

English Education in Asia:
Through the experience of overseas students

Chiaki Hayashi

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Abstract

This article reports on how English is currently taught and learned in several Asian countries. 10 high school students from different Asian countries filled in a questionnaire about their experience of learning English. As we shall see, there were similarities and differences concerning the students' language learning contexts. Despite the differences, the students all regarded English as a useful tool for communication. Their responses demonstrate that English is a lingua franca.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca, English Education, Multilingualism

Introduction

In November, the author was asked to give a 50-minute cross-cultural workshop as part of an event called the Children's Museum. It is a major event organized by the local community and its aim is to broaden the interest of children attending elementary school. 10 overseas students, who had arrived in Fukuoka two weeks earlier and started studying at a local private high school for girls, were invited as guests. The students were all participants of the 2021 Asia Kakehashi Project, sponsored by MEXT. Kakehashi, meaning bridge in Japanese, is a project that aims to act as a bridge, bringing people of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds together. The project invites to Japan high school students of other Asian countries who are studying Japanese or willing to learn the Japanese language. After the orientation in Tokyo, different groups of Kakehashi students are placed in different prefectures across the country and spend three months attending local high schools to study Japanese and also to enjoy cross-cultural communication with Japanese students of their age.

To take advantage of their rich and different linguistic backgrounds, the author asked the guests from different countries to use their mother

tongue when introducing themselves during the workshop in Fukuoka. The international guests, however, gave their self-introductions using a combination of English, Japanese, their mother tongue, and other languages they knew. They were all willing to communicate with the Japanese pupils, using every language they knew. The sounds of multiple languages captivated not only the participants but also the pupils' parents, and the staffs who helped organize the event.

After their introductions, each guest gave a simple quiz using pictures that highlighted the cultural differences between their country and Japan. The Japanese pupils were willing to respond to the guest students in English, though they were not forced to use English. It was an unconscious and spontaneous reaction and decision on their part that they chose English to share their thoughts. Through the power of language, the workshop provided an opportunity for the participants to engage in cross-cultural communication, which focused on the cultural differences between their country and Japan.

Survey on English Education in Asia

After the workshop, the author explained the purpose of this survey and asked the students participating in the Kakehashi project to fill in the questionnaire. On average, it took the students about 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and they submitted it directly to the author once it was completed.

The questions that appeared in the questionnaire were made in the light of the author's thoughts concerning the participants' level of English (especially the level of overseas students funded fully by the government) and the author's interest in language education policies in Asia. The questions covered the following seven topics:

- 1) age when they started learning English
- 2) language skills they learned at the beginning of their English education
- 3) language their teachers used when teaching
- 4) amount of English use in daily life
- 5) amount of English use in Japan
- 6) difference in English education between their country and Japan
- 7) number of languages they can use

Survey Results

The students' writings which follow immediately below give us a glimpse into English language education as it is currently practiced in certain counties in Asia. The account each student gave was not about experiences that happened very recently. But the experiences they wrote about probably left a strong impression on their mind. For the students, writing in English was easier than writing in Japanese. Small mistakes which may lead to misunderstanding were corrected. To protect the students' privacy and in order to facilitate understanding, the nicknames they used during the event are used and some additional information, such as their home country, are supplied.

Subject 1) Vi from India

Q1: When did you start learning English?

At the age of three, kindergarten

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

All four skills: School in my country are English medium. We are not allowed to communicate in Hindi in our school.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English: all the subjects are taught in English.

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

Personally, I use English more than my mother tongue, that's how I communicate with my friends back in my home country.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

I am trying to speak in Japanese but yes, I use English most of the time.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

There is a big difference here. They even teach English in Japanese!

English here is very easy for me.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

Hindi (mother tongue), English, a bit of Japanese, French (I've been learning French for the last 7 years, I am pretty fluent.)

Subject 2) Lara from Pakistan

Q1: When did you start learning English?

From 1st grade, I started learning English from basic then gradually we got progress in it and we become fluent in it.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Writing: first we started the writing system from A to Z, then we moved to reading, listening and then moved to basic grammars.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English: from elementary school the English lesson is in our mother language, but in junior high school the lesson in English to start doing a skill of English better in studies.

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

We use English in every sentence of our own mother language usually.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

In Japan, we used much more English in our daily life because this is an international language and it's easy to interact with other.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Yes, the accent difference I notice a lot. For example, they (Japanese students) say Kondon instead of London.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I can speak 7 languages - I used English, Urdu more but not others.

Subject 3) Sab from Bangladesh

Q1: When did you start learning English?

We start learning English from kindergarten.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Speaking and Listening: I learned from songs mostly; English songs, movies and dramas!

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

I mostly talk in English and Bangla (mother language). I also talk in Japanese.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

I use English with my international friends and Japanese in school.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Yes, it's very different. In my country, we focus on speaking and grammar more.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I can speak five languages, and read one and understand a bit of one. I can speak English and Bangla, Hindi, Undu, Japanese. Read Anbi, and understand Turkey.

Subject 4) Bew from Thailand

Q1: When did you start learning English?

I started in the kindergarten around 3 years old.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Speaking and listening: I studied English at school only. But when I was 7

years old, I went to learn with British Teacher at the language school.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

Everyday in class and free time hobby

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Everyday communication

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

In Thailand we always learn grammar but from what I see is they learned a lot of vocabulary but few grammar (in Japan).

Q7: How many languages can you use?

3 languages: Thai, English and Japanese

Subject 5) Moe from Myanmar

Q1: When did you start learning English?

From elementary school: I learned English at British Council Myanmar and sat IELTS.

I tend to chat with any friend from Thailand back in last year.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Listening and writing: I started learning Alphabet.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

Whenever in British Council, we spoke in English only.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Every time I speak with exchange students in my dorm.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

In my country, we got rote learning as our government education system was too suck at my time. So, Japan is good. But it would be better to teach English in English instead of mother tongue (Japanese).

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I've been using Burmese, English, Japanese and French (learning). Because I aim to work in UN as Embassy.

Subject 6) Niky from the Philippines

Q1: When did you start learning English?

We started studying English at an early age so almost everyone in the Philippines speaks in English. We started studying ever since we were babies/toddlers since our parents talk to us in Taglish (Tagalog+English). Such as the numbers or even daily expressions.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Speaking and Writing: I don't really remember since I was still little then but my parents would often talk to me in English. We would also read stories together.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

Everyday

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Everyday

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Honestly speaking, the English education in Japan is a bit late for high school students. In my school, one phrase is taught every day. I think if you want to learn a language well, you should start with grammar rules and vocabulary.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

4: Tagalog, English, Italian and Japanese. I was born in Italy so I studied there for some years.

Subject 7) Pich from Cambodia

Q1: When did you start learning English?

Around 3 years old, in kindergarten.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Listening and reading: I listened to English music, watched kids show and cartoon, my parents enrolled me into an English language school since young, watched English movies.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

I used every day, with friends at school (I used both English and Khmer (mother language)), foreigner teacher, and sometimes I use English to talk with my parents.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Everyday, because we're all from different countries and our Japanese

level are different, so English is the only choice.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Similarity: Listening practice.

Difference: English subject is taught by foreigner like American or British, we don't have Khmer translation like Japanese, all the lesson are taught and written in English.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I can use 3: English, Khmer (mother language), Japanese (a little bit).

Subject 8) Tasya from Indonesia

Q1: When did you start learning English?

I was learn it when junior high school, 13 years old. We use English in Indonesia is not that much.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Speaking: I try to learn English by repeat the vocabulary.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

Mother language (Indonesia)

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

I don't use English that much, usually we use Indonesian language, even we still use dialect.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Because my English is better than Japanese, so if I want to communicate I will use English (everyday).

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Actually we can find a lot of difference between Indonesia and Japan. It's hard to find the senior high school student who can speak English. It's same with Indonesia (language), It's hard to find people who can speak Indonesia (language in Japan).

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I can speak 4 languages: Indonesia, English, Minangese (the dialect), and Japanese, but not that much.

Subject 9) Kaz from Vietnam

Q1: When did you start learning English?

Usually, schools start teaching English at the 1st grade of elementary. But in some cases, Vietnam parents tend to let their children learn at 2 or 3 years old.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Speaking, Listening and Reading: Actually, I listen English through cartoon when I was 4. And then, when I turn 5, my parents find me an English teacher. I start to study English more than my friends. After some years of studying, I participated in many contest to improve my language skills.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

Both English and mother language

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

Not so often. Schools only hold 4 period of English and the test, I study and use when chatting with some of my friends or for understanding films and music.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Everyday: I have to speak in English with my international friends.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Both Vietnam and Japan teach grammar a lot. The difference is Vietnam starts teaching English when the students are in elementary, but Japan starts at secondary school.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I can speak Vietnamese, English and some Japanese.

I can also understand some Thai and Chinese.

Subject 10) Afiara from Malaysia

Q1: When did you start learning English?

7 at school.

Q2: Which of the four skills of English did you start learning first?

Listening: We learnt by pronouncing easy vocabularies.

Q3: What language does your teachers at secondary school use when teaching English?

English

Q4: How often and when do you use English in your daily life in your country?

Not often, only in class. At school, we learn science related subjects and mathematics in English.

Q5: How often and when do you use English in your daily life here in Japan?

Very often, in fact, I use English to communicate to everyone in Japan.

Q6: Did you find any difference in English education between your country and Japan? Please let me know the similarity and difference in English education.

Yes, in Malaysia, we use full English in class but in Japan they use Japanese to explain.

Q7: How many languages can you use?

I can speak Malay and English. Currently learning Japanese and Korean.

Summary and Discussion

In what follows, a summary will be given of the guest students' responses for each topic. The purpose is to characterize the reality of English education in Asia as seen and experienced by the students.

1) Age

On average, the students started studying English when they were 4.7 years old. This fact implies that there is a tendency for students to learn English very early in some countries in Asia. Niky said that people in the Philippines started studying English around the time they start crawling. Participants from 4 countries - Thailand, Cambodia, India and Bangladesh - wrote that they first learned English at kindergarten when they were 3 years old. Students from another 3 countries wrote that they were first exposed to English in the early years of elementary school. The student from Pakistan and Myanmar both started from first grade, and the student from Malaysia started from second grade.

In Vietnam, English education at school starts also in the first grade of elementary school. Kaz indicated that parents tend to make children learn earlier, when they are about 2 or 3 years old. She, however, stated that it was her decision to start learning English. When she was 4, she started watching and listening to an animation program in English.

Indonesia was the only country where English education starts when the students reach 13 at junior high school. Tasya wrote that Indonesians generally don't use much English. This seems to resemble the situation here in Japan.

2) Language Skills

This question aimed to identify the language skill or skills that are emphasized at school when teaching English to beginners. Only two students identified a single skill. The student from Pakistan mentioned writing and the student from Malaysia said listening. Most of the responses were a combination of two or more language skills: 'All four skills,' 'Speaking, listening and reading,' 'Listening and writing' and so on. The most common response identified the oral skills of speaking and listening as most important. Two students-one from Bangladesh and the other from Thailand-underscored oral skills as paramount. A student from Cambodia pointed out the value of receptive skills-listening and reading, while

another student mentioned the expressive skills of speaking and writing as valuable.

Concerning the results, listening was mentioned 7 times, speaking 6 times, writing 4 times, and reading 3 times. Regardless of the differences among countries, it seems that the four language skills are equally taught in the early stage of English education in many Asian countries.

It was also found that some were taught in ways that focused on reading and writing, namely learning the alphabet and mastering high frequency words. This is contrary to the education system here in Japan, where it is thought that the early stages of learning should be more fun, not placing too much emphasis on reading and writing. The summary and this result might suggest that a more balanced approach in Japanese English education is required.

3) Language for Instruction

Regarding the third question which asked what language their teacher uses when teaching English at secondary school, seven students said that it was English. The student from India wrote that all subjects are taught in English. Indonesia is the only country where English is taught in the students' mother tongue. In Vietnam and Pakistan, both English and the native language are used.

There was one case where the language used for instruction altered according to the learners' level and age. Lala from Pakistan explained that her mother tongue is used when English is taught at elementary school, though English is used at the advanced level in secondary education to cultivate the students' competence in English. But language teaching in Japan follows a different pattern. English is used more when teaching younger learners and less when teaching older students. Though ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) or foreigner teachers can be seen teaching at elementary schools using English, high school teachers conduct their lessons mostly in Japanese.

4) & 5) Amount of English Use in Daily Life

In response to the questions concerning how often they use English during the course of their daily lives in their respective home countries, there was great variation in their answers. The students from three countries-Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia-answered, 'Not often'. Afiera wrote that in Malaysia she used English only in school English classes,

adding that science-oriented subjects and mathematics were also taught in English. Sub from Bangladesh said she mostly talked in English, and she had some opportunities to communicate in Japanese. Students from other countries wrote that they used English everyday with their friends and even with their parents. Vi, a student from India, believes that she uses English more than her mother tongue. Lara feels that she uses English a lot when communicating in her native language because many English words and phrases are found in her first language. For Niky, her mother language is Tenglish (Taglog+English). It can be said that English is used as a means for teaching in some countries like Indonesia, while in other countries such as Pakistan and Philippines many English words, phrases, and expressions can be found or are even embedded in their native languages.

Although there are differences with regard to the students' use of English in their respective countries, they mainly use English when communicating with their friends here in Japan. Although Vi tries to speak in Japanese, she cannot help using English most of the time. The participants explained that their level of Japanese varied a lot so it was easier to use English when interacting among themselves, and English was also used when communicating with their Japanese friends. In a cross-cultural community setting, students chose which language to use, depending on the language level of those they were communicating with and their own ability (Murata 2018). English was used as the means of communication in Japan. Arguably, it can be said that English can be seen as a lingua franca among high school students in Asia.

6) Difference in English education

Answers to the question about the similarities and differences in English education between the students' country and Japan revealed interesting views. They all discerned differences and articulated their opinions. Moe from Myanmar thinks the English education in Japan is good because unlike the way it is taught in her country, there is not much emphasis on mechanical, rote learning. Some claimed that the level of English taught at high school was easy and undemanding in Japan, pointing out that English should be taught earlier. Three of them thought that Japanese high school students should focus more on grammar rules and vocabulary. Speaking was also pointed out as one of the skills Japanese students need to improve. Lara noticed the differences in pronunciation, pointing out how the Japanese struggle to differentiate "l" from "k", not "l"

and “r”, a difficulty Japanese students face. There might be an influence of her linguistic background. In fact it seems an interesting issue to address.

7) Number of Languages in Use

Concerning the number of languages the responders can use, despite the differences in their backgrounds, they were all competent in at least three languages: English, their first language and Japanese to a certain extent. Most of the responders were able to communicate in more than four languages and a few were even able to use some European languages such as Italian and French. Moe is learning French because she has a dream to work for the UN. Some students detailed and specified their level or ability for each language they were able to use. Kaz speaks three languages and understands Thai and Chinese. Sub speaks five languages, reads one language and understands one more language, Turkish. She included Udo and Anbi as languages, though strictly speaking, they might be regarded as dialectics rather than formal languages. Lala also wrote that despite being competent in seven languages, she mainly used two, namely English and Urdu.

It is commonplace when theorizing about language education that students should acquire the four skills when mastering a foreign language. However this preconception needs to be revised (Kimura 2021). As the answers to the questionnaire reveal, some students thought they were competent in a language even though their abilities beside their receptive skills weren't fully developed. Kimura (2021) insists that in order to encourage language learners, we need to positively assess learners who have not fully mastered a given skill and those who are not fully competent in the languages they are learning (52). And he claims that this way of thinking is compatible with the viewpoint of CEFR, which advocates multilingualism to create peace in Europe (Council of Europe 2020).

Conclusion

This paper examined English education in 10 Asian countries. Throughout this study, pedagogical characteristics of early English education were noted. But because these characteristics were based on what the students recalled from personal experience, the features they revealed might not be entirely reliable and objective. And because the teaching and learning context are all unique and dissimilar, it is difficult to

make generalizations about language teaching as a whole. Despite the limitations, the information gathered offers some insight into the various ways in which English is used in Asian communities. English plays a large role as a lingua franca in our global community (Crystal 2019, Kimura 2021, Murata 2018).

From the study, it was found that multilingualism in Asia is not very uncommon. Students' competence in multiple languages is a common feature, and the students seek recognition for their competence. Students are all aware of the value of multilingualism in their life in Asia. There may have been some respondents who overrated their ability, while others may have underrated their ability. However, the answers they gave might reflect their confidence in their language ability, and might also reveal their feelings about being competent in many languages and their sense of satisfaction they draw from being multilingual.

This study implies ways in which English education can be improved in Japan. To help students in Japan become interested in learning a foreign language and for students to become competent in languages other than English, our misconceptions towards language and learning must be addressed. Having a command of multiple languages broadens the range of our choices, which is why this present study needs to be supplemented with further studies that examine cross-cultural communication.

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