

Vietnamese EFL Learners in Japan: Instructor Experiences

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With the number of international students at Japanese universities and colleges increasing, new challenges have arisen in terms of how to successfully integrate these students into a formerly quite homogenous student body and help them adapt successfully to the classroom environment. According to the Japan Student Services Organization, total international student numbers have risen from 184,155 in 2014 to 267,042 in 2017 and of this total the two largest groups of international students are those from China and Korea (JASSO, n.d.). However, while the number of students from these two countries has actually dropped slightly over this period, the number of Vietnamese students has nearly doubled (MEXT, n.d.) and now constitutes the third largest group of international students in Japan. While there has been some discussion of how these Vietnamese students have adapted to studying abroad in Japan (see, for example, Lee, 2017) there has been little discussion of how this has impacted EFL classes and how teachers have had to adapt to a sudden influx of foreign students. In this paper, I shall share the experiences of a group of instructors at a private vocational college (*senmon-gakkou*) in Kawasaki in terms of how they have adapted to the needs of a new group of Vietnamese students and how it has affected their classroom teaching practices.

Strange as it may seem, the first classroom difficulty for the foreign English-speaking instructors was the low level of Japanese ability of the Vietnamese students. The most commonly used Japanese proficiency test scale, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) assigns students a proficiency grade from basic N5 to academic-level advanced N1 (Watanabe & Koyanagi, 2013). Previous foreign students, mainly from East-Asian countries such as China, Korea, or Singapore, were only admitted to the school upon obtaining an N2 Japanese grade or higher. Due to a school policy change however, it was decided to admit the new Vietnamese students with an N4 grade, or lower. Therefore, while most of the other East-Asian international students already had a relatively high level of Japanese and/or English ability, the Vietnamese students arrived with neither. For instructors, this presented a number of unique classroom management challenges.

The lingua franca of the college is Japanese, which means that if a Chinese student is talking to a Korean student they will mostly use Japanese as their primary means of communication. In the classroom, while the primary linguistic task may be English-focused, a lot of the task negotiation between students--deciding seating arrangements, turn-taking, repair strategies, etc.--was done by the students themselves in Japanese

independently of the instructor. As a result of the Vietnamese students' lack of Japanese abilities, pair- and group-work had to be more overtly managed by the instructor, which decreased the amount of classroom time spent that could otherwise be spent on-task. Additionally, the use of Japanese L1 as means to lower nervousness and, hopefully, increase willingness to communicate in the English L2 among Japanese students (Matsuoka, 2008) could instead have the opposite effect of isolating the Vietnamese students.

The second linguistic factor that caused difficulties in the classroom was pronunciation. Similar to the situation in Japan, the Vietnamese education system for English generally favors exam-focused vocabulary and grammar instruction leaving the students with little opportunity to practice oral skills (Van Van, 2010). As a result, the students often have heavily Vietnamese-accented English pronunciation. When encountering the often entrenched 'katakana' pronunciation of the Japanese students (Martin, 2004) they can be all but incomprehensible to each other, leading to obvious frustration for both parties. This extended even to basic spelling. For example, in Japan the letter "A" is generally pronounced /ei/, while in Vietnamese it is closer to /ai/. Also, whereas Japanese is a syllabic language, Vietnamese language is tonal and final consonants are often dropped when speaking English (Nguyen, 2002). Therefore, the number 'six' would be pronounced /shi-kku-su/ in Japanese whereas it would be /si/ in Vietnamese. As a result, even for more grammatically-advanced classes, instructors were forced to spend more time than they normally would on basic pronunciation activities, even down to sounding out the alphabet, in order to get the students to a level of mutual understanding before any communicative speaking activities could take place.

Another source of difficulty for instructors was in the slight differences in classroom expectations between Japanese and Vietnamese students. As in Japan, higher education instruction in Vietnam is generally teacher-led lecture style instruction, which results in "a passive attitude to learning" (Tran, 2012). For Japanese students, however, English classes led by *foreign* ("native") instructors were perceived differently to those led by Japanese instructors, where the foreign instructors were expected to be 'entertaining' but not necessarily 'knowledgeable' (Shimizu, 1995). Japanese students thus tend to respond more positively to active communicative games in the classroom, whereas these were viewed more as a waste of time by Vietnamese students (Yen, 2014), who expect the teacher to stick to the textbook or lesson outline clearly (Nguyen, 2002). However, this attitude may have just been due to a lack of experience with a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach on the part of the Vietnamese students, and they could in fact be just as competitive as the Japanese students during games. Rather, the Vietnamese students needed more

overt explanation as to the justification for, and encouragement to participate in, communicative student-to-student language activities than may previously have been required with Japanese students.

Another result of differences in classroom expectations that instructors encountered is that, as Nguyen (2002) points out, Vietnamese students tend to take a more collaborative attitude towards learning. The classroom is seen as a 'family' where all the members are expected to contribute and help each other. This had two major consequences. First, Vietnamese students are not used to small group activities, which are seen as akin to separating family members from each other. Second, students tend to help each other during tests and evaluation. In other contexts, this can be seen as cheating. In fact, several Vietnamese students were caught sharing answers in exams constituting 40% of their final grade which resulted in a zero mark, yet they seemed genuinely surprised to be so harshly censured. For instructors then, activities had to be adapted to allow for more collaborative and whole-class input while the importance of final exams and the consequences of cheating in them had to be repeatedly stressed beforehand rather than being taken for granted.

The final thing that instructors had to deal with was the impact of a sudden influx of large numbers of international students on what had previously been a predominantly Japanese student body. The foreign-born population of Japan is less than 2% of the total population and so, coming from mostly homogenous high school learning environments, many Japanese students were not used to or were unprepared for such large differences in not only language and culture but also classroom behavior and learning expectations such as those outlined above. Similarly, instructors that could previously count on a body of shared knowledge with their Japanese students, such as geography, foods, and general cultural knowledge, now had to find new ground with a group of Vietnamese students who did not share this. Lesson topics and instructional approaches like using cultural background knowledge to introduce vocabulary or grammatical structures had to be either adapted or discarded.

However, I personally believe that this has had a positive impact on the Japanese students. Any 'cross-cultural' or 'international' communication the Japanese students had previously encountered in high-school textbooks was overwhelmingly with American culture. They typically do not see themselves as having any connection to an imagined L2 English-speaking community – it being too remote and disconnected from their lives in Japan – and consequently do not have the motivation to study English (Yashima, 2009). With an increase in numbers of Vietnamese students however, the Japanese students were pushed into an L2 language community in their own backyard, so to speak, that provided a unique opportunity for all students to interact with different cultures and hopefully provide an increased motivation to become more confident global citizens.

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Bio

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