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Unfair Advantage: Insight into Attitudes towards Diversity at an English Conversation Competition in Japan

Scott Stillar and James York

University of Tsukuba, Tokyo Denki University

Abstract: This paper analyzes the attitudes towards the inclusion of students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in a local English speaking competition. The information was procured via a questionnaire answered by student participants and English teachers in order to better understand the resentment towards diversity. This paper concludes with analysis and suggestions regarding improvements to the competition and the inclusion of all students, regardless of their background.

Introduction

In 1999 Japan's Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education implemented the Interactive English Forum, a new approach towards English speech contests for local junior and senior high schools which take the form of a conversation competition instead of the traditional speech contest, where students simply recite monologues. Its intention is to promote communicative English usage by having students freely discuss topics in groups in front of a panel of native speaker judges. While some agree that the contest succeeds in shifting the focus of the participating students' language learning toward communicative skills, disagreements have arisen concerning the fairness of inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds, as some have expressed discontent due to the assumption that they have an unfair advantage due to their backgrounds and thus compromise the legitimacy of the event.

In this article, we primarily intend to add to provide insight into attitudes towards diversity and multiculturalism of Japanese English language learners by analyzing the opinions of the participants and the teachers involved in the competition. In addition, we shall attempt to provide recommendations concerning possible changes to this kind of event in order to promote greater equality

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without exclusion of any student based on their ethnic and/or cultural background.

Background

Diversity in Japan

Diversity in Japan has long been a contentious subject due to the popular assumption that Japan is a nation comprised of only one ethnicity and one culture (Uchida, Noda, Sado, & Ishiyama, 1994). To the present day, the idea of Japanese homogeneity continues to be used as a unifying ideology and source of national pride (Noguchi, 2001). However, despite the common assumptions, Japan always has had its fair share of diversity. In fact, According to Noguchi (2001), it is a sense of cultural superiority that has been used as justification for the assimilation of other ethnic and cultural groups in Japan as a means to erase their existence in order to maintain the myth of homogeneity (Weiner, 2009). Historically, people such as the Ainu, native to the northern island of Hokkaidō, and the Okinawan Ryūkyū, have existed for as long as Japan as a civilization has been in existence. In addition to its native minority groups, Japan also has a long history of accepting immigrants from other Asian nations, especially China and Korea.

Multiculturalism in the Present

It is difficult to estimate the number of ethnic minorities in Japan due to the fact that neither governmental nor sociological surveys include ethnicity as a measurement (Lie, 2001), however there is a relatively large population of resident foreigners of East

Asian decent (Fukuoka, 2000; Hicks, 1997; Maher, 1995) and South American immigrants of Japanese descent (Hirataka, Hoishi, & Kato, 2001), who exist in Japanese society unbeknownst to the general populace and oftentimes do their best to keep their heritage secret in order to avoid possible discrimination. In addition to this there exist immigrants of non-Asian descent, who despite having Japanese citizenship, oftentimes face limited social access solely due to their ethnic and/or culture background (Mannari & Befu, 1991).

Interactive English Forum History and Rules Regarding Diversity

The Interactive English Forum was initiated in 1998 by the Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education as an alternative to the traditional speech contest format which has been present in all areas of Japan since 1982. The format was first introduced by the then Supervisor of Education, Mr. Tanabe Kazuo, who decided to change the contest to a conversational format in order to promote communicative skills, rather than simple speech memorization and recitation. The contest has since been held annually and has become a rather well known event across Ibaraki prefecture and is, as far as the authors know, unique amongst other official English language speaking contests both inside and outside of Japan due to its focus on non-scripted conversation.

The judging of the contest is done by local assistant language teachers (ALTs), of whom the vast majority are young, white, native English speaking, North American or British nationals (Kubota, 2002) who work for either the Board of Education directly or a human resources placement agency contracted by the Board of Education. As a countermeasure to biased or dishonest judging, ALTs judge only contests from schools other than their own. The ALTs judge the students based on their ability to express themselves, attitude, and the naturalness of their communication. The participants are then judged using a ten-point scoring system. Upon completion of a round, score sheets are collected and the final scores for each student are tallied. The two highest scoring participants are declared the winners

and thus move on to the next round at a later date and different venue.

In addition, the rules of the contest currently state that any student who has lived in a foreign country for longer than one year is not allowed to participate, regardless of language instruction experience. These rules do not however exclude English bilingual students who have lived in Japan their entire lives. Also, despite these rules, every year students from diverse backgrounds are, in comparison with their relative percentage of the general population, disproportionately represented.

The Study

A total of 12 junior high school students aged 14 and 15 years (second and third grade level) participated in this study. The participants in this study were from three of four junior high schools that entered students in the 2010 Interactive English Forum held in Moriya, Ibaraki, in August, 2010. In addition to the student participants in this study, a total of six teachers were also interviewed in order to better understand what factors teachers look for when choosing students to participate, as well as to gather opinions on how the contest can be improved.

One issue that we hope to address in this study, based on our own experience as judges of the contest, is that the participants who appear to have the most success appear to be English bilingual ethnic minorities. Considering this factor, we included three questions to measure the students' amount of extracurricular exposure to English, which we expected would be important for understanding their motivation to learn English. These questions were designed to reveal the ethnicity of participants, to measure how much time they had spent living in a foreign country, and to gather information on any other places where they may be exposed to English outside of school.

The questionnaire was originally written in English and then translated into Japanese with the help of a native Japanese teacher to ensure that the questions were accurately translated before being given to the participants.

Results

Participants Exposure to English

Based on the results to questions 4-6 of the questionnaire, we found that two of the 12 students were from multiethnic families with one native English speaking parent and one native Japanese speaking parent at home (Participant 3), and one of Chinese and Japanese decent (Participant 1). Teachers responsible for choosing participants also confirmed their ethnicity. All other participants spoke only Japanese at home, being of Japanese descent.

Regarding the amount of time participants have spent overseas, we found that two individuals had experience living overseas (Table 1 provides more details). Surprisingly, Participant 3 had not spent longer than a month living in the United Kingdom, but in further, non-recorded observations, we discovered that this participant regularly traveled to the United Kingdom to visit relatives during the summer and winter school holidays.

Table 1. *Participants' Overseas Experience*

Participant number	Time spent overseas
1	60 months
2,3,4,5,6,8,9	12 months
7,10,11,12	None

Participant 1 has spent the most time living abroad, a total of five years. The current rules of the contest state that any student that has lived overseas for longer than one year may not enter the contest, which meant that Participant 1 was unable to continue to the next round of competition. This raises the question: As this student would be ineligible to advance to the regional tournament, why was the student selected to participate? A possible reason could be that no other student volunteered to participate in the contest, or

Table 2. *Students' Extracurricular English Study Habits*

Extracurricular English speaking activity	# of students
At English conversation school	5
At non-specific cram school	1
With friends	1
On the Internet (using Skype)	1
With family members	1

that the teacher in charge of selection was simply unaware of the rule.

Data from the questionnaire also confirmed that the majority of the participants study English as part of their extracurricular activities (Table 2). The most popular activity was attending an English conversation school, with 5 out of 12 students using this avenue to improve their English ability. One other student noted that she studied English, presumably alongside other subjects such as math and science, as part of her study routine at a generic cram school.

Regarding the other extracurricular English activities, Participant 3 wrote that she practices speaking English with her native family members, which could imply that this participant is bilingual. Indeed, having personally viewed this student's speaking ability in the Interactive English Forum and in unrecorded informal conversation, we can confirm that she is a bilingual English-Japanese student of mixed ethnic descent.

Participant 8 noted that she speaks English on the Internet using Skype. Unfortunately, we have no additional data on this point, but we believe that this participant may take part in online English conversation lessons.

In addition to the nine students who do study English outside of school three students reported that they do not participate in any extracurricular English activities, including Participant 12, the same student who also indicated that she was motivated to continue studying English as a result of participating in the Interactive English Forum.

Selecting Participants

In general, the teachers appeared to agree that potential participants had a higher motivation to study English in and outside of class. Teacher 3 stated, "Students who volunteer ... have more motivation to study ... and have a greater ability to express their thoughts in English." Additionally, the personality and general social skills of students influences teachers' decision when choosing potential participants: "I also look for a certain level of sociability because, at the end of the day, the interactive forum is about

communication, and if the student either talks over people or doesn't speak up, then they are not going to do so well" (Teacher 2).

Conversely, some felt that the students chosen to participate had little to do with motivation or personality and more with teacher ego, as expressed by Teacher 1:

Due to a bizarre sense of competition between the foreign teachers who train the kids, some teachers choose unenthusiastic students solely based on their English conversation ability in order to win, oftentimes these are students who were educated abroad or have native English speaking parents.

Student Ethno-Linguistic Background

One of the more controversial aspects of the contest is the rule regarding inclusion of students from various English-speaking backgrounds. As stated above, students who have lived abroad in an English speaking culture for more than one year are not allowed to advance beyond the local contests. Despite this rule, it is not uncommon for teachers to select students who speak English at home with at least one of their parents. When asked whether a student's background affected their decision to select a participant, the teachers gave mixed responses. Teacher 2 was against rules regarding student background, commenting, "There is a lot of pressure to put such students forward. At the same time, however, being of mixed descent does not guarantee that a student's English will be any better than one who is not, so these things really need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis." Other teachers advocated for less restrictive rules. Teacher 6 agreed with the rules due to their desire to choose students whom they feel "could benefit from the experience." Finally, Teacher 1 critiqued the entire selection process:

The problem is that teachers put their ego first and force students to participate. In my school, the mixed-descent students had an uphill battle for acceptance due to their race and wanted nothing to do with the contest, as it would have emphasized that they are 'different'. Seeing the other teachers force their non-Japanese students to stand out even more made me upset.

Positive Aspects of the Context

Teachers felt that the contest succeeded in several areas, namely, instilling confidence, enthusiasm and a sense of importance regarding communicative competence in the participants. Teacher 2 detailed this in the following response:

It's a real chance for the students to use English with one another. While of course the ultimate goal is to speak with native speakers, having the forum involving Japanese students can give them the confidence to try speaking with native speakers later in life.

Teacher 6 agreed, stating, "It's good to see the progression and enthusiasm for English among the students." Lastly, Teacher 1 claimed, "The Interactive English Forum, with all its faults, does at least succeed in promoting English as a living means of communication, not just another school subject like math or history."

Suggested Improvements

In general the teachers felt that there were several areas that could be improved, particularly the judging system, participation criteria, and the abnormal circumstances of conversation. Teacher 2 felt that the judging system should include harsher penalties in three areas: "monopolizing the conversation, shutting other students out by not letting them participate (e.g., choosing topics they will clearly not have an interest in or knowledge of), and not participating enough." Conversely, Teacher 5 advocated for more leniency regarding student-speaking time, stating "the 5-minute time limit combined with the 'Don't Hog the Conversation' clause creates a situation where many competitors just volley the conversation after giving a minimal answer." Teacher 2 also echoed the sentiments discussed above regarding issues surrounding student background by stating:

The rules specifically forbid students from participating if they have lived in an English-speaking country for a length of time and attended school that was taught primarily in English, while admitting students who have a parent who speaks fluent English. Clearly, the latter can have a

tremendous advantage over the former, yet the former is shut out of the contest.

Teacher 6 expressed concern about the stress put on the students due to the unnatural circumstances of the situation: “Sitting kids up on a stage and getting them to talk isn’t a very natural setting. I think setting them some activities to do which involve English conversation, and monitoring them would be more natural and put less stress on the kids.”

Discussion

Participants’ Ethnicity

The rules of the contest currently state that any student who has lived in a foreign (read: English speaking) country for longer than one year is not allowed to participate, regardless of language instruction experience. These rules do not, however, exclude English bilingual students who have lived in Japan their entire lives. In addition, despite these rules, every year students from diverse backgrounds are, in comparison with their percentage of the general population, disproportionately represented. This being so, in our experience attending the contest, we have noticed a faint yet noticeable sense of resentment towards participants of diverse backgrounds. Such attitudes are illustrated below in a blog entry from a girl who participated in the Interactive English Forum prefectural final:

There were a lot of *halfs* [biracial] and *gaijin* [pejorative term for foreigner] ... There were just so many *gaijin* faces there, I thought I was in the wrong place! Of course they dominated all the awards. (Tomu, 2010)

As one may be able to gather from the above, xenophobic sentiments are present among even Japanese junior high school students. This being so, some feel that the inclusion of diverse students itself is a contentious aspect of the contest. For example, in our teachers’ survey, the sole Japanese teacher who participated echoed these sentiments by saying, “The Interactive English Forum is for native speakers of Japanese and as such feel that it is inappropriate to have returnee students or students who use English everyday... participate” (Teacher 4). Therefore, it appears

that while the Interactive English Forum is, on the surface, celebrating diversity through foreign language education, it highlights some of the issues that still remain in the struggle for greater acceptance of ethnically diverse individuals within the Japanese national identity.

Positive Aspects

Despite some of the problems inherent to implementing a contest such as the Interactive English Forum, it succeeds in several important ways. Primarily, this type of contest is a unique way to highlight the importance of communicative competence in L2 learning. Although the contest itself may be a stressful affair, the practice and training before the event certainly provide students with a significant increase in opportunities to improve their communicative language skills. In addition, as evidenced by the student responses, the contest encourages students to put aside their fears and communicate with native English speakers, something that may improve their attitude toward individuals from diverse backgrounds, and their English language skills in general.

A more important way in which a contest such as the Interactive English Forum succeeds is the attention it brings to foreign language education within the community. The event we observed was held at a public banquet hall and was attended by a variety of local press and public officials, including the city mayor. Upon completion of the contest, results and quotations from the winning participants were printed in the local newspaper. As researchers with a long history in Japan, we felt it was rare, yet overwhelmingly positive, to see foreign language education receive treatment similar to scholastic sports in the media.

Final Considerations

Referring to the teachers’ responses to the online questionnaire, we feel that one aspect of the contest that could be improved is the environment in which the conversation takes place. It is not difficult to imagine that even for native speakers of English, being given a random topic and having one’s speech judged in front of an audience could be a taxing proposition. Needless to say, for young

second-language learners this situation may increase what Krashen (1981) refers to as the affective filter, as well as discourage student participation due to fear of failure or intimidation at the daunting nature of such a task. Accordingly, we feel that a more natural and stress-free environment for conversation may improve both the level of English used as well as student enjoyment of the contest. One way this may be achieved is by creating task-based activities, with closed goals and pre-determined outcomes, for participants to complete in English. Participants could then be judged on their ability to complete tasks as teams while using English. This approach would promote intragroup cooperation rather than individual competition, as well as eliminate judging issues regarding specific details of how well any specific participant performed.

Finally, with regards to concerns about the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds, there are two challenges which we feel should be considered. Firstly, teachers may want to take greater care in student selection. As one of the teachers mentioned previously, some students from diverse backgrounds, despite having a high level of English proficiency, might not feel comfortable participating in such a contest out of a fear that doing so would highlight their differences from their peers. Therefore, we suggest that teachers primarily select students who express interest in competing because such students may receive the most positive experience from being a participant in the contest. The second challenge lies in creating a rule set that promotes fair competition while not excluding any individual on the basis of their ethnic, cultural, or linguistic origins. One possible approach to achieving this would be creating tiers separated by English skill or experience level. This would allow both students who have lived abroad, speak English at home, and take extracurricular English conversation classes to compete in their own category while also allowing lower-level students to benefit from the experience without worries about having to engage in what they perceive to be unfair competition.

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About the authors: **Scott Stillar** is currently an assistant professor of foreign languages and cultures at the University of Tsukuba. His research interests include ethnic studies, sociolinguistics and multicultural education.

James York has taught a wide range of ages from kindergarten to university students in Japan and is currently employed at Tokyo Denki University as a full-time English lecturer. He is committed to performing classroom-based research, where his research interests include CALL and using games in the EFL classroom.