF SET PLUS thoroughly evaluates examinees' listening and reading skills and correlates them to CEFR standards. The test was first launched in 2014. At which time, EF invited Professor Richard M. Luecht of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to administer an objective study to compare their test with the standard IELTS and TOEFL tests. As reported on their website, "EF SET PLUS scores are as reliable as TOEFL and IELTS scores" (EF, 2024). Though the test is created and administered by an independent company, it appears to be an accurate indicator of English language ability.

This record low ranking by EF begs the question: Why is English language proficiency so low in a country that, according to World Population Review,

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has very high IQ levels worldwide and, furthermore, has a remarkably robust education system? In fact, the age group with the lowest scores were those that most recently left Japan's education system: those aged 18 – 25. This age group should have higher English proficiency, not lower, than the age brackets above them. This study endeavors to understand this fall in proficiency levels. After comparing English classrooms in Japan with those in the Netherlands, this report proposes that there is a correlation between levels of English proficiency and exposure to the L2 outside of the classroom.

II MEXT's Standards to Prepare Students for a Globalized World

According to EF, the three countries with the highest proficiency levels were: the Netherlands, Norway, and Singapore. All three countries have great education systems, heterogenous societies, and an understanding of the value of English for commerce. Knowing that Japan must increase English language proficiency in an age of globalization, MEXT has promoted a number of changes to the Course of Study in recent years. Most notably has been the insistence upon Japanese English teachers to transition from the grammar translation method to English-only methods that encourage improvisational speaking (MEXT 2020).

This has left some teachers in a state of uncertainty and has caused anxiety regarding how to best prepare students for university entrance exams (McCarthy, 2021, p. 3). Indeed, there has been some pushback to this L2-only implementation; with many remarking that students need use of their L1 in order to fully comprehend the context and grammar of English. In fact, this has taken place in other countries too. Cruz states that his Spanish students "...also preferred that teacher uses Spanish to explain the topic or to explain grammar rules. Students believed that this may help them to improve their English knowledge" (Almeida, Cruz, Ovando, & Vazquez, 2024, p. 10446). Beginning in the 1990s, teachers began rejecting a strict adherence to L2-only language environments.

This trend is continuing to gain popularity, but teachers must be careful not to use more L1 in the classroom than they fully realize.

This researcher proposes that, in Japan, the use of simple English as the only language in the classroom increases students' hours of exposure to authentic English; and is therefore beneficial in a country where students infrequently hear, see, or encounter English outside of the classroom. So, while this L1/L2 debate will inevitably continue, this researcher aimed to provide evidence for their proposal by evaluating how Dutch students study English in the Netherlands, and then observe how a L2-only language environment affected our students' engagement with English.

III MEXT's Standards in Japanese English Classrooms

Due to the Course of Study changes, in 2020 the beginning year of English was moved from 5th to 3rd grade. Additionally, MEXT prompted more communicative and improvisational speaking activities in classrooms. Nakashima states that "...the purpose of the revised Course of Study is to give priority to communication and teach the necessary structural knowledge of English for that, not to teach communication with priority on structure"(Nakashima, 2021, p. 6). She also states that MEXT advocates using the CEFR framework to gauge English ability. And lastly, that MEXT insists upon a stronger presence of English in English Language classrooms.

However, due to factors both in and out of Japanese teachers' control, MEXT standards are not always followed meticulously in the classroom.

According to Nakashima's English translation of MEXT's Survey of English Education, in 2020 18.5% of participating Junior High School teachers use 75% English or more in their classes. While 58.3% of participating Junior High School teachers use 50% - 75% English or more in their classes. And 23% of participating Junior High School teachers only use English for less than 50% of their class. (Nakashima, 2021, p. 9). This survey was conducted in 2020, but Japanese English teachers have been encouraged to

use mostly English in the classroom since 2009.

Understandably, many teachers struggle to use English-only in their classrooms; especially high school teachers who need to prepare their students for university entrance exams. But, according to McCarthy's survey of English students at Oberlin Academy in Tokyo, students desire some changes to the typical English pedagogical approach that is found in Japan. McCarthy interviewed 12 students regarding the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom. Three main themes emerged from his survey; that there is a "desire to change the way English is taught at school in Japan, (there is) an acknowledgement that Japanese is needed in the English language classroom, and (there is) a desire to try the 'English only' approach even if it is difficult." (McCarthy, 2021, pp. 5-6). McCarthy's survey was meticulously done and sought to fully understand the benefit and the downside of an L1 + L2 language environment. His students' responses varied considerably, but generally adhered to the three themes mentioned above.

Of course, some Japanese schools have impressive English programs. The *Mainichi Shimbun* reports that for the fifth year in a row, Saitama City junior high third-year students have achieved an Eiken level three or above. (Masuda, 2024). In Saitama City, students use a global English curriculum, and they receive more hours of English per year than students in other cities across Japan. The city also prioritizes English events such as intensive programs, debates, and plays – ensuring that students receive English in and outside of the classroom.

IV English Classrooms in the Netherlands

There are some similarities between Japan and the Netherlands. Both countries are small on the global scale, both have a history of sea commerce, and both have a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. But one major difference is the cultural composition of each country's societies; Japan's society is homogeneous while the Netherlands's is heterogeneous. Although Dutch is still the native language of 95.6% of the population; 14% of the population was foreign-born in

2021, and 12% have at least one foreign-born parent (World Data, 2024). With such a heterogeneous society, English has emerged as a common language. Dutch citizens hear, see, and use English on their streets, in their cafes, on their screens, and in their homes. Therefore, Dutch students encounter English both in and outside the classroom.

In fact, English Language classrooms in Japan and the Netherlands are not so different. But the amount of English exposure that students receive outside of class is vastly different between the two countries. But it should be noted that there are some major differences between the two countries' education systems. Most Dutch schools are privatized and compete for students; with many schools adopting different educational philosophies and promoting students' self-directed learning. Whereas in Japan, most schools are public and a standardized national curriculum is utilized in the classroom.

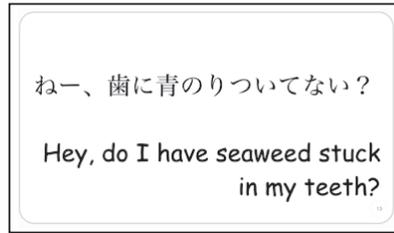
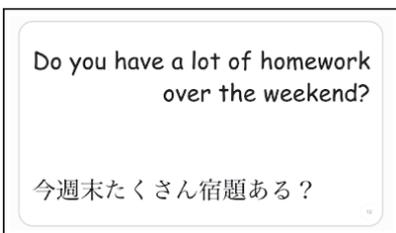
In 2024, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a study in which they reviewed the methods of English Language teaching for 15-year-olds in various countries, including the Netherlands. They observed three different schools in the Netherlands and interviewed principals, teachers, and students, regarding English Language classrooms. Similar to Japan, their report stated that Dutch classrooms also focus heavily on reading and grammar. Therefore, it seems likely that the difference between Dutch students' and Japanese students' English proficiency lies not in but outside of the classroom.

Dutch students are simply exposed to more English outside of class, and even engage with English through various mediums such as social media, video games, or research daily. Indeed, the OECD study reported that "...several students felt that studying English at school is just about studying grammar whereas outside school they can communicate and interact in the language" (OECD, 2024). Dutch students hear English from native sources in their daily lives and the value of listening to authentic, native pronunciation of English cannot be undermined.

V Mimicking Dutch Students' Exposure to English - Methodology

It is possible that the major difference between Japanese and Dutch students learning English is simply the amount of English that students encounter outside of the classroom. And, assuming that Dutch students are not translating every single English utterance that they hear in their daily lives, it is also probable that Dutch students are listening to English-only occasionally or often, and negotiating meaning of English while listening. This study sought to create a simulation of that L2-rich environment for our students and then understand 'what happens to the relationship between the L1 and L2 when students listen and engage with English-only material outside of the classroom?' With that guiding question in mind, we formulated a methodology.

Before the study, students were to take a short flashcard quiz. We asked students to view each flashcard and then simply to circle which language they saw first on their correlating worksheet. There were 14 flashcards in all. Upon each flashcard was written an English word, utterance, or sentence with its Japanese equivalent. Both the English and Japanese were in varying locations on the card. Each word used the same font, size, and color. Cards were arranged in order of complexity, with the last cards being the most difficult. Some examples are given below.



We were interested to discover if the language of the L2 was prioritized over the L1 as research of parallel activation by Bobb, Kroll, & Hoshino (2014) might suggest. Or if students would naturally see their L1 first. We were also inspired by a recent study at MIT in which polylingual individuals' brain activity were measured when they heard or saw one of their acquired languages. Surprisingly, as Jagers states "... the more familiar the language, the greater the activation of these networks – except for the participant's mother tongue..." (Jagers, 2024). Without the use of an MRI machine, we sought to measure students' engagement with English and with their L1 by this simple flashcard quiz.

After this flashcard quiz, students were asked to listen to English videos, songs, or podcasts for 2 weeks. We shared a google slideshow with videos that were chosen by the researcher. The videos were organized according to categories: food, life, stories, life in Japan, and travel. Although we provided this slideshow, we also emphasized to students that they could listen to other content if they wished. We strove to imitate Dutch students' English listening autonomy. Furthermore, we encouraged participants to listen at home or in a relaxed environment. We tried to mimic the Dutch English Language environment as best we could considering students' schedules, work load, and time constraints.

After 2 weeks, students were to return and take another flashcard quiz. This one using the same stipulations – English and Japanese in varying places and arranged according to complexity. These cards did not use the same words, utterances, or sentences as in the first flashcard quiz, but we did endeavor to make them similar; replacing 'San Francisco / サンフランシスコ' in the first quiz with 'Los Angeles / ロサンゼルス' in the second quiz, for example.

VI Findings

We were not sure what to expect from our flashcard study, or if any conclusions could even be drawn from such a simple study. Indeed, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding neural pathways or suppression of the L1 by the simple question of which language one sees first. However, when comparing the students' first and second flashcard quizzes, it seems that listening to English-only did have some affect.

Due to student obligations and constraints upon their time, we only obtained one student volunteer for this study. This student shall be referred to as 'Student H'. 'H' was chosen because it is the first letter of 'Hokuriku Gakuin University.' Before sharing the results of this study, the researcher wants to reiterate that the number of times English or Japanese was seen first, has nothing to do with the students' intelligence or knowledge of English. We strongly discourage that conclusion. The results of the first flashcard quiz are shared below.

Student H – 1st quiz

Number of cards – 14

Number of times English was seen first – 4

Number of times Japanese was seen first -10

Student H then listened to videos in English only for about one week. On average, they watched or listened 15 minutes daily. They watched each video twice. Student H watched videos in only English first, then they watched again with English subtitles. Then Student H took a second flashcard quiz. The results of the second flashcard quiz are shared below.

Student H – 2nd quiz

Number of cards -14

Number of times English was seen first -7

Number of times Japanese was seen first – 7

We concluded the study by asking the student to rate their experience with English after this study. We asked them to circle 1 – 5, with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 5 being 'strongly agree.' When asked if

they enjoyed listening to English, Student H answered '5.' When asked if they feel more confident in English, Student H answered '5.' When asked if they want to learn more English, Student H answered '5.'

VII Conclusion and Considerations for Further Research

As these findings indicate, listening to English has an impact on students' eagerness and confidence in English, and we hypothesize that it impacts suppression of the L1 as well. However, there are some considerations regarding further research. During this study, we were limited by the low number of student involvement. Repeating the study with students of differing English proficiency levels and attitudes towards English would be more enlightening. Additionally, the researcher wanted to stipulate that students speak English with a native speaker daily, but this simply was not possible due to time constraints upon our students. A more exhaustive study composed of more students that incorporates English conversations, debates, role-plays, and games along with the English listening practice would be much more ideal.

However, although we did not have an MRI machine to research which neural pathways were or were not active during Student H's listening, this simple flashcard quiz was still enlightening. It is probable that listening to English-only allowed for easier suppression of the L1 in Student H when they took the flashcard quiz. This suppression is apparent when observing that Student H saw the English first 7 times in the 2nd quiz, as opposed to only 4 times in the 1st quiz. We propose that listening to one's L2 in a relaxed language environment enables learners to focus on the L2 and suppress the L1. This is the language environment that Dutch students live in, and this is the language environment we sought to simulate for our students. Furthermore, overall, Dutch students have positive feelings towards English, and Student H also indicated a positive reaction to English after listening in an English-only environment.

Regarding Japanese English classrooms, this

researcher agrees with MEXT that more English-only language environments must be prioritized in Japan. Ideally at least 75% should be in the L2 – understandably, some Japanese will be needed. But English-only environments are imperative because Japanese students are unlikely to encounter authentic English outside of the classroom. Using Japanese for 50% or more of the class deprives students of an opportunity to listen and negotiate meaning of authentic English (particularly if there is an ALT in the classroom). If our observation is correct and the biggest difference between Japanese English students and Dutch English students is not their teachers' methods, but rather their exposure to English outside the classroom, then Japanese English teachers must take advantage of the fact that the classroom is one of the only places that Japanese students can encounter authentic English. Furthermore, utilizing ALTs productively, guiding students to read easy English books or watch simple YouTube channels, and creating fun English games, events, or debates are all methods that could motivate students to listen and engage with English more. It is this researcher's hope that Japan's schools will follow the example of the Dutch and encourage students to engage with authentic English both in and out of the classroom.

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