

Laying the Groundwork for Globalization: A Study on English Oral Communication Classes

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Abstract: In recent years, English education at Japanese universities has become increasingly important, corresponding with the trend of globalization. To lay the groundwork for globalization at the Kasuga campus of the National University Corporation Tsukuba University of Technology, this work discusses the problems and issues of English education in oral communication classes in terms of (1) the diversity of students with vision impairments and (2) the disparity in their English proficiency levels. In discussing the former, this study introduces the effective usage of Integrated Circuit recorders in assisting students with vision impairment and points out their difficulty in learning English braille and the International Phonetic Alphabet. As a result of arguing for the latter, the study suggests that a proficiency-based teaching and learning system is urgently required. The English Chat Room and English certification exams, which are already implemented at Kasuga campus, are also described in brief. The study suggests that further advancements are necessary to create the groundwork for globalization.

Keywords: Globalization, Oral communication, Vision impairment, Proficiency based teaching and learning system

1. Introduction

With the trends in globalization, English education has become increasingly important in Japan. In 2011, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) made English education compulsory in elementary schools, and in 2015, MEXT released its Execution Plan for the Reform of English Education in Response to Globalization. This plan aims to develop learners' communication abilities so they can proactively solve problems through basic English skills [1]. Thus, it is urgent to assist students at the Kasuga campus of the National University Corporation Tsukuba University of Technology (K-NTUT) by creating an English education framework, so that students with vision impairment can play important roles in a globalized society while cooperating with sighted people.

This study delves on the problems and issues of English education in oral communication classes at K-NTUT in terms of (1) the diversity of students with vision impairment and (2) the disparity of English proficiency levels. From here, the key factors in laying the groundwork for globalization are identified. This study is organized into five sections. Section 2 discusses the disability compensations and problems of English education at K-NTUT (especially in the oral communication classes) as regards diversity of students with vision impairment. In this section, the

effective usage of Integrated Circuit (IC) recorders is introduced and the difficulties of learning English braille and International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) are pointed out. Section 3 examines the problems arising from the disparity of students' English proficiency levels in a class and suggests that a proficiency-based teaching and learning system be urgently required. Section 4 briefly introduces the English Chat Room and English certification exams, which are both implemented at Kasuga campus. This section also points out other remaining issues. Lastly, section 5 concludes this paper.

2. Approach to the diversity of learners with vision impairment

K-NTUT students come from different backgrounds and their level of visual impairment varies. Under this situation, providing adequate disability compensation to students with vision impairment is a necessary condition in creating the groundwork for globalization. This section discusses the problems of English education in the oral communication classes and argues the essential factors for creating this groundwork in English classes in terms of considering the diversity of students with vision impairment.

2.1. Disability compensation for students with vision impairment in English oral communication classes

K-NTUT first-year students are divided into three English oral communication classes based on their major or courses: Acupuncture and Moxibustion, Physical Therapy, and Computer Science Courses. Students are therefore not assigned to classes based on the severity of their vision impairment. Thus, students in a single class can have varying levels of vision impairment, ranging from completely blind to weak sight, including tunnel vision. Oral communication classes provide disability compensation to students with vision impairment, just as in other K-NTUT classes. For instance, teaching materials are distributed in both printed and braille forms. Word/text/braille data files are also available so that students can choose the form most useful to them. Printed materials for students with weak eyesight are provided in several different font sizes ranging from approximately 10 to 36 point. Classrooms also have magnifying viewers that can inverse black and white materials on the screen. Depending on their level of vision impairment, students may use loupes, binoculars, or braille memos as well.

One distinctive care method in oral communication classes is that students with weak eyesight not using a magnifying viewer move their seats next to peers who do or next to blind students; this ensures that pair/group work is conducted smoothly. Another method is the vocal spelling out of words written on the board several times to guarantee that students can take notes.

The last form of support relates to students' reading speed. One problem requiring distinctive support in oral communication classes is students' different reading speeds. Most students have difficulty in reading and their reading speed is relatively slow compared with the anticipated rate, which is based on their English ability. In particular, students using magnifying viewers require extra time when reading English materials and may gradually feel discomfort when doing so. Thus, although these students may enjoy studying English, they at times eventually stop doing it. Under such conditions, grasping the natural flow of conversation through pair/group works, which is among the most effective oral communication practices, is almost impossible.

To overcome this situation, I provided the students with IC recorders, which contained audio data from the text, to reduce the burden on students' eyesight and help them utilize their auditory senses fully. This approach had an immediate effect on the students. Many of them said that the IC recorder enabled them to "read" and remember texts auditorily instead of abusing their eyesight, making it substantially easier to study English. I thus plans to continue utilizing IC recorders in oral communication classes to support the students with vision impairment, and leave further practical research for future research.

2.2. Remaining issues: English braille and IPA

The problem associated with reading speed still exists. More specifically, some students with weak eyesight lose their eyesight while studying in university, and eventually, they can no longer read printed materials. When the latter happens, students need to use braille. Note that there are two types of English braille: Grade-1 and Grade-2.¹ Grade-1 braille is the uncontracted version, that is, a one-to-one conversion of printed English. Grade-2 braille is the contracted version that contains abbreviations and contractions aside from the one-to-one printed English conversions. Students with weak eyesight who can no longer read printed materials have to master the two types of English braille in addition to the Japanese one; this task seems difficult, if not impossible. The English learning method that uses IC recorders discussed in the previous subsection is only an improvised one for these students, and further support systems must be offered.²

The other issue concerns the IPA. IPA is an alphabetic system consisting of phonetic symbols (e.g., [æ] or [ʌ]), which can be seen in dictionaries. It is relatively unknown that IPA braille (now used worldwide) was only developed in the 2000s, and thus, it has not been taught in many Japanese schools for students with vision impairments.³ Thus, blind students cannot obtain information on how words are pronounced until the words are heard. This is problematic for learners trying to learn the difference in pronunciation between words such as *track* and *truck*. Although dictionaries with audio functions are readily available, learning the IPA may enable students to have a more profound and systematic understanding of English phonetics. In fact, MEXT advocates that Japanese universities should provide English phonetic classes to prepare students for a globalized society. This ensures that students can understand English more structurally and systematically [6]. As NTUT aims to guarantee students the right to acquire knowledge, when and how the university instructs IPA braille are among the issues for discussion in the near future.

3. Urgent issue on the disparity in students' English proficiency levels

This section analyzes the status and problems arising from the disparity in K-NTUT students' English proficiency levels in a class. The discussion points to the central role of a proficiency-based teaching and learning system in laying the groundwork for globalization at K-NTUT.

3.1. Large disparity in students' English proficiency levels

The English oral communication classes for K-NTUT first year students are organized based on the students' majors or courses, as mentioned in section 2, and not on their English proficiency levels. Learners with varying proficiency levels and English education backgrounds are gathered in each class. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the results of the 2014 placement test.⁴ The average scores of the students from the three courses, namely, Computer Science, Physical Therapy, and Acupuncture and Moxibustion, were 329.9, 312.1, and 267.1, respectively. The small differences in the average scores of these students show that it does not appear difficult to conduct the English oral communication classes in each class.⁵

¹ Other grades of braille (e.g., Grade-3 and Grade-1–1/2) have been developed. See [2] for more detail.

² [3] is a helpful textbook for English braille learners that was written by a braille transcriber and edited by NTUT's Division of Research on Support for the Hearing and Visually Impaired, Research and Support Center on Higher Education for the Hearing Impaired and Visually Impaired. I thank Eiji Nagaoka for reminding me of this book.

³ Although the original pioneering work of IPA braille was developed by W. Percy Merrick and W. Potthoff in the early 1930s [4], at least two different IPA braille systems had been used (one in the UK and another in North America). It was only in the early 2000s that the IPA systems were unified. See [5] for more detail.

⁴ Test B of Eigo Nouryoku Hantei Tesuto (Placement Test) by the Eiken Foundation of Japan was organized by Chikako Ota. I thank Chikako for organizing this placement test.

⁵ See [7] for more information on teaching English to one of these classes.

Table 1. Students' average scores in three classes

Students' Major/Course	Average Score
Acupuncture and Moxibustion	267.1
Physical Therapy	312.1
Computer Science	329.9

However, Figure 1 shows that the disparity in students' English proficiency levels in the three classes is far greater than what the average scores demonstrate. According to a booklet from the Eiken Foundation of Japan, students receiving a score between 400 and 500 are at Grades Pre-2 to 2 English level, whereas those who score between 200 and 300 are at Grades 4 to 5. Thus, K-NTUT's current system will assign students from Grades Pre-2 – 2 with those of Grades 4 – 5 in a small class of approximately 10 members. Note that Grade 4 or 5 correspond to the elementary or middle level of junior high schools, while Grade 2 corresponds to the middle or high school graduate level. Furthermore, Grade 4 – 5 students have difficulty in conjugating present forms of verbs (e.g., *am*, *is*, and *are*) into their past forms (i.e., *was* and *were*). In contrast, the Grade Pre-2 to 2 students do not have difficulty in using the English subjunctive form, and they can read almost every sentence in a book using a dictionary. As such, teaching effectively in a class with students having mixed English proficiency level presents an extremely difficult task. To conduct classes more efficiently, it is necessary to close the gap between the higher- and lower-level students. In order to resolve this issue, this work suggests and further expounds on the necessity of adopting proficiency-based teaching and learning system in K-NTUT English classes.

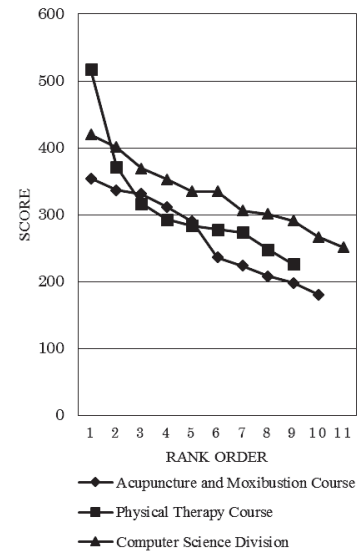


Figure 1. 2014 placement test results

3.2. Proficiency-based teaching and learning system

To circumvent the previously discussed problem on English proficiency disparities, lower-proficiency students may be encouraged to join make-up classes. These classes allow students to learn basic English grammar, which is normally impossible to teach in a 90 minute oral communication class. Meanwhile, high level students are urged to speak more freely in class to expand what they learned from the text. However, teaching effectively in such mixed-level classes is still difficult.

Thus, introducing a proficiency based teaching and learning system to K-NTUT English classes is urgently required. Most Japanese universities preparing for a globalized society adopt this system in their English classes. MEXT's status report noted that by 2012, 72.1% of Japanese universities had already implemented this system as a response to globalization [8].⁶ Indeed, first-year students and certain sophomore English classes in N-TUT's Amakubo campus have already begun utilizing the system; effective results have been subsequently reported [9]. To maximize educational effects and create foundations for globalization, it is urgent for K-NTUT to introduce this system in its English oral communication classes.

4. Other groundwork for globalization

Japanese universities employ other strategies for globalization, such as employing native English speakers as

⁶ MEXT reported that the percentage of Japanese universities adopting the proficiency-based teaching and learning system in their English classes increased from 72.1% in 2012 to 72.4% in 2013 [10].

English teachers and conducting English certification exams. According to MEXT's status report, 84.4% of Japanese universities employ native English speakers as English teachers, 58.5% have certification exam preparation classes, and 46.9% recognize the results from certification exams as credit [10]. This section briefly introduces the present situation at K-NTUT as regards these issues and points out the remaining challenges.

In 2014, K-NTUT started the English Chat Room as among its measures for globalization. This space allows students and faculty members to speak with teachers who are native English speakers.⁷ In the oral communication classes, students were given assignments that required them to use the English Chat Room and speak with native English speakers. The result was favorable. This opportunity was, for a few students, their first conversation with native English speakers, and they found the exercise to be exciting. Continuous and further cooperation of the English Chat Room with oral communication classes will enhance students' understanding of different cultures, which is important in a globalized society. Details on how this can be done are left for future research.

As regards English certification exams, the Test of English for an International Communication (TOEIC) has become increasingly important in recent years along with the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency. K-NTUT provides practical English classes where students can learn and practice for the TOEIC tests; it also conducts the TOEIC Institutional Program (IP) test once a year and the EIKEN test twice a year. In 2011, K-NTUT was the first Japanese institution to conduct the TOEIC IP test with special support measures for students with vision impairment; even today, the university continues to improve on these support measures by cooperating with the Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC)^{8,9}. Further, receiving a high score in international certification exams offers students a great advantage in obtaining important roles in a globalized society. Thus, continuous improvements of the TOEIC test with special support measure and assistance on improving students' scores are required.¹⁰ Whether K-NTUT should recognize these exams for credit or conduct certification exams as placement tests remains to be considered for future research.

5. Conclusion

The paper presented a discussion of the problems and issues in English education for globalization at K-NTUT using the experiences in teaching English oral communication classes in terms of (1) the diversity of students with vision impairment and (2) the disparity in their English proficiency level. In discussing these topics, the study introduced how IC recorders were effectively used in class, elucidated the difficulties in learning English Braille and IPA, and argued that a proficiency-based teaching and learning system is urgently required. K-NTUT's English Chat Room and English certification exams were briefly explained. Further advancements are necessary to lay the groundwork for globalization. Although several issues remains to be resolved, this study aims to shed light on how to create a groundwork for globalization in English education at K-NTUT.

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⁷ I thank Hisayuki Ishida for organizing the English Chat Room.

⁸ This institute organizes TOEIC tests.

⁹ I thank Chikako Ota for her efforts in introducing the TOEIC IP test with special support measures for K-NTUT. See [11] [12] [13] for more details on K-NTUT English certification exams.

¹⁰ The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam, an international certification exam, is also anticipated. I leave this issue to future research.

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