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Japanese Students' Reflections on High School Preparation for University English Classes

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Abstract

High school English classes in Japan typically focus on passive writing skills at the expense of practical communication skills, leading many Japanese students of English to progress to university study lacking vital English conversational competence. The requirements at university differ in that students are required to speak and interact more, thus presenting difficulties in adjustment. The present study aimed to address this disparity by finding how students would like to be taught at high school to prepare them for the different environment they find in university English classes.

A qualitative case study approach was used to gather data, including semi-structured interviews with seven English-major university students. The findings provide insights into students' preferred language of instruction and perceptions on teaching at high school, initial difficulties in adjustment to university, greater enjoyment following adjustment to university, and perceptions on how students can aid their own transition.

The findings from this study indicated that high school lessons were useful for the purpose of achieving in the university entrance test, but not useful for their broader studies at university. The students indicated they would have preferred more dynamic interaction in smaller classes, instead of the current large grammar-centered classes. It was also reported that Japanese high school teachers used little or no English in class and lacked knowledge of Western culture. The students would have preferred more classes with the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) who, while not deemed immediately helpful for their university entrance exams, was considered helpful for students in making a successful transition to university.

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Interviewing my seven participants was a pure joy and I am most grateful to them for giving up their time for me. I was impressed with the honesty and integrity with which each student shared their own personal experiences, especially considering the difficulty of expressing some complex feelings in a second language.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Many Japanese students of English enter university with limited English conversation experience, despite having completed six years of English education during high school. At university they must face challenges and perform tasks they may never have experienced in their high school years, where they were used to following directions and aiming to pass written exams (Holthouse 2005). This thesis aims to provide insights into how students would like to be taught at high school to best prepare them for English classes at university level.

In recent years, several changes have been made in order to assist students in making the transition to university. The Japanese education ministry has promoted a communicative language teaching approach to remedy the problem of students' inability or unwillingness to communicate in English despite six years of compulsory English education. In Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)'s revised Course of Study Guidelines (April, 2013), it was stated that senior high school English classes should be conducted in English in order to increase the opportunities for students to be directly exposed to the language (Tahira, 2012).

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is a multiple choice test with no speaking component, giving rise to the assumption that its format would suit students whose education system has typically favoured teaching grammar and written translation (Gorsuch, 2002). However, in spite of Japan's heavy emphasis on improving standards of English education, Japan's scores in the TOEIC are unexpectedly deficient. Japan was ranked just 40th among 48 nations in the TOEIC in 2013 (Yoshigaki, 2014).

Japan's students undergo a notoriously grueling testing period at the end of high school,

commonly referred to as “examination hell” (Kaji, Hama, & Rice, 2010), the results of which decide which university they will attend after graduation. However, following graduation, students see a much different environment at university (Berwick & Ross, 1989). While high school typically hones the passive written skills necessary for the university entrance examination, the practical skills of speaking, pronunciation and communication ability are often not nurtured. This means that students can find themselves bewildered by the more creative and communicative lesson requirements they must adapt to at university (Holthouse, 2005).

The current research addresses the disparity between students’ experiences in high school English classes and their university classes, with a view to easing the transition for students who choose to major in English at university. All seven participants in this study were third and fourth year English majors at a university in Chubu, Japan. They attended high schools in Japan and had varying exposure to English, including overseas experiences and English conversation school education. The data were gathered through qualitative interviews that took place during the Summer of 2017.

My interest in the topic for this study arose from my prior experiences in Japan. I have worked as a teacher in Japan for seven years, one year at an English conversation school (known in Japan as *Eikaiwa* school), four years as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), and two years at a private boarding school. From my personal observations, many learners appear reluctant to use English, whether from self-esteem issues, excessive modesty about their speaking ability, or a self-professed “shy” personality. Over my time in Japan I have heard many people criticize the education system for focusing too much on reading and writing and not enough on listening and speaking, while others blame themselves and lament a lack of industriousness toward English study at high school. In my experience, English study, particularly when aiming for improvements in applicable proficiency, appears to be an arduous struggle for many Japanese students.

The current study addresses a specific educational context: the adjustment of learners from high

school to university English study. The main research question is:

How would students like to be taught at high school to prepare them for English-classes at university level?

This thesis is arranged into five chapters, commencing with the introduction. The concerns of this thesis, and the main research question which frames it, are outlined in this Introduction chapter. Chapter Two explores the literature in order to provide a contextual and conceptual framework for the thesis. In Chapter Three, I outline my methodology, research design, data collection and the analysis processes, along with the ethical considerations within this study. The findings from the data and a discussion of these findings, in relation to the central and sub-questions posed and existing literature, are presented in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five I conclude with a summary of the key findings and wider implications.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature provides a number of insights into the challenges students face with the transition from high school English education to learning English in the university environment. These challenges are outlined in the first section, beginning with an examination of factors that have been identified in studies on Japan's high school education system, including Japan's assessment focus, teachers' competence, the language of instruction in schools, and the balance of the first language (L1) and second language (L2). The next section provides insights from the literature on cultural perspectives that may contribute to the research problem, including the grammar-translation approach (Yakudoku), English-study (Eigo) vs English conversation (Eikaiwa), language differences, and foreign language anxiety (FLA). Finally, the transition to university is discussed, including literature on the contrasting approaches between high school's linear instruction-based learning and university's independent learning, and an examination of differences in students' motivation between high school and university.

2.2 High school education system in Japan

This section will focus on aspects of Japan's high school education system that are considered to be linked to the challenges students face in transitioning to university. Firstly, the focus on the university entrance test is discussed, followed by literature on teachers' competency to teach English. Finally, the system of having Japanese as the primary language of instruction is examined, including literature on the balance of L1 and L2 in the classroom.

2.2.1 Assessment focus

Considering the education ministry's aim to promote a communicative language teaching approach (Tahira, 2012), it might seem logical to assume that English examinations would reflect this by including a speaking component. While communication is prized in theory, the difficulty and subjectivity involved in its assessment makes it tempting to avoid broaching for teachers (Berwick & Ross, 1989). The reality is that the university entrance examination only tests grammar and translation, mainly focusing on aspects of English proficiency that are easily testable, as opposed to speaking, pronunciation and communication ability (Berwick & Ross, 1989).

Gorsuch (2000) suggested that if university entrance examinations included questions that assessed students' communicative ability, it might in turn moderately influence the approval of communicative language teaching among Japanese teachers. Similarly, Vanderford (1997) stated that if the entrance exams contained, "a reliable and valid test of oral English, ... teachers and students [would] follow suit by teaching and studying English in a more communicative way" (p. 23). However, given the current situation, any efforts to promote conversational English may lead to a sense of futility and frustration for both educators and learners (Holthouse, 2005). Little has changed since McConnell (2000) noted that "the contradiction between the ideal of teaching conversational English and the reality of preparing for entrance exams remains acute" (p. 269).

The Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) interviewed by Amaki (2008) also contended that Japanese schools should give their students greater incentive to learn practical English, rather than continue an assessment-oriented approach. In a one-year action research study Talandis and Stout (2014) observed that a new syllabus featuring personalized topics, direct instruction of pragmatic strategies, and regular speaking tests resulted in more accurate and fluent conversation. However, considering that communication skills are not assessed in university entrance examinations, students may deem this content irrelevant to their immediate academic success, demotivating them from nurturing a skill that will be useful for them immediately after their entrance to university.

2.2.2 Teachers' competence

Teachers' competence is a further issue affecting students' success in adjusting to university English classes. A study by Amaki (2008) examined perspectives of Japanese teachers of English through an online survey of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). It was found that many ALTs consider the tendency among teachers to rely excessively on Japanese when teaching English lessons to be the cause of students neglecting what should be an emphasis on developing speaking and listening skills in English (p. 62).

One reason for the current situation in Japanese high school classes is the lack of qualifications held by elementary school teachers. According to Butler (2004), Japanese elementary school teachers did not have access to comprehensive preservice or in-service training, because English was not an official academic subject in Japan's elementary schools at the time of writing. Instead, English tends to be taught by regular homeroom teachers, occasionally accompanied by ALTs. In addition, the qualifications of ALTs may vary widely, as most have little formal teaching experience and very few hold a teaching license (Butler, 2004).

A study by Butler (2004) examined the self-perceived English proficiency levels of teachers from Korea, Taiwan and Japan. The majority of these teachers perceived their proficiency levels to be lower than the minimum levels considered necessary to teach English under current educational policies. Butler argued that such perceived shortfalls in proficiency need to be taken seriously because this could influence various aspects of their English teaching, including the teachers' confidence, pedagogical skills, the content of their teaching, their students' motivation and, ultimately, their students' success in acquiring English (p.268).

2.2.3 Language of instruction

Many Japanese students entering university have only experienced English classes where

Japanese is the language of instruction, and were accustomed to this medium of instruction in their previous schooling. Despite the recent emergence of numerous Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) policies, classes continue to be conducted in Japanese (King, 2013). For this reason, students may become psychologically dependent on L1 being used by teachers and may perceive it as a vital support tool for understanding and learning a foreign language (Stephens, 2006).

It has been argued by Ellis (2005) that the English classroom should be based around first-hand experiences of the target language with genuine opportunities to communicate. This would presumably compel students to negotiate meaning in the target language. However, in large classes, Japanese students are rarely given the individual attention that is required to support this (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001).

2.2.4 Balance of L1 and L2

Krashen (1985) affirmed the importance of simple and understandable classroom English, with an emphasis on *comprehensible input* for language acquisition. However, Swain (1985) argued that a stronger focus on target-language *output* is more effective for learners to improve. Her study showed that 6th grade French immersion students were unable to achieve native-like proficiency in French after undergoing comprehensible input for almost seven years. Moreover, Lee (2013) demonstrated the difficulties faced by students in an English-only university classroom, particularly by those who had low motivation and had no intention to use the language abroad. This highlights two problems, firstly how these students could be better prepared for the challenges of an English-only university classroom, and secondly how students could be motivated to make the effort in spite of no clear intention to use English.

There is a possibility that students would be more likely to engage readily with the lesson if they can rest assured that they can revert to L1 for clarification if absolutely necessary. For example, a study by Carson and Kashihara (2012) found that beginner students preferred knowing that it

was possible to rely on L1 support, even if the teacher refused to use L1 except in circumstances where there was no other choice. That would mean that either Japanese teachers or foreign teachers proficient in Japanese are preferable for students, though whether that is more preferable for students in terms of effectiveness for their English education is still unclear. They argued that the quickest way for students to make cognitive development in the L2 was to make connections between the L2 and the L1. This finding suggests that teachers who are proficient in both languages can therefore assist students when comparing L1 and L2 linguistic rules, teaching new vocabulary, and checking comprehension (p. 46).

In a case study on students' perceptions of use of L1 and L2 in the classroom, Beebe (2001) found that even though it is difficult to teach beginner-level students using L2, it is not necessarily impossible. He suggests that teachers need to look to their own teacher development and broaden the range of meaning clarification techniques at their disposal. For example, they can achieve this with time-lines, concept questions, paraphrasing, and careful, thoughtful lesson planning that identifies possible problems in the lesson with regard to unknown vocabulary and language used for instructions (p. 21).

It has been demonstrated that teaching in the L2 can also be done by easing the gap between the students' world and the study material. A study by Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989) compared two English comprehension passages. In one, non-Japanese elements were changed to conform more to the expectations of the readers tested, including the names of persons and places and one instance of kissing changed to hugging. It was found that the modified form resulted in a significantly better performance on fill-in-the-blanks tests, known as cloze tests (Taylor, 1953), suggesting that teachers and materials producers could take such cultural factors into consideration and meet students somewhere nearer their linguistic and cultural comfort zone to aid comprehension. These results suggest students would benefit from more cultural awareness imparted from a culturally informed Japanese teacher or a foreign teacher.

2.3 Cultural Perspectives

As noted in the previous section, Japan's education system has often been blamed for students' low English performance. However, the education system is itself embedded in a culture that is not conducive to certain vital elements of language study (Ryan, 2009). This section examines cultural perspectives that may contribute to the challenges central to this research context, including a discussion of Japan's grammar-translation approach (Yakudoku), the discrepancy between Eigo and Eikaiwa, language differences between English and Japanese, and foreign language anxiety (FLA).

2.3.1 Grammar-translation approach

The grammar-translation approach used in Japan is known as Yakudoku. This was the first technique introduced to foreign language education in Japan, and was initially used to translate Chinese characters into Japanese (Hino, 1988). *Yaku* means "translation," and *doku* means "reading." Hence, Yakudoku can be defined as a method or a mental process for reading a foreign language in which the target sentence is first translated word-by-word, and the resulting sentence is then reordered to match the correct word order of Japanese (Kawasumi, 1975).

The literature has long pointed out (e.g. Matsumoto, 1965) the disadvantages of Yakudoku for the Japanese student. It notes that this strategy limits reading speed, causes fatigue, reduces the efficiency of comprehension, and also hinders the development of other language skills - listening, speaking, writing, that are seen as key to language learning (Nation & Newton, 2009). Students operating under a Yakudoku mindset attempt to understand speech by translating every sentence into Japanese, meaning that they have difficulty following speech unless it is delivered slowly, using the rules they are familiar with. This makes comprehension more tiring and ineffective (Matsumoto, 1965).

Despite these disadvantages, Yakudoku's continued prevalence may be due to its ease of use for the teacher. It requires little professional training, and also little preparation is needed for each

class (Hino, 1988). Most teachers studied English through Yakudoku themselves and, for lack of better alternatives, tend to fall back on it as they can teach it in the same way without much effort (Gorsuch, 2002). Additionally, the majority of prospective English teachers were English literature majors at university who had little exposure to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Once they become teachers, they often do not have the time to learn alternate methods (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008).

2.3.2 Eigo vs Eikaiwa

The perceived disparity between speaking and studying in Japan may present a barrier to students. Lee (1989) highlighted the problematic distinction in Japan between English study (Eigo) and English conversation (Eikaiwa). Eigo conveys the intellectual element of language study, with stringent demands on static knowledge of complex grammar and vocabulary, while Eikaiwa entails freely conversing with a native speaker in a more social context. The fact that these two are considered disparate entities serves to perpetuate the idea that English as an academic pursuit has no utility outside textbooks and formal testing, and that English conversation is distinct from this pursuit. Dabbling in English conversation may therefore be seen as frivolous if it is not contributing toward examination results.

2.3.3 Language differences

Harumi (2001) states that key cultural elements of English are seldom emphasized in Japan's classrooms, such as using interjections to express interest and comprehension. She found that this can result in unnatural pauses, short answers, and the tendency to rigidly follow linear question-answer patterns, a trait common to the Japanese language but unnatural in conversational English. Another Japanese communication trait that differs from the west is that the burden of making sense of a conversation is placed on the listener (Anderson, 1993). Students are often afraid of being the only one who did not understand and will therefore not ask the teacher to repeat even if it is likely that it is for the benefit of the whole class.

Japanese is widely regarded as a highly contextualized language in that non-verbal factors are a vital part of the communication process and conscientious listening is of great importance. People are averse to heated debates, avoid direct confrontations, and “mind reading” or “the art of conveying unspoken messages” is valued. This is something referred to in Japanese as “reading the air”, which is regarded as a subtle skill that serves to maintain harmony (Barnlund 1975). This cultural trait has a heavy influence on Japanese learners’ classroom attitude, resulting in a reluctance to take initiative in classroom activities. For this reason, ALTs and other English teachers from different cultural backgrounds might consider those who are not participating actively to be disinterested or poorly motivated, which may discourage them from teaching effectively.

2.3.4 Foreign language anxiety

Japanese students are typically passive during lessons (King, 2013), therefore averse to speaking a foreign language before their peers. This is in part due to Japan’s emphasis on maintaining harmony by not standing out. As Martin (2004) notes, “the national aspiration in Japan towards conformity and compliance to social expectations does little to foster a classroom atmosphere conducive to foreign language learning” (p. 51). It is also due to the need to “save face”. Face is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman 1967, p. 5). In order to maintain face, individuals typically take into account their position in society and refrain from actions or activities that would create awkwardness for others. In this case, overtly showing English proficiency by speaking before the class could be viewed as flamboyantly “out of place” in a different way than say, scoring highly in a math test. Conversely, failing to speak well or making even minor pronunciation or grammatical errors in speech could also result in “losing face” (Huang, 2014).

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined reluctance by Japanese learners to speak out in English as foreign language anxiety (FLA), or “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). FLA among Japanese students tends not to resolve itself

markedly among adult students studying at tertiary level. This was shown in a study of communication apprehension by Ishii, Cambra, and Klopf (1978) in which anxiety levels of Japanese and American university students were compared using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension for College Students (PRCA-College). These results suggested that Japanese students were more apprehensive about communication than the American students. FLA among university students has been cited in modern literature too, with various schemes to attempt to alleviate the problem, such as forcing students to stand up and give responses (Shea, 2017) and exploring potential social predictors of FLA, such as the teacher's age, friendliness, tone of voice, and dress code (Effiong, 2016).

Auerbach (1993) argued that allowing use of Japanese in the classroom could serve to alleviate such foreign language anxiety by vitiating other affective barriers that may inhibit learning. Considering the logistical implications of teaching in the L2, Atkinson (1987) contended that using Japanese for explanations could save time for more productive language practice. Carson and Kashihara (2012) concur by suggesting “careful use” of the first language in the classroom to explain difficult concepts, particularly to beginner students.

2.4 Transition

In this section I will outline the literature on students’ transition from high school to university study, including difficulties caused by the contrasting approaches, and students’ changes in motivation upon entering university.

2.4.1 Contrasting approach

The framework of most high schools in Japan is such that students can succeed by following instructions and finishing assigned tasks in a prescribed way. They often have various means of support available to them should they make mistakes in following directions or attending lessons. In tertiary education, however, students are expected to work more independently and to take the

initiative when they need help or assistance (Conley, 2010). Japan is no exception to this contrasting approach. Students tend to be confused by the contrast between the rigid, form-focused classes that they are inured to at high school and the freer, more fluency-focused approaches they face at university. They can find themselves unable to understand what is taking place in the university classroom, or what is expected of them (Holthouse, 2005).

Some English study techniques picked up from high schools in Japan can hinder achievement at university. A case study by Taguchi, Naganuma, and Data (2006) examined how Japanese students who graduated from regular Japanese high schools adapted to a new English-only university environment. The findings from their interviews showed a difference in reading instruction between high school and university English classes. In high schools, the students were trained to understand every single word and grammatical structure in a sentence, which de-emphasized reading speed. As noted earlier, Japan's high school English education consists largely of Yakudoku, a method of teaching that focuses on direct translation of sentences (Kawasumi, 1975). Due to this bottom-up reading habit, the students struggled to read long texts quickly and efficiently at university. The study showed that, to remedy this, the students gradually adopted new top-down reading strategies – skipping redundant vocabulary, reading for the gist, and making inferences using contextual information, which helped students to develop reading speed.

Due to high school's linear, assessment-centered style, students are unused to questioning the reasoning behind what and how they are being taught. Holthouse (2005) found that university students who do not grasp the reason behind the classroom activities are less likely to participate enthusiastically.

“Students need to be given more explicit guidance about how to improve their chances of becoming communicatively competent. It seems entirely possible that the majority of students would put more effort into participating actively in fluency-based activities if they could only grasp the rationale behind them.” (p. 74).

In many cases students do not understand that completing the activity might be useful in itself without necessarily needing to be achieving anything tangible. If they knew the goals first they might feel more involved and therefore willing to participate more enthusiastically. Offner (1997) concurs with this idea, saying “the better the language students comprehend the learning process and are aware of the key factors which will aid their foreign language studies, the more likely they will succeed” (p. 5).

2.4.2 Motivation

Motivation is an important part of students’ attitudes and willingness to study English. It has been observed that students who have greater motivation for language learning and who are more willing to communicate report using the language more frequently in the classroom (Hashimoto, Y., 2002). Early studies have shown that while Japanese junior high school students are usually enthusiastic about English at least during the first semester of their first year, they start exhibiting unwilling attitudes towards learning English during the first semester of their second year (Hatori & Matsuhata, 1980), while recent literature points to low levels of willingness to communicate among junior high and high school students (Humphries, Burns & Tanaka, 2015). This could be explained by the *fun and games* approach at elementary school that shifts drastically to textbook learning at junior high school and high school level.

Motivation to study is very much extrinsic at high school level. The intensity of this motivation hits a peak in the final year of high school, when students need to compete fiercely for entrance to university. This is when the content focus of the English examination is on grammar and translation, with a focus on easily testable aspects of English proficiency. Motivation to learn English is thus channeled into the sort of proficiency with the least communicative value. Once they have completed their university examinations, “there is very little to sustain students’ motivation, so they appear in first-year university classrooms as a kind of timid, exam-worn survivor with no apparent academic purpose at university” (Berwick & Ross, 1989, p. 206).

Upon entering university, students find that instead of “English for exams” they struggle with the notion of “English for communication.” Suddenly they are expected to derive their motivation from their desire to make their English studies personally meaningful for the future, as opposed to the externally imposed needs of an examination-based system (Aubrey, 2014). It is not difficult to imagine that switching from an extrinsic goal to something very much intrinsic would be a steep shift in focus that may result in disillusionment in many cases. To maintain motivation, it can be expected that students would need personalized goals that can be met by acquiring English communication skills.

2.5 Research Questions

The main research question that forms the basis for this study arose from the gaps identified in the literature review. This question is as follows:

How would students like to be taught at high school to prepare them for English classes at university level?

The following three research sub-questions support the main question:

1. How useful did students perceive their high school studies to be in preparing them for English study at university?
2. What kind of learning environment do students think would have been ideal for preparing them for English study at university?
3. What might students be able to do to aid their own transition to university?

Sub-question 1 narrowed the focus of the research question to the actual state of English education at high school and how students are being taught, allowing a comparison to be made with data related to sub-question 2, which was how they would like to have been taught. The third sub-question was included to approach the main question from the angle of the students themselves and their own independent efforts in adjusting to university. The research therefore aimed to provide insights into university students’ perspectives on how useful they found their

experience of English language learning at high school, and in doing so illuminate how they might have been better prepared for the transition to university.

2.6 Summary

The review of literature and research around English education in Japan's high schools and the students' challenges in their passage of transition to university suggests that adjustment from high school to university may be fraught with challenges for the Japanese student.

Research around the language of instruction and the Yakudoku approach would indicate that high schools may be teaching in a manner that leads to considerable challenges should students choose to continue studying English at university level.

Literature regarding teachers indicates that not only do students lack confidence, but Japanese teachers also perceive their proficiency levels to be insufficient for teaching English, which may be a reason for classes being instructed predominantly in Japanese. ALTs, though considered an important part of acquainting students with English, also tend not to be formally qualified to teach and often have little prior formal teaching experience.

Past research indicates that Japan's culture of encouraging conformity and compliance creates an atmosphere where students are prone to lose motivation and suffer from foreign language anxiety through fear of standing out from their peers. Motivation to nurture communicative English in university classes is also stunted by the university entrance examination's focus on formulaic written English, which de-emphasizes communication and concentrates on the less practical grammar and written translation. This in turn causes students to separate the idea of language study from communication, with the latter being deemed unnecessary for success in future studies of English.

Upon entrance to university, students face a number of challenges in English study. Not only do they have to adjust their study habits from traditional Yakudoku methods to concentrate on the meaning and key points of communicative speech, they also have to work independently towards intrinsic goals that are no longer linearly defined by a final examination.

The current study sees value in finding what kind of English-teaching at high school is perceived to have helped Japanese students adjust to and perform better at university level. Difficulties in adjustment to university level English may be partially accounted for by their dependence on L1 from high school English classes taught in Japanese, cultural differences, or different sources of motivation between the two phases of education. However, to date, no studies have looked at these questions.

Chapter Three

Methodology Review

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will begin with an explanation of the research paradigm and the research design utilized in order to gather insights into students' reflections on how their experiences at high school prepared them for studying English at university. Next, the chosen data collection tool, as well as the schedule for research and the approach to data analysis for this study are described. Finally, the role of the researcher and the relevant ethical considerations are outlined.

3.2 Research paradigm - qualitative research

A qualitative research approach was taken for this study. This approach fits with the emphasis in this study on looking closely at students' experiences of their transition to studying English at university, and to understand how well they felt that they were prepared for that transition while at high school. A major feature of qualitative research is that it is naturalistic, preferring to study people, things and events in their natural settings (Punch & Oancea, 2009) where the researcher "does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 39).

The qualitative methodology employed interpretive techniques and strategies to explore the meaning, rather than the frequency, of social phenomena. In doing so, I recognized that students' perspectives, as well as my interpretations, would be shaped by context and personal experience. In keeping with a qualitative approach, I acknowledged that people experience the world through their own filters and that these perspectives are guided by context (Merriam, 2009). This methodology allowed the possibility of exploring and illustrating in-depth insights into students'

reflections on their high school English studies. Such insights are a key attribute of qualitative methodology (Punch & Oancea, 2009).

3.3 Research design - case study

The specific focus on students' experiences in the current study makes it a good fit for case study research. Case study is a useful research design for exploring practical problems and questions, and perplexing occurrences that emerge in everyday practice. Each case is therefore important for what it reveals about a phenomenon and for what it might represent (Merriam, 2001).

In a case study, often a "how" or "why" question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control (Yin, 1994, p. 9). The 'How' in question here is 'How would students like to be taught at high school to prepare for university?' This case will provide a window into students' varying past experiences to illuminate answers to the main research question, something that could not be achieved with other research designs.

A case study entails systematically investigating an event or a sequence of events for the purpose of describing, examining and explaining that event. It provides what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) describe as a specific example of real people in real situations, which allows readers to understand concepts more clearly than by offering them abstract theories or principles.

A case study has a holistic focus, which endeavours to preserve and comprehend the wholeness and unity of the case. It could therefore be looked at as more of a strategy than a method (Yin, 1994). Stake (1995) outlined three main types of case study. These are the intrinsic case study, in which the research is conducted to gain a better understanding of the case, the instrumental case study, where the case is examined to gain insight into a wider issue or refine a theory, and the multiple or collective case study. In an instrumental case study multiple cases are included, in order to learn more about the phenomenon, the population or a general condition. The current

research could be called an instrumental case study, as it is not any specific case itself that is of interest, but rather the implications of high school English education and its efficacy in preparing Japanese students for studying English at university in a broader sense. For this reason, instead of presenting individual case studies as findings, the findings were presented thematically according to the data gathered from individuals.

The strength of case study research lies in its potential to familiarise us with a complex issue or object, extending experience or bolstering what is already known through earlier research. It places an emphasis on thorough contextual analysis which has a limited scope. Yin (1984) defines case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23).

The multiple sources of evidence gathered in the real-life context for the present study are the different student participants who were interviewed (see Section 3.5 *Procedures for participant selection*). The participants’ cases in the current study provide a unique opportunity to gain insights into students’ personal experiences of learning English, which can be considered in the light of conventional wisdom about English education. Ultimately, findings may lead to new suggestions about easing the transition from high school to university or, given the open-ended nature of case study exploration, take the research topic in a new direction. As Stake (1995) wrote, “Previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies, leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied. Insights into how things have come to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies” (p. 47).

The discussion and recommendations that emerged from the data may inspire changes and lead to improvements in English education in this context. The insights from the participants inspired several recommendations (see Chapter 5), which could not have been formed without the rich and holistic account of a circumstance that a case study offers. As Merriam (2001) stated,

educational processes and issues investigated can engender deeper understanding that in turn influences and potentially improves practice.

3.4 The data collection procedure: Semi-structured interviews

The interview is the most commonly used collection tool in qualitative research. Interviewing was selected for use in this study as it can provide a powerful way of understanding people's perceptions, interpretations of situations and constructions of reality (Punch & Oancea, 2009, p. 182). The interviewees in the present study provided reflections on their high school English experience and transition into university, allowing me to gain insights into how they would like to be taught in order to ease that transition. The interview is an essential source of data in case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs that are interpreted through the eyes of specific interviewees (Yin, 1994, p. 85).

Different styles of interviews have different functions in research. The type adopted should therefore be aligned with the study's strategy, purposes and research questions (Punch & Oancea, 2009, p. 184). Most qualitative case study interviews are of an open-ended nature. The interviewees in this study therefore were regarded more in the role of informants rather than respondents, as recommended by Yin (1994, p. 84).

The present study used semi-structured interviews. This type of interview falls between a structured and unstructured interviewing style. It is guided by a set of questions and prompts for discussion, but has built-in flexibility to adapt to particular informants and situations (see Appendix G). The questions were punctuated by prompts that allowed participants to elaborate on their points, or follow-up questions that led to new tangents from the students, as recommended by Punch and Oancea (2009). The interviews were therefore open-ended and had an informal, conversational manner, although the interview still followed a certain set of questions that were derived from the study's aims. The order in which I asked the questions during the interview was also prone to some variation, allowing me to transition between

different points according to the interviewee's answers and maintain a good conversational flow. Prior studies on this subject (e.g. Holthouse, 2005) have utilised a questionnaire for data collection. However, the current study's semi-structured interview methodology provides more in-depth insights into students' thoughts through the possibility of spontaneous and candid utterances.

During the interview, participants were occasionally required to give a number from a response Likert-scale (see Appendix I) to indicate the degree of their response, for example, their preparedness for university following high school. A 4-point scale was used here because it eliminated the possibility of choosing a neutral answer, meaning that participants needed to express an opinion leaning toward one side. Some evidence has been provided that social desirability bias, arising from participants' desires to please the interviewer or appear helpful, can be minimised by doing so (Garland, 1991). The 4-point scale allowed me to probe for reasons behind the participants' decision and gain richer data.

3.5 Procedures for participant selection

The seven participants were students at a university in Aichi, Japan. After being judged as low risk, ethical approval to interview the participants was granted (see Appendix B). Consent was then gained from their institution (see Appendix E), after which information sheets and cover letters in Japanese (see Appendix A and C) were dispersed to English majors at the university by their lecturer. Students who were interested in participating sent an expression of interest to me via email, after which a convenient time and place to conduct the interview was negotiated.

As shown in Table 3.1, five female and two male Japanese university students participated in the study. They were all in their third or fourth year at university, not their first year, as might be expected given that students were interviewed about their high school experiences (see 5.3 "Limitations of the Research"). Most of the participants had previously studied English for eight to ten years. However, one (Participant 4) reported having studied English since she was a child,

and another (Participant 2) had taken English conversation classes since the age of three. All but one (Participant 3) had attended a public high school. All but two (Participants 5 and 7) had been overseas before, to places such as the United States (U.S.), Canada, Australia, and South-East Asia. However, time spent overseas was a matter of days or weeks in most cases, with two exceptions being Participants 1 and 3, who had stayed in Canada for three months and five months respectively. The participants were enrolled in either the Contemporary International English course or the Discourse Analysis course.

Table 3.1: Participant characteristics

| Participant | Gender | Years of English study | High school details and English education | Overseas experience | Year | University Course |
|-------------|--------|---|---|--|------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Female | 9 years | Public co-ed school with about 900 students | 5 years ago in the U.S. for 10 days, Canada for about 5 months last year | 4 | Contemporary International English |
| 2 | Female | Since elementary school (over 10 years), English conversation classes since she was 3 | Medium-sized public co-ed high school. | Homestay program for 2 weeks in Utah, U.S., when 11 years old. Trip to Gold Coast, Australia for 3 to 5 days | 3 | Discourse Analysis |
| 3 | Female | 9 years | Large private school with 15 classes in each grade. Two English lessons per week | Studied English for 3 months in Canada | 4 | Contemporary International English |
| 4 | Female | Since she was a child | Mid-sized co-ed public high school in Hamamatsu city | U.S. for 1 week when 3rd grade at junior high school | 4 | Contemporary International English |
| 5 | Female | 9 years, since junior high school. | “Not so big” co-ed public school in Hamamatsu. Had 4 or 5 English lessons per week, and 1 English lesson at a Juku (cram school) after school | None but often listens to English music | 4 | Contemporary International English |
| 6 | Male | 9 years | Big public school with 6 classes per grade and about 40 students per class | 1 week in Singapore, 5 days in Malaysia, 1 week in the Philippines, 3 weeks in the U.S. | 3 | Contemporary International English |
| 7 | Male | 8 years | Small public co-ed high school | None | 3 | Discourse Analysis |

3.6 Schedule for the research

In May 2017 a pilot interview was conducted. This tested the thoroughness and comprehensibility of the questions, the suitability of the chosen interview location, and the quality of the recording device in that setting. The participant in the pilot was a professional acquaintance of the researcher.

Table 3.2 Interview schedule

| Interview | Date and time |
|-----------|------------------|
| Pilot | May 24th 6:00pm |
| 1 | June 2nd 6:00pm |
| 2 | June 3rd 11:20am |
| 3 | June 14th 6:00pm |
| 4 | June 14th 7:00pm |
| 5 | June 29th 6:45pm |
| 6 | July 2nd 2:00pm |
| 7 | July 2nd 2:45pm |

As shown in Table 3.2, the seven interviews were held during June and early July. The recordings were transcribed during mid-June and July. Transcription and analysis were executed according to the timing of the incoming data.

In light of the students' time constraints, and that English was not their first language, transcripts were not returned to participants for verification. However, Participants 6 and 7 requested an audio recording of their interview which was sent to them the following day via email.

3.7 Data analysis

In this section the procedure for analysing the data from this study is described. Firstly, the audio recordings of the interviews from each participant were transcribed to provide a complete word-for-word copy of the interviews. Following the transcription phase, the qualitative data were analysed.

Transcribing the interview data presented the opportunity for constant comparative analysis. The qualitative data were coded into emergent themes which were repeatedly revisited after the initial coding, until it was evident that no new themes were emerging, as suggested by Cohen et al (2000). The thematic coding process was carried out by reading each of the transcriptions and selecting sentences, paragraphs or sections within each document that fitted into the emergent themes. These data were copied into a new document and labelled with the participant's code number and the page number of their transcription. For example, the theme 'teaching style' was associated with data that indicated that high school teachers' teaching style was a relevant factor in the students' transition from high school to university. Following the advice of Cohen et al (2000), the data were then continually sorted, collated and highlighted under specific themes that emerged. The themes were later linked back to theory and past literature in order to understand how they focused on particular gaps in existing knowledge. A list of the themes and their definitions were recorded in a separate document.

3.8 Role of the researcher

In quantitative studies, participants ideally act independently of the researcher as if he or she were not present. However, in qualitative studies such as the present project, the role of the researcher is quite different, as the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2001).

In the current study, due to the intimate nature of the interview process, I participated fully as an interviewer while taking care to maintain objectivity throughout the interview process. As I had never met the participating students prior to the study and had never taught in the schools they attended, I was able to perform my role as an objective outsider, known as an etic role. According to Punch and Oancea (2009), the qualitative researcher can identify their role in a study as emic, an insider, who is a privy participant in the interview, or etic, an objective viewer. My role was not completely etic, however, as my experience of working as an ALT in public junior high schools may have influenced my interpretations, meaning there was an emic element in my analysis process.

A level of cultural validity was also required for this study. Cultural validity signifies sensitivity to the culture of the subjects being studied, incorporating the techniques of dissemination of information (Cohen et al., 2000). Because the current project, headed by a New Zealand European, examined students from Japan, culturally appropriate measures were considered. An understanding of the cultural background of the participants and conducting research in a culturally appropriate manner was required. Though my ethnicity and background differs to that of the participants, I am proficient in speaking Japanese, and this skill was able to be utilized in case communication difficulties arose with the participants. I was also aware of pertinent cultural differences and could adjust my communication style accordingly.

3.9 Ethical considerations

The study was evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it was not reviewed by one of Massey University's Human Ethics Committees. Further details on this can be seen on Appendix B. Following this evaluation, consent was gained from the institution (see Appendix E).

The following ethical principles outlined in the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (2005) were adhered to:

respect for persons; minimisation of harm to participants, researchers, institutions and groups; informed and voluntary consent; respect for privacy and confidentiality; the avoidance of unnecessary deception and conflict of interest; social and cultural sensitivity to the age, gender, culture, religion, social class of the participants; and justice. Further details on the ethical considerations pertaining to the study are outlined below.

In conducting qualitative research with human participants I had an obligation to protect individuals' rights. Informed consent was sought and received from participants, based on a thorough explanation of the research (Punch & Oancea, 2009). This explanation included not only an information sheet outlining the study (see Appendix A) but also an informal cover letter written in Japanese (see Appendix C) for ease of comprehension (see Appendix D for an English translation). Before signing their consent forms (see Appendix F), the participants were informed of the study's details in its entirety without the need for deception or omission of information. An opportunity was also provided for potential participants to ask any questions about the study.

From the outset I made it clear that students were free to decline participation without any negative consequences or opportunity loss. Besides the mention of having the chance to practice speaking English on the cover letter and a bottle of oolong tea given to each participant to drink during the interview, no coercion was used in recruiting the volunteers for the study.

In order to gain informed consent from the participants, they were fully informed of the research project's details. Upon meeting the participants I ensured that the information provided was comprehensible to them. The information sheet and cover letter both informed students that in the event of any confusion resulting from language difficulties, they are able to use a dictionary or ask the researcher for clarification. Care was taken to account for the potential issue of consent being genuine but not totally informed in cases where English is not the participants' first language (Koulouriotis, 2011).

As the current research endeavoured to probe Japanese students' perceptions, I needed to take into account that the participants might have a tendency to avoid questioning authority. Gathering reliable data from Japanese students can present issues, as there is often a suspicion that they will attempt to give the answers they think the teacher wants, with regard to the student-teacher power-dynamic, as mentioned in Holthouse (2005). Koulouriotis (2011) highlighted the importance of both parties having the same understanding of the definition of ethics when providing consent. Individuals from different cultures or backgrounds may have different ideas regarding the scope of appropriate consent. These differences may be unavoidable to an extent, but were largely mitigated in the present study as the students had no prior or existing teacher-student relationship with me, and were thus presumably less inclined to attempt to appease me with overly positive views.

Punch and Oancea (2009) suggest that, besides achieving technical ethical clearance for research, the investigator in question should also work on their own personal awareness of ethical principles and scenarios, their dedication to ethical research, and the ability to act thoughtfully in ethically complex or ambiguous scenarios. They mention that this is important from not only an ethical standpoint, but in ensuring the quality of the data (p. 209). Therefore I made sure to revise ethical principles and behave in a conscientious manner that I hoped would put the participants at ease before, during, and after the interview. For example, my experience with Japanese learners has taught me that they are more relaxed if they have notes in hand, so I took the opportunity to have students fill in a short background information form (see Appendix H) before beginning the interview. When the interview began I verbally asked the same questions, so students were able to begin by simply reading from their sheet of paper, something I hoped would help them relax initially.

As the interview process posed the possibility of problems regarding sensitivity of participants' personal opinions and feelings, I occasionally reminded the participants mid-interview (e.g. whenever there was a long pause) that they were free to refuse to comment. Where appropriate I also reminded them that when, for example they were mentioning an example of an ineffective

teacher, they did not need to mention any names. This was to ensure they were able to safely avoid making a hasty utterance that may cause them embarrassment. In taking these measures I was mindful that, in close interactions, such as in-depth interviews, the researcher temporarily invades the subject's world, accessing experiences and thoughts that may be sensitive or lead to potential risk for the subject or other individuals (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012).

I also took care to ensure that students were not coerced to disclose any information against their will. Standards of privacy can differ across cultures, so in interviews I bore in mind that the prevailing viewpoint of what defines privacy should be on the side of the participant and not the researcher (Tarone, 1980). As the student participants were all Japanese and might have different notions about the concept of privacy to people from other countries, I was thorough in my clarification of the study's handling of personal information before the interview. In accordance with the *Data Management* section of the Information Sheet (see Appendix A) I reminded the participants that their own personal information and that of university staff would not be included in the thesis report, and that the audio recording would be deleted after the thesis had been graded. In the absence of actual names, each participant is therefore referred to by a unique number to protect their anonymity.

3.10 Summary

The qualitative research approach taken for this study emphasised gaining in-depth insights into students' experiences of their transition to university English classes, and how they were prepared for that transition at high school. The case study design was useful for exploring this transition, as case studies allow us to describe a specific example of real people in real situations, providing the opportunity to understand concepts and gain insight into the wider issue of students' transition to university. In addition, using a semi-structured interview allowed me to adopt an open-ended, informal manner with the seven participants while following a certain set of key questions in a naturally occurring order. Data were gathered while adhering to ethical principles in preserving participants' rights, maintaining transparency, and acknowledging cultural differences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly afterwards, followed by analysis

and thematic organisation. This was achieved by selecting and separating portions of the transcriptions that fitted into emergent themes. The themes were later discussed in connection to theory and past literature in order to understand how they focused on particular gaps in existing knowledge of the research questions.

Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The interviews with the seven participating university students provided insights into their thoughts about their English studying experiences, with a focus on how well they were prepared for university from their high school classes. As a result of the data analysis, five major themes were identified. These themes were: language of instruction, perceptions on high school teaching, initial challenges in adjustment to university, greater enjoyment following adjustment to university, and students' perceptions on how to aid their transition. Findings related to each of these themes will be presented first, followed by a discussion which reflects on the results in the context of relevant literature.

4.2 Language of Instruction

In this section, I will identify and discuss the range of participants' opinions regarding the language of instruction in both high school and university. Firstly, I will focus on participants' views regarding high school English classes being taught in Japanese, then participants' opinions about the possibility of an all-English system at high school.

4.2.1 High school English lessons taught in Japanese

Each of the seven participants reported that the language of instruction at high school used by their Japanese teacher of English was predominantly Japanese, while two participants (P3 and P6) stated that their high school English lessons were taught 100% in Japanese.

Though the classroom activities appeared to involve reading English questions, the instruction and dissection of these exercises seemed to abandon the target language completely. For example, Participant 7 reported that the language used in class was: “All Japanese. So writing is all Japanese. However, of course the question[s] ... we can read in English, however teacher cannot explain the grammar in English. The teacher didn’t explain the grammar in English” (p. 7). According to this participant, even the notes taken by students in the English class, having been presumably provided by the teacher, were in Japanese. It is also worthy of note that this participant reported that the teacher did not have sufficient language ability to explain the class content in the target language. This fits with earlier research findings (see Section 2.2.2 *Teachers’ competence*).

Students also appeared to use Japanese in class among themselves. According to Participant 2, “Students often used Japanese in the class, and yeah, and teachers also. So everyone usually using Japanese” (p. 9). All participants indicated a predominantly Japanese-language environment with a strong focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary over opportunities to practice speaking, which runs parallel with the existing literature on the language of instruction in Japan’s English classes (King, 2013; Stephens, 2006).

4.2.2 Views on all-English at high school

The idea of changing high school classes from instruction in Japanese to instruction in English (commonly referred to as “all-English” in Japan) appeared to be a good idea in theory but not feasible in practice. Participant 2 indicated that realistically the high school classes need some Japanese for support: “Last year I learned grammar in English and I feel that if I can understand in English, it’s better to learn grammar in English, but ... for high school students it is difficult to learn grammar in English, so maybe it is better to explain in Japanese” (p. 9). Participant 2 also stated: “For high school students it is difficult to learn grammar in English, so maybe it is better to explain in Japanese” (p. 9). This student clearly estimated they would have had insufficient comprehension ability for an explanation of grammar in English at high school age.

The literature also provides support for the idea that initial foreign language study requires the support of the mother tongue. For example, Carson and Kashihara (2012) argued that the quickest way for students to make cognitive development in the L2 is to make connections between the L2 and the L1. In addition, Liao (2006) reported that the L1 could be useful for students as a tool to expand their English vocabulary and to improve their reading, writing, and speaking skills. She found that using L1 helped students to thoroughly check their comprehension in reading and listening tasks. Furthermore, in counteracting foreign language anxiety, Karimian and Talebinejad (2013) contended that teaching with translation allows students to be more comfortable in their communicative English interactions, because referring back to the L1 gives them some degree of security.

If all-English were to be fixed in high schools, it could be a difficult methodology to enforce. Participant 1 emphasized the importance of having rules to maintain an English-only environment:

“In Canada we had an English only group in the school, and students had to use English. Actually there were many Japanese students and some Japanese students were speaking Japanese but I think it’s not good, so making those rules [mandatory use of English] is good” (p. 16).

However, this same participant said that she would like to be taught basic grammar in Japanese: “At first, we hadn’t any grammatical knowledge, and actually I think it’s very difficult to learn grammatical things in not our mother tongue. So, basic things is taught in our mother tongue is good” (p. 15).

The balance of following an all-English guideline while avoiding causing students confusion and discomfort may be subject to the teacher’s professional judgement. When Participant 2 was asked to describe an effective teacher, she said: “He always tried to do class in English. And he

always answered the questions which the students don't understand" (p. 5). Participant 7 expressed a similar sentiment:

"So maybe the most important thing is teacher use English to explain. So, now Japanese is trying to take on this system. However, it's not come true now. So if teacher use English, so students can learn, students can improve listening and of course grammar" (p. 12).

However, Participant 2 preferred the teacher to switch to Japanese in times of confusion: "If student[s] don't understand the meaning of something then teacher explains in Japanese. Support in Japanese" (p. 13). Again, this adds responsibility to the teacher in terms of detecting when students need the Japanese input.

All seven participants reported that they would have preferred a greater speaking element at high school to aid their transition to the university's English learning approach. For example Participant 4 reported: "I think it should be more, make more speaking and listening lessons because I wanted, I wanted to study speaking" (p. 9). This participant would have preferred high school lessons conducted in "almost, almost all English ...It is useful for preparing for university in the future" (p. 10). Furthermore, "I want them [high school students] to not only study about vocabulary grammar but also practice speaking listening. This is useful for class in university" (p. 11).

One participant believed that a gradual transition of the language of instruction from half English to full English by the third year would prepare students for university well. His opinion on the ideal amount of English spoken in class, through the three years of high school, was as follows: "When I am first grade, half ... when I become a second or third I want [to] increase the percentage of English ... [over the three years] from half to 70[%] and then all [100%]" (Participant 5, p. 12). He provided further details on this idea:

"I think grammar and vocabulary is important but I wanted to learn about speaking and

listening at the same time, so perfect class is teaching all of them. And when I become third grade I wanted to, I try to take a class in English, not use Japanese ...And I wanted to get more opportunity to speak with foreign person, or person using English” (p. 12).

The idea of a gradual transition, ultimately leading to classes conducted solely in English, may provide a good basis for coping later with all-English classes at university.

4.3 Perceptions of high school teaching

Participants shared their perceptions of the grammar translation approach as a teaching methodology, English teachers’ language ability, the importance of teachers having cultural familiarity, and their impressions of the ALT system in high schools. These issues are examined next.

4.3.1 Retrospective views of high school English teaching

Three of the seven interviewees (Participants 3, 5 and 7) mentioned that they did not take the quality of the teaching they had received into consideration until they entered university years later. Looking back, Participant 7 stated: “I couldn’t improve listening skills when I was a high school student, so therefore now I am not good at listening [to] English. So reading English is important, however listening to English is more important than reading” (p. 14). Participant 3 stated: “At the time, yeah, I think, I thought, this is usual, usual. But now, that is, that is, ... Chotto chigau kana? [Not right I guess]” (p. 10). More specifically regarding exactly what was “not right”, Participant 5 stated: “When I was [a] high school student, I think[thought] that is natural because junior high school, when I was junior high school student, English class was [the] same style, but now I wish we used more English” (p. 7). Participant 7 remembered: “When I was a high school student I didn’t think so [the teacher explaining English grammar in English was strange] but I didn’t think deeply about it. However, when I was a university student, it is strange for us” (p. 7). We can see a pattern emerging in the data from these three participants, in

that initially they did not think anything of their English classes lacking interaction with the language itself. It seems that, on later reflection, they found this to be a less beneficial learning experience when they realised that they needed more enhanced skills to participate in the more interactive university classes.

A striking example of a retrospective view of high school studies was Participant 6 mentioning that his six years of high school English education had made a negligible difference to his proficiency. When asked how long he had studied English in total he reported: “Nine years but actually, including junior high school times and high school times ... it has no big difference, if I didn't study English in that six years [at high school]. The university time is [more] important” (p. 2). It appears that this participant believed it to be a case of quality over quantity in making improvements in the language.

However, it was interesting to note that elements of Participant 6's English had actually deteriorated following entrance to university: “When I was [at] high school I learned so many vocabulary, difficult words, but now I don't use them” (p. 8). He also reported that his knowledge of grammar had declined since entering university, despite improvements in communication: “My communication skill is of course improved ... but ... I cannot remember the exact grammar now” (p.12). This may be due to the vast difference between the grammar in Japanese and English. Andersen (1982) contends that language areas that contrast with the L1, in this case grammar and vocabulary, are more vulnerable to attrition than the ones that are similar. Additionally, he claims that elements that are less frequently used are more likely to be forgotten than those that are more so. It might therefore be inferred that the grammar and vocabulary Participant 6 forgot was not useful for the activities he undertook at university.

A final remark on participants' reports of not considering the quality of teaching until years later is that, in Japan, there is a formal distance and large power gap between teacher and student, and between older and younger individuals (Kaji, Hama, & Rice, 2010). This means it is rare and difficult for people to confront or question authority figures, and may have been why students

were loath to critically analyse the quality of their teaching while in the subordinate role of the high school student.

4.3.2 Grammar-translation approach

All of the students mentioned both grammar and translation when asked to describe their classroom activities. Participant 1 reported: “In the class we just read the textbook and translate in Japanese” (p. 7), while Participant 6 said: “The new grammar or vocabulary appear in the textbook, the teacher explained about that in Japanese, what is this English means in Japanese. We just did that” (p. 12). This teaching style is known as Yakudoku, or translating word-by-word (see Section 2.3.1 *Grammar-translation approach*), which poses disadvantages in terms of reducing efficiency and impeding the development of other language skills (Nation & Newton, 2009), yet remains prevalent in Japanese classrooms (Humphries & Burns, 2015).

Participant 5 provided further details on how Yakudoku was used by the teacher:

“We had textbooks and at first we read sentence together and then teacher wrote a sentence on the board, then we translate them last night, so, so we go to front of, in front of students to write answer in Japanese ...Then teacher explains that it's right or wrong, and sometimes we had a vocabulary test. ... [When we were] just reading sentence we should use English, but other[wise, in this] case we use just Japanese” (p. 7).

Additionally, all students who mentioned Yakudoku reported that the direction of translation that they were taught was from English to Japanese. This is the common practice in Japan. As Law (1995) comments: "English has tended to be perceived as a channel of one-way communication, that is, for the reception of Western ideas" (p. 214). In fact, Gorsuch (1998) found that students focused the bulk of their attention on the accuracy of the Japanese translations of the English text, rather than the content of the English text itself, viewing reading and translation as the same thing. From early literature, Yakudoku techniques have been described as a major roadblock to the introduction of communicative language teaching into Japanese classrooms (Henrichsen,

1989), presumably because one-way translation, while it may aid comprehension of particular English utterances, would provide little help in production of new English expressions.

When participants were asked to provide opinions on what they thought of the teaching methodology they undertook at high school, it appeared that they thought Yakudoku was useful for passing the university entrance test but it came at the expense of learning English communication skills. Participant 3 reported:

“In high school, I studied just grammar, so maybe many people study English to pass the examination, I think. But in university, we study English ... more actively and communication, so grammar is, I think grammar is not so important for communication” (p. 4).

We can understand “grammar” here as studies using Japan’s grammar-translation method. Participant 4 shared a similar insight: “I think now I can’t use what I learned in high school. Because at high school I studied, focused on grammar and vocabulary so... Of course, it’s useful, but I think how to communicate is more important” (p. 3). Participant 7 compared his experience with that of other schools (i.e. private or international schools): “I heard other high school is, the class is mainly communication ... without grammar and English words, so maybe they could learn communication skill for English, so [for] this I envy the high school. It is useful for me” (p. 4). The general consensus here is that students would rather have practiced productive English than use the passive translation system.

Participant 6 commented on his teacher’s use of the Yakudoku approach and the confusion that arises when there are subtle differences in meanings between English and Japanese utterances:

“Teachers try to do translate English to Japanese in exactly same way as example in the answer book. So, sometimes it’s not, it’s not a wrong answer but some kind of grey zone. I, then I wonder why that grey answer will not be the correct answer ... I wanted to [be] taught the Japanese translation from English sentence is not exactly same meaning as the

original sentence. If I got that fact in junior high school, high school time, I could improve my English more better now” (p. 6).

Though Yakudoku teaches students about the process of translation and how word order differs between English and Japanese (Matsumoto, 1965), without context it fails to impress upon students the subtlety of nuances that depend largely on situations. Yakudoku is very much a black and white, right or wrong system that benefits the teacher in terms of simplicity of preparing classes and grading tests (Hino, 1988). It appears Participant 6 may have benefited more from studying dialogues and reading extended texts in the target language to gain some direct idea of the context and therefore the nuances of the language used. Extended reading has been shown to promote reading fluency and increase reading speed, which leads to improvements in areas such as reading comprehension, expanding vocabulary knowledge, and enhancing writing skills (Day, 2002).

When describing an ideal class for preparing for university, Participant 6 also mentioned his need for more pressure in lessons than the typical Yakudoku sentence dissection:

“Making English sentence in my head faster than, more faster and faster, that makes me fluent, that makes me fluent [in] English so. Making English sentence fast is important to speak English so that’s why I would have some kind of, how do you say, some kind of fast English sentence class, something like that” (p. 14).

His sentiment about the necessity to train for speed echoes the literature on Yakudoku’s disadvantages for the Japanese student. For example, Yakudoku has been shown to limit reading speed and reduce the efficiency of comprehension (Nation & Newton, 2009). This is because Yakudoku trains students to understand speech by translating every sentence into Japanese in their head, meaning that they are never able to “think in English”. This leads to difficulties following speech unless it is delivered slowly, using the rules they have learned in the classroom

(Matsumoto, 1965). For this reason, it appears that Participant 6 would rather do away with the slow and steady approach and have more pressure to make utterances quickly.

4.3.3 Japanese teachers' English language ability

A number of participants reported that their high school classes were mostly taught in Japanese, which implies they probably had limited opportunities to hear their teachers speaking English. For example, Participant 6 said “The teacher didn't speak English so 0% English, 100% Japanese” (p. 9). While they are unaware about the extent of their teachers' abilities to teach using only English at high school, from the students' perspective it would presumably be unclear as to whether it was a case of not being *able* to speak English, or simply choosing not to speak English. Nonetheless, there was an assumption about teachers' lack of English ability in Participant 7's report that: “Teacher cannot explain the grammar in English” (p. 7) and Participant 6's comment about the language of instruction: “100% Japanese English class is natural because Japanese teacher maybe cannot speak English. I'm not sure but I've not heard he [him] speak English” (p. 14).

Teachers' preference for Japanese over English could be a question of confidence rather than ability, as Japanese English teachers have been reported to perceive their own English proficiency levels as lower than the minimum requirement (Butler, 2004). This view was echoed in Participant 7's comment about his teachers' confidence in their own English language skills and the effect that had on his motivation: “So maybe not good teacher is not confidence in themselves, therefore we can feel the teacher is not confident, therefore we cannot study hard” (p. 5). This shortfall of self-confidence in the teacher may therefore cause a lack of trust from the student, who would presumably have been hoping to emulate the teacher's English confidence and ability.

Whether the decision to use the target language related to perceived or actual deficiencies in English-speaking ability of teachers, it appears to negatively affect students' impressions of

them. Participant 1 said of her high school teacher: “Can’t speak English. And I think she had a complex about her pronunciation and wouldn’t try to say English before the classmates. She just used CD, CD sound ...I couldn’t, sonkei? [respect] her” (p. 7). This practice appears to be common in Japan, one possible cause being teachers’ reluctance to adopt more communication-based teaching practices (Bartlett, 2017). However, it is interesting to note that all students at some point in the interviews mentioned that they would have liked an English teacher at high school who spoke English to them more frequently.

4.3.4 Japanese teachers’ cultural familiarity

High school teachers’ unfamiliarity with the culture of the target language also appeared to play a part in students’ difficulties adjusting to all-English classes at university. Participant 3 mentioned that teachers were limited in their knowledge of the foreign culture: “Japanese teacher, Japanese teacher don’t know English culture in English speaking country” (p. 15). At early stages of learning, Japanese students may require some foundational knowledge of the context of the language they are learning to make faster progress. In a study by Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989) it was observed that passages modified to more closely resemble familiar cultural contexts resulted in a significantly better comprehension performance than those further outside students’ linguistic and cultural comfort zones. This would suggest that any means of enhancing students’ familiarity with the cultural context of their text would help them.

Three of the participants stated they would prefer an English teacher who had familiarity with foreign cultures. Participant 3 expressed this when describing an ideal English teacher who could spark students’ interest in English: “If teacher go[es] to [a] foreign country so, they, they can talk about foreign culture and then so, maybe many students will be interested in English, I think” (p. 7). She elaborated further later in the interview:

“Japanese teacher don’t know English culture in English speaking country ... So, I think, when I, when we speak English, we have to know about culture. So, culture and background. So I want to learn, I wanted to learn English and English speaking culture

also, in high school. So, I hope, I hope foreign teacher teach[es] high school student[s]” (p. 15).

A teacher’s familiarity with foreign culture may also provide some support for progression to university. Participant 5 suggested this by saying: “If the teacher was [studying at a] foreign high school, and using English with us, that is, I think the teacher is good, and the experience can be useful for university” (p. 5). Given that classes are conducted all in English and often by a foreign instructor at university, giving the students some level of familiarity with this culture could help their progression.

4.3.5 Perceptions about ALT input

Students’ perceptions about the ALT input were mixed. A striking finding was that the ALT appeared to only teach during the first year of high school, meaning that the final two years were taught only by Japanese teachers. Participant 4 described it as follows:

“When I was first grade in high school, there were two kinds of class. English, one is [taught by a] Japanese teacher ... another is a foreign teacher’s class, but more than two grade [beyond second grade], only Japanese teacher” (p. 4).

Two of the participants mentioned their discontent with this infrequency. Participant three described her dissatisfaction with having insufficient ALT classes, stating: “We have only this class [ALT class] 1st year, 1st grade ... Why we didn’t take this [ALT] class [in second and third grade]? Why we study only grammar? So, that’s boring” (p. 5). Participant 1 also mentioned that the ALT only rarely visited her school even in first grade: “I think they seldom to, came to our high school. Only a few times. If they came every week it was [would have been] very, I think, useful” (p. 7). This view varied among participants but the general trend was that their high school had fewer ALT classes than they would have preferred.

Five of the seven participants mentioned that the ALT's lessons were useful for improving their English conversation skills. In particular, Participants 3 and 6 thought their exposure to the ALT made a useful contribution to their transition to university. Participant 3 said: "In university, university English class is almost [entirely] teacher speaking English, teacher speak English, so ... ALT class is also teacher speaks English. It was useful, ALT English class" (p. 9). Further probing into her view of the ALT revealed that this exposure may have helped her adjust to the more media-oriented university classes: "We watched movie[s] in English, and [ALT] teacher, teacher made exam from the movie, so yeah, it was interesting for me" (p. 9). This sort of positive impression, describing a high school English class as "interesting", was a rare find among the seven participants.

Though the majority of participants found the ALT was useful for conversational English, some thought this was not useful for their studies. For example, Participant 2 stated: "ALT's class was just conversation, mainly conversation. So, it was useful for our daily life but maybe not useful for university" (p. 6). In many cases, participants were initially unclear about whether the ALT input was useful for gaining entrance to university or useful for coping with study at the university. Clearly these are two very different questions, given the disparity between the skills required for the entrance examination and the skills required at university (see Section 4.4.4 *Examination goals vs university demands*). Participant 2 went on to say: "I want to learn daily English conversation from ALT ... Native speaker's English, but maybe it doesn't connect to [university]" (p. 7). Participant 7 had a similar opinion:

"Of course ALT is useful for conversation. However, we, we cannot learn from ALT. For example, ... I have a problem for grammar, however I cannot tell the problem in English. So, we cannot communicate with the ALT, so ... we cannot ask ALT about our problems like Japanese teacher. It is not convenient ... However, ... ALT helps us communication skills, so that's good" (p. 6).

Of interest here is Participant 7's point "We cannot learn from the ALT," something that may suggest Japanese students are inured to viewing learning as following instructions, as opposed to

learning from experiences. However, he makes a valid point that an English-speaking ALT in many cases would be unable to answer a question about grammar in Japanese. This is where the nature of the team-teaching could be a decisive factor. How the Japanese and native-English ALT teacher cooperate while fulfilling distinct roles in teaching students could be a critical element in students' preparation for learning English in university.

On a more positive note, the presence of a foreign teacher was thought to help with pronunciation, something especially vital in the absence of a Japanese teacher who had the confidence or willingness to provide input in English. Participant 6 mentioned the ALT's importance in aiding pronunciation, saying: "By listening to their [ALT's] pronunciation we could get how to say [in] English. That's why [it's] useful" (p. 7). Prior to this he also mentioned: "When studying English we're not heard the right pronunciation. I think pronunciation is ... actually not important to study English, but [for] speaking English it has a big part" (p. 7). It is interesting that he viewed studying English and speaking English as separate fields, something that has been remarked upon by Lee (1989) as a problematic distinction, as it sustains the notion that English conversation is distinct from academic studies and therefore less worthy of investing time and effort in.

Two of the participants had a positive impression that the ALT's presence worked in tandem with the Japanese teacher. Participant 3 reported:

"When I was grade one of high school, ... our class have [ALT] teacher who speak English, so yeah, this is, this is important. He always speak, speak English, so, and another teacher help us ... This is good, good chance to communicate in English" (p. 5).

Participant 6 also said: "Actually, I noticed why ALT teacher support[s] English class when I was high school student," especially "for some like difficult question that [the] Japanese teacher can't answer exactly" and "pronunciation or some small nuance in English" (p. 7). Self-consciousness about pronunciation is a big obstacle for Japanese speakers of English. It results in

a hesitance to speak and a fear of being misunderstood. A lack of adequate instruction in English pronunciation negatively influences students' speaking ability throughout their years of English learning and use (Chujo, 2017). Helping students improve their pronunciation is one of the main goals of the ALT. If students are encouraged to improve their pronunciation and overcome the stigma it arouses, they may develop more confidence in their overall English ability and gain stronger motivation to study. In this respect, pronunciation instruction is crucial for language learning.

Impressions of the current team-teaching system were not all positive, however. Participant 6 later said: "I think if the ALT teacher and Japanese teacher was in the opposite position, it would be a better class. Like, ALT teacher teaching mainly and the Japanese teacher support what the grammar means, explaining that to students" (p. 14). The current setup has the Japanese teacher occupying most of the teaching time, with the ALT lesson an additional practice session with a communicative element. This participant suggested that giving the ALT more time in the Japanese teacher's lesson, would make the ALT's classes more effective. However, this may be unfeasible in reality as ALTs are usually hired to cover multiple schools and grades simultaneously, meaning that giving ALTs a larger role would either mean substantially increasing their workload or hiring a much larger number of them. Additionally, the majority of ALTs do not have a teaching license or qualification that would entitle them to independently run a class, not to mention the difficulties already present in the team-teaching dynamic, such as issues in communication and role ambiguity (Ohtani, 2010).

While cooperation between the ALT and Japanese teacher was seen as important, two of the participants thought that the ALT needed to use Japanese in the classroom. Participant 6 said:

"One thing I wonder was why they helped speaking English without using Japanese, while the other students cannot understand their English. It's OK for us and all the students studying English to explain the meaning in Japanese ... And I also think if they speak in Japanese, students can contact or talk to the teacher more easily" (p. 7).

Participant 7 shared a similar opinion. When asked to describe a hypothetical example of a good ALT, he responded: “Ah, so, like you [me]. Both Japanese and English speak. So, if ALT were like you, we can tell the question in Japanese, and ALT can answer in Japanese” (p. 6). These findings suggest that while effective team teaching may be important, a teacher who can speak both English and Japanese would be ideal. After all, Barker (2003) argues that teachers who have familiarity with their students’ mother tongue make more effective teachers for various reasons, an important one being that they are able to empathise with their students, having put themselves through the same hurdles that their students are going through. Burden (2000) also found in his survey of Japanese students that, across all ability levels, it was felt that the teacher should know the students’ native language. He concluded that learners prefer all-English in communicative teaching scenarios, but expect the teacher to be able to use the students’ mother tongue when it is necessary to explain the usage of English.

In particular, four participants mentioned the lack of clarity in the ALT class. Participant 3 reported: “Sometimes I didn’t understand what he [the ALT] said” (p. 5). Pair work was reported as a common component in the ALT’s teaching repertoire but it left mixed impressions. Participant 4 said: “In foreign teacher’s class, we communicate, we practiced communicate with pair, many times” (p. 5). Pair work can be a useful activity as it serves to maximise the chances for students to communicate, as opposed to individually calling upon students to speak. However, Participant 7 felt that students were not provided with enough basis for speaking in English with another non-native speaker: “But teacher didn’t teach, teach how to communicate ... I wanted to learn good communication. How to [have] good communication.... So, only communication with partner ... need more communication with native speaker” (p. 5). Though occasional confusion may be an unavoidable part of the process of adjustment to English it would appear this student wanted more direct instruction and interaction with the ALT as opposed to attempting to communicate freely with her classmates during the ALT class. This may also be indicative of students’ tendency to be more willing to participate when they know the reason and the learning process behind their classroom activities, as noted by Holthouse (2005) and Offner (1997).

Another key aspect of communicative teaching in EFL classes was touched upon by Participant 6, who mentioned the impracticality of the ALT's class:

“They did some game, activity like, make the pair and, like playing card game, ... what they wanted to do us was speak English through that card game, but that's kind of just a playing time for us ... I don't think it's a practical way to study English” (p. 11).

It appears that viewing a lesson as “playing time” may detract from the seriousness with which students approach the lesson. However, it is possible that this view itself, that “playing time” and games cannot be effective for study, is detrimental to the effectiveness of such activities.

4.4 Initial challenges in adjustment to university

Six of the seven participants reported difficulties with initial adjustments to university. Of these, while five students mentioned difficulties with the language of instruction at university being all English, two were also challenged by the necessity of working independently. Further information about these challenges that participants reported in adjusting to university are discussed with reference to the literature in the following sections.

4.4.1 Challenges with all-English university classes

All seven participants reported that classes at high school were taught mostly in Japanese, so it was not unexpected that all participants, particularly Participants 4, 6, and 7, talked about their initial surprise when faced with an English-speaking teacher at university. Participant 4 reported: “When I was [in my] first class in university, I was surprised, because I hadn't ever [taken an] English class [taught in English]” (p. 7). After 9 years of English study that involved instruction mainly in Japanese, suddenly taking a class taught solely in the target language would indeed have been a challenge. Other studies have suggested that a student's native language, having been used as a support tool in her previous education, may lead to a psychological dependence on L1 instruction in future studies of English (e.g. Stephens, 2006), which explains how

bewildered the participants in this study were when confronted with an all-English learning environment.

Participants 6 and 7 also expressed their surprise at the sudden shift in language of instruction. Participant 6 reported: “The [university] teacher was Canadian and he speak[s] English all the time in the class. At first I was surprised about that. Because all the class was spoken in English” (p. 10). As found in comments about ALT lessons, students rarely had the opportunity to be taught English by a native speaker in the latter part of their high school studies. Therefore, the teacher’s nationality in itself would have been a surprise. As Participant 7 mentioned: “I was surprised the teacher, the [that] most of teacher uses English, so they, they don’t speak Japanese” (p. 11).

4.4.2 Shame and foreign language anxiety

Three of the seven participants mentioned some form of discomfort, shame or embarrassment in the new environment at university. As Participant 5 reported, “Even now I’m nervous when I [am] speaking with foreign people in English” (p. 8). It appears that an inurement to instruction in Japanese by a Japanese teacher, followed by a sudden shift in which students are required to communicate and engage in the target language with a native speaker, may have triggered such feelings. These feelings may stem from foreign language anxiety (FLA), a reaction that arises among foreign language students due to the uniqueness of the new language learning process, and which can affect future interactions with English (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Participant 1 in particular showed signs of FLA when she expressed her embarrassment in her English ability: “Actually at first, I felt shame, to use English because my English skill was terrible, and I felt shame to use” (p. 11). This sense of shame and inhibition is likely to be related to the “face-saving” culture present in East-Asian societies (Goffman 1967). Failing to speak well or making even minor pronunciation or grammatical errors in speech could result in “losing face” (Huang, 2014). This occurs when someone’s perceived social value is diminished through

a particular contact (Goffman 1967). The repetition of “shame” would serve to indicate that Participant 1 was “losing face” because of what she perceived as her “terrible” English skill.

However, feelings of shame in the classroom were not confined to the all-English environment. Participant 7 mentioned that, even in his predominantly Japanese-instructed high school classroom, he felt: “Embarrassed, of participating in the classes. So, maybe most of Japanese students think the same things like me” (p. 10). It could have been the case that students are not expected to speak out so hide their abilities even if they have something to contribute to the class. Students may also be wanting to avoid “showing up the teacher”, as doing so could be deemed disrespectful to an authority figure.

Participants’ inability to understand the teacher’s all-English instruction also led to initial difficulties for two participants in following classroom instructions. For example, Participant 7 said: “I was surprised ... most of teacher uses English, so they don’t speak Japanese so ... I was worried about it, because I didn’t listen to English well. So I cannot follow the class, so it is my worry” (p. 11). Participant 5 also stated: “Of course, it was so tough, because when I was first grade, I couldn’t hear what should I do to homework, I couldn’t do homework, and I couldn’t understand what teacher say” (p. 8). It can be seen here that the burden of making sense of the class is placed on the student (Anderson, 1993). The Japanese mindset of “face-saving” (Goffman, 1967) again plays a role in this, in that students would not want to present awkwardness or inconvenience to the teacher by admitting they were not following the class content. This may explain why, though the students did not understand the teacher’s English, they found themselves unable to ask the teacher to clarify their message. Asking for clarification would be admitting failure of comprehension on their part and give them the sense of being a nuisance to their teacher (Goffman, 1967).

4.4.3 Necessity to work independently

Participant 3 emphasised the necessity to work independently at university. He stated this point

in Japanese, and it was later translated into English: “At high school you just take the lessons, but at university it’s necessary to study proactively, and look for books, and do your own research on the internet” (p. 16). Not only do students need to adjust to being instructed in the target language at university, they also have to work independently and take initiative when they need help or assistance with their studies (Conley, 2010).

Holthouse (2005) claims that factors inherent to the high school education system are culpable for the difficulties in adjustment to university following high school, such as the grammar-translation method, the assessment format, and the enforcement of obedience and conformity over independent thought. However, first-year university students’ responses to his questionnaire indicated that the gap from high school to university could be bridged. According to Holthouse’s study, first year university students may respond more positively to their studies if they spend more time being acquainted with the ideas behind communicative language teaching, and engaging in activities which enable them to gradually adjust to the demands of the class. The present study built on Holthouse’s findings by interviewing students in depth, rather than using a more restrictive Likert-scale. The tools used in the current study therefore provided more complex and varied insights. In addition, any “suspicion that they [students] will try to give the responses they think the teacher wants” (Holthouse, 2005, p. 73) was mitigated to some extent in the present study through my prior absence of contact with the participants and the fact that I did not have a teaching role with any participants.

4.4.4 Examination goals vs university demands

Impressions from participants indicated that high school studies were geared toward passing the university entrance examination. Four participants (Ps 1, 3, 6 & 7), mentioned the importance of high school studies for the university entrance test but not for handling the communicative aspect of university study itself. For example, Participant 7 stated: “High school is useful for entrance for university. However, ... I didn’t improve the communication level, English communication level, so therefore the class is only for entrance university, so therefore, ... we cannot learn realistic English” (p. 4). Like other participants, it appears that he realised in hindsight that his

high school studies did little to improve his English communication ability. However, he did perceive that the high school classes addressed the need to pass the university entrance examination.

The idea that “realistic” or “practical” English would have been more useful was a common theme among participants. Participant 6 also emphasised the practical application of English over entrance test preparation in envisaging his ideal high school English class in preparation for university level study:

“If I was a teacher in high school, I’d like to teach students a more practical way to use English. How to speak, how to use ...We have to speak English, understand how to speak English, like how to express personal feeling or emotion in English” (p.14).

This desired communication ability could arguably arise not solely from rote study but from intrinsic motivation, the impetus to do something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, as opposed to an obligation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When Participant 1 was asked how well being taught the “testable” aspects of English (grammar and vocabulary) prepared her for university, she replied: “Not good. I think even if we don’t have grammatical skill or vocabulary, we can communicate if we had energy, desire, that we want to speak, communicate” (p. 9). Accordingly, this willingness to communicate would be an important thing to impress upon students during their high school years in preparation for university.

The extent to which high school students, in later years, can make use of the grammar and vocabulary they learn at high school is difficult to quantify. However, it was interesting to note that, although Participant 7 reported that his “communication skill is of course improved” (p. 12) during his time at university, his Center-shiken (National Center Test for University Admissions) score decreased upon retaking the test in his third year: “I cannot remember the exact grammar now, so when I ... took a Center-shiken just a few days ago, I cannot do, I couldn’t do the Center-shiken The score is falled [lower than before]” (p. 12). This would suggest that the

skills tested in the Center-shiken, despite supposedly assessing university eligibility, may have a weak applicability to actual university study. Participant 3 supported this statement by adding: “I think high school student[s] need to study grammar because of entering university examination; so high school students should learn grammar, but this study is not so useful for university, university study” (p. 7). It appears that what she would have found more useful was working on communication in preparation for university: “I wanted to study, I wanted to practice communication in English, so, I hope high school teacher tried to communicate with, with all classmates in English” (p. 7).

Participant 1 also shared insights about assessment at university with the comment: “We focus on the communication of using English. We don’t have paper test, we have like, speaking test, conversation test” (p. 11). From this we can gather that more communicative activities would prepare students more effectively.

Though we have seen the emphasis that high school studies place on the university entrance test, it appears that the importance of tests does not subside following university entrance. Participant 7 stated: “If we can get high score for TOEIC, for example, it is an advantage for us” (p. 2). The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is a business-oriented multiple-choice test of English for non-native speakers of English (Liu & Costanzo, 2013). Participant 7 went on to say:

“So, the most of companies limit, limit the score of TOEIC for entrance, for example if ... we don’t have 700 score for TOEIC, so we cannot receive the interview. Even [if we have] the interview, so we cannot do [work] for the company” (p. 2).

Though this student had clearly passed his first entrance examination, it appears the next step in his career would involve an entrance test of another variety, and this would require oral proficiency.

Another perspective on testing that was brought up by participants was the effect of grades on students' study ethic. For example, Participant 6 shared the experience of becoming complacent after earning a good grade: "At that time I thought myself, maybe I had, I could get a high score in the exam, so I kind of getting carried away at the time, so I would say stop doing that" (p. 16). He consequently said: "I didn't study well because somehow I could get a certain score in the exam. If I didn't satisfied with that score I could be a better student" (p. 16). His reaction to his score illustrates the effect of testing on students' attitudes toward their studies. If their motivation is test-oriented then it appears their motivation to study hard may drop after gaining the necessary grades.

For students who have experienced a passive learning style at high school, in which they "just take the lessons" (Participant 3, p. 16), it can be expected that entering university would demand a shift in sources of motivation. Students may find that instead of studying for tests, they have to redefine their strategy as studying for communication and fitting into the all-English environment. The literature suggests there is likely also to be pressure to create a desire to make their English studies personally meaningful for the future, as opposed to the externally imposed needs of an examination-based system (Aubrey, 2014). A possible source of this discrepancy between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation may be the contrast between examination goals at high school and the different focus of university demands.

4.5 Greater enjoyment following adjustment to university

Despite the general impression that initial adjustment to university is difficult, participants' responses indicated that students gained greater enjoyment from their university studies than at high school. Further details are now provided on how they adjusted to the all-English context, why they found university more fun, their views on class sizes, and the use of media, technology, current issues and presentations in classes.

4.5.1 Adjustment to “all-English”

Though six of the seven students had initial difficulties adjusting to lessons taught solely in English, they appeared to follow a pattern of initial difficulty, followed by a gradual adjustment. Later comments from five participants (P2, 3, 4, 6, and 7) indicated that students eventually came to understand that “all-English” at university fostered an effective learning environment. This development is illustrated in how, despite expressing surprise at the all-English style, Participant 6 said: “I’m getting used to it, but at that time it was a real challenge for me” (p. 13). Participant 3 also stated: “First time, university English class is, was very difficult for me. Because I couldn’t, couldn’t listen to, listen to English, what teacher said, but, but ... after repeating a lot I got used to the lessons” (the final part was translated from Japanese) (p. 11). Similarly, despite Participant 4’s initial difficulties, she later stated: “Now, this English class is useful for me. So it’s good ... Firstly, it was difficult, but then I [got] used to class” (p. 7). There is a clear learning curve displayed by these students. Participants’ development, from initial struggles to finding the all-English style effective, indicates the benefits of L1 instruction. In literature on language learning, (e.g. Ellis, 2005), it is indicated that EFL study should have its groundings in first-hand experiences of the target language with realistic communication opportunities. These five students seemed to benefit from being taught English in this way from a native speaker.

The literature also shows that early immersion in English leads to meaningful improvements. The results of a study by Aoyama, Guion, Flege & Yamada (2008), comparing children and adults immersed in an English-speaking environment, suggests that adult students were initially able to make faster improvements than children in segmental perception and production. However, in subsequent tests it was found that children’s foreign accent scores and pronunciation of English fricatives improved faster than adults, whose scores tended to reach plateau, suggesting that children are eventually able to reach a higher level of production than adults. These results suggest that in terms of natural production, immersion may be most effective at a younger age, but can still be effective for adult students. This suggests that introducing communicative language activities at an earlier stage in students’ English education than university level could be beneficial in the long term.

The positive impressions participants had after adjusting to the university context may be because all-English was seen to provide students with more genuine speaking opportunities. Discussing how he favoured the university's all-English approach, Participant 6 stated:

“The biggest change I think is now we have more options[s] to speak English. Only [by] speak[ing] English we can get more ability to listen [to] English. We can brush [enhance] both ability by speaking English. That is the biggest change” (p. 9).

Although most participants in the interview expressed discomfort over the all-English style, Participant 6 later described the university's approach as having “more options to speak English” (p. 9). If we can understand “options” as “opportunities” we can see that Participant 6 is pleased with the opportunities to communicate that his English classroom environment is giving him. Similarly, Participant 7 summarised his feelings on his environment as follows: “Maybe university is realistic English, so therefore the main things we focus on is communication skill, I think” (p. 12). This view is supported by Ellis (2005) who argues that such an environment, with genuine communication opportunities, compels students to negotiate meaning in the second language. Negotiation of meaning is also a central part of the Interaction Hypothesis, which is based on the idea that we learn a language by using it in context to exchange information in the completion of practical communicative tasks (Allwright, 1984).

Comprehensible input could place students at a clear advantage if all-English were indeed to become the norm at Japanese high schools. When talking about a teacher that instructed solely in English, Participant 6 said: “But he sometimes supported the meaning of difficult sentence or vocabulary in easy English ...That's why I can understand that in class, and that's why I didn't fall [fail] the class” (p. 10). This inclusion of “easy English” would require a delicate balance, and a well-thought-out structured framework to ease students into English-immersion while still making class comprehensible.

4.5.2 “Boring” high school vs “fun” university

Though participants’ comments indicated difficulties in adjustment to university, the findings suggested that they all enjoyed the university’s learning environment. Comparisons drawn between high school and university generally entailed views about having more “fun” and the diverse learning opportunities at university, in contrast to a “boring” textbook approach at high school. For example, Participant 3 reported: “High school English class is just study grammar or vocabulary, so ... it was boring for me, but university English class is more activity, and communication, so it is fun for me” (p. 2). We can gather from such comments that high school’s focus on the teachable and testable language elements is less enjoyable than communicative language activities.

Attractive presentation of lessons at university was found to be a further factor aiding comprehension. Participant 5 mentioned the stylistic difference between high school and university:

“When I was [a] high school student, I think [teaching by writing] on the board was boring for me; but now teacher shows [a] screen using colour, many colours and sometimes use[s] video[s] or photos so ...it can help to understand” (p. 10).

The only visual aid mentioned in his high school experience was the blackboard, whereas the scope of learning opportunities at university seems to have been magnified by the larger range of study resources. Considering the initial difficulty of adjusting to the university study environment, it is possible that the more attractive and varied resources were a contributing factor in helping students to understand the content of the classes, despite being taught in the still-unfamiliar target language.

Lastly, Participant 6’s comment that emphasised making the most of one’s time at university indicated the difference in pressure to study between high school and university.

“In university we have more free, free time. So the important thing for students in university is to, to do time management. The balance of free time and study time ... Maybe we get hard time after we graduate. But just study is kind of a waste of time because we can’t make free time after graduated” (p. 15).

Japan’s university time has been described as a “limbo where you await your launch into the world of adult Japan”, that is “there to reward you for all the sweat and tears that have gone before” (Kaji, Hama, & Rice, 2010). The “sweat and tears” allude to the hard work for the final exams, in which students are under a great deal of pressure to enter the university that will ultimately decide their future (Brown & Yamashita, 1995). After finally being free of this pressure, it is unsurprising that students wish to make the most of their “limbo” time in university.

4.5.3 Class size difference

Class size was also noted as a key difference in university. Four of the participants reported having had 40 students per class at their high school, two reported having had 35 students, and one reported having had 30 students. All seven of the participants stated that they preferred their smaller classes at university.

The main reason behind the preference for smaller classes was the greater freedom to speak and participate in class. Regarding high school class size, Participant 7 stated: “There are many people in one class [at high school] so all students cannot raise their hand and so cannot participate in their class” (p. 9). It seems likely that in a class of that size, many students would tend to fall into habits of passivity. Participant 7 went on to say: “Most of students are passive, can be passive and specific students is active, while most of students are passive, which is not good” (p. 9). In a larger class, it appears there is more likely to be an imbalance between the active and the passive students, especially considering the limited possibility for all students to participate equally. In contrast, Participant 7 reported that: “[University classes are] smaller ...

All people can participate in classes” (p. 9).

The smaller classes at university also reportedly allowed Participant 5 not only to speak more in class, but to express herself more freely: “I’m happy because, how can I say, when I was [in] high school I said answer for my homework, but now I can say my idea or ... I can say anything what I think” (p. 9). This response suggests that high school not only limited the frequency of speaking opportunities, but also limited those opportunities to just linear textbook answers while neglecting individual expression.

Opinions on class size also revealed the contrast between the teacher-centered and student-centered dynamic in high school and university. Participant 5 reported: “When I was high school student, teacher speak a lot but now students speak something mainly, so I get a chance to speak English” (p. 9). Participant 4 shared a similar sentiment: “Now ... I often communicate with classmates, so it’s practice for speaking; it’s easy to practice ... in small class” (p. 8). It appears from these comments that the students’ participation in class was not to appease an authority figure but rather to achieve communication in English. Motivation to participate more actively in a smaller class could be described as intrinsic, as mentioned in Section 4.4.4 (on “Examination goals vs university demands”) as it sounds like university students may be motivated to communicate for reasons other than passing their tests.

Despite the apparent benefits of smaller classes in terms of communicative opportunities, the opinion of those less willing to communicate is also worth considering. For example, Participant 6 made an interesting point regarding the level of anonymity in which students can take refuge in high school’s larger classes: “Maybe it’s a kind of feature of Japanese students. Because it can be safe to [for] me ... If there are many students around me I don’t feel like raising my hand and speaking to [the] teacher or something” (p. 10). He was referring to the “safety” an uncommunicative student is bound to feel if they do not have any pressure to share anything with the class. This “feature” he referred to seems to pertain to the face-saving culture in Japan, in which even minor embarrassments in class may gradually diminish a students’ perceived social

value (Goffman 1967). It is easy to imagine that being in a small and therefore more communicative class that poses these risks for an entire school year would be undesirable for introverted students, whereas a larger teacher-centered class might actually make these students more relaxed. However, this kind of reasoning can always bring us back to whether what is seen as desirable by students is good for their education. It can be assumed that in the absence of pressure to participate, students would make little to no improvements in their English or increase their motivation to improve. When Participant 6 was asked about his personal opinion on the class size difference at university, he responded: “Actually it was easier for me to ask something, ask some question to the teacher. I think small class is better to speak English” (p. 10). The variance in students’ views about large/small classes, suggests that opinions on class size may vary depending not just on cultural norms, but also on the individual’s personality and attitude.

4.5.4 Use of media and technology

Six of the seven participants mentioned that university uses media and technology in lessons and the general consensus was that this was more interesting than the high school textbook approach.

In particular, interviewees noted that at university they were able to use technological aids such as computers, screens, and projectors. For example, Participant 2 reported: “We use a lot of technology. For example, computers, and screen and [it’s] quite different” (p. 10). Later he elaborated: “In university I [am] focused [on] many things and, for example, new media English. So recently we use smartphone and TV, computers, but before people used radio or newspaper” (p. 13). Given the more independent nature of academic pursuit at university, the students seemed to be challenged to consider different means of acquiring information.

Use of media and technology was also thought to be an effective part of English classes at university. Participant 6 highlighted the proportional difference in English input between high school and university: “The biggest difference between the two types of classes is the amount of

watching or reading, writing English is totally different. If university studying English is 100, then high school study is 5” (p. 13). This insight indicates a lack of diversity in his English study experience, a discipline that typically favours a multi-pronged strategy that makes use of the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking (Nation & Newton, 2009). In particular, the linear approach of Yakudoku, in contrast to such a multi-skills approach, has been shown to hinder the development of listening, speaking, and writing, by compelling students to understand speech through internal Japanese translation instead of striving to process speech in the target language (Matsumoto, 1965). It is interesting to note that the receptive skill of “watching” was also included in Participant 6’s statement, which suggests that he favoured the use of visual media in his language study, in addition to the four traditional language skills.

However, whether a greater emphasis on media and technology at high school would be beneficial or even feasible is another issue. For example, Participant 3, while saying that “University should use technology” (p. 13), mentioned that high school’s emphasis on manual writing has its merits: “But, in high school, yeah. I think it’s not so important, and taking notes is good for high school student[s]” (p. 13). She went on to explain her reasoning for this emphasis on practising note-taking at high school: “Because taking, taking note time decrease[s] in university, yeah so I sometimes I forgot English spelling because almost [all of the] time I use, I use computer, so and computer fixed wrong spelling, so I think that’s a problem” (p. 13). In her opinion, an over-reliance on automated spell-check could lead to a deterioration in the speed and accuracy of manual note-taking skills, though this problem is by no means endemic to the Japanese classroom in our present digital age (Waldron, Wood & Kemp, 2017).

4.5.5 Current issues and presentations

The participants responded favourably when asked about their other classroom activities at university, with four of them mentioning presentations and discussions of current issues as part of their classwork. Participant 6 and 2 in particular had positive comments about this. Participant 6 reported: “The current issues ... is like, moving all the time in the class. We have to search something, then after that we have to speak in English, have to make a presentation out of the

class time” (p. 13). In addition to favouring the faster pace, Participant 6 also liked the fact that studying current issues allowed him to practice a wider range of skills:

“I’m taking a current issue [class]. That’s the English class name. It’s more like, it’s more like studying social issue[s] in English rather than studying speaking English. We have to listen to English, the teacher is speaking English, and all the article[s] we watch in class is in English ... That [is], the biggest part [for] me [in] studying English. That makes me getting used to touching English, like reading, listening, writing, all the English ability we have to achieve in university. It’s concentrated in that class. I like that class” (p. 11).

Interesting to note in the above excerpt is the reference by Participant 6 to “studying social issues in English rather than studying speaking English”. Learning about real-world news and events was seen as giving him greater access to English culture than studying from a textbook. It may also be that he considered improvement in speaking English was not something obtained through study, but rather a by-product of applying himself to something more practical in the target language. His use of the tactile word “touching English” could also indicate that this class allowed him to access and manipulate the language to more practical ends. It also appears that he believed a concentrated emphasis on “reading, listening, writing” skills would naturally result in elevated speaking skills, more so than directly studying speaking as a testable element of the language class. It is possible that providing students with these opportunities and this environment would allow this ability to be acquired naturally, rather than by focusing on learning it directly, which may serve to detract from the end result.

Again, the findings raise the debate on whether practical, interactive classes with a focus on the four skills would be feasible and effective in preparing students for university, or even effective in itself as a means of improving students’ English skills and motivation. High school seemed to be devoid of these kinds of exercises: “Didn’t do practice ... for discussion and presentation” (Participant 4, p. 9). However, Participant 2 reported that studying current issues and discussion at high school would have been helpful for her university studies, saying: “Focus[ing] on current issue[s], world problem[s], what[’s] happen[ing] in the world now, and maybe use more English

in the [high school] class is better [preparation] for university” (p. 13). Participant 7 also mentioned the importance of practising presentation skills at high school. In describing what curriculum changes he would like to see at high school, he said: “I think many presentations should be added. Presentation, if we can perform presentation, we will be able to be [build] confidence in speaking English” (p. 13). Besides helping students improve their confidence, he thought that preparation for presentations could also improve students’ reading skills: “Once we do the English passage to the presentation, it is ingredient to presentation so that’s a reading skill ... Presentation is good, good way for university students [to improve]” (p. 13). This insight suggests that it might be helpful for a student who is already motivated and willing to communicate, like Participant 7, to be given the opportunity to practice presentation skills at high school. His mention of the English passage as fostering reading skills was also an interesting find. An earlier study on autonomous learning showed that students required to perform in English in a musical reported improvements in vocabulary and pronunciation, generated from motivation, instrumentality and collaboration rather than the explicit goal of language improvement (Griffith, 2007). In much the same way as rehearsing lines for a play, students often memorise a script to accompany a presentation. Perhaps collaborating in presentations in pairs or small groups would motivate and support students to play a more interactive part in a presentation.

Whether collaborative or not, the compulsion to give presentations could cause problems for students less inclined to stand before their classmates and express themselves. It must be noted that the opinions expressed are from students who have elected English study at university, who therefore do not represent high school students of English in general. The literature shows numerous examples of Japanese students’ reticence (King, 2013) and a description of foreign language anxiety that fits many Japanese students (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

On the other hand, the findings suggest that incorporating current issues into a high school curriculum, even without necessarily including any form of public speaking, could stimulate interest in the language without taking students too far outside their comfort zones. Nakamura

(1999) found that students who practiced writing based on topics such as human rights and education developed greater freedom and joy of self-expression. Instead of writing using the Yakudoku (translation) style, students in Nakamura's study used content-based process writing, which was found to be a productive and interactive writing strategy between students and teachers. As well as developing greater social awareness and cultural sensitivity, it also motivated students to communicate in the target language, leading to improvements in their communicative competence and confidence.

4.6 Students' perceptions on how to aid their transition

Students' impressions on preparing themselves for university level study generally emphasised the use of English in social communicative contexts and the use of media, such as music and films. These views are thematically grouped on Table 4.3 on the following page.

Table 4.3: Students' perceptions on aiding own transition to university

| Theme | Advice for students to aid transition to university |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Using media | <p>“It is important to increasing speaking and listening ... Listening, in the media, TV and so on. I often hear, uh English news” (Participant 4, p. 10).</p> <p>“I want them to not only study about vocabulary grammar but also practice speaking and listening. This is useful for class in university. English, learning English is enjoying, while enjoying is better. Watching English movies, listening English movies, English culture” (Participant 4, p. 11)</p> <p>“For example, watch TV in English or research something in English or watch movie in English. So maybe when environment changed English is becoming more good. So, no Japanese around us” (Participant 2, p. 14)</p> |
| Volunteering | <p>“Use English ... Find an environment where they can use English. [For example], volunteer, volunteering, or some events” (Participant 1, p. 14)</p> <p>You should go to volunteer or communicate, international communicate, you should try to [use] English as much as possible (Participant 5, p. 14)</p> |
| Communicating with foreigners | <p>“Communicate with many foreign countries, many foreigners ... Study abroad ... Use a lot of English in daily life” (Participant 2, p. 14)</p> <p>“Keep talking with people using English. I think ... Communicating with people. At university any subject communicate with classmates or teacher is so important to do my work” (Participant 5, p. 13)</p> <p>“Through the travel I could use English and in university it's like, if I can make a friend in that university, I mean friend from [a] foreign country, it would be productive” (Participant 6, p. 16)</p> |

As shown in Table 4.3, the key themes mentioned by participants included: Using media, volunteering, and communicating with foreigners. These three themes will be explored below.

Using media

Participants' emphasis on enjoying the language through media instead of spending time on textbook study may have come from their desire to familiarise themselves with foreign culture before entering university. Acquainting students with English-speaking culture through movies can help them to achieve greater familiarity with the contents of their school texts. This finding

is in accordance with other research by Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989). Regarding the use of media, Participant 6 recommended films in particular:

“I like to watch movies since I was a kid. By watching movie we can get [how to] pronounce English and also how to, how do I say in English, when I want to say something like that in that situation. Like, greeting. In Japanese high school we just learn *Hello, how are you? I'm fine*. That's not [a] practical way to use greeting I think, so in movie I learned like, *Hi*. One example I remember is *Hello, how you doing?* And how's that [used] in English, and when I homestayd in the US I heard it in the supermarket” (p.15).

Participant 6 made a valid point in his words above, as movies can serve as a source of dialogue observation. If students find themselves captured by a scene and would like to watch it again, it could reinforce a substantial amount of English phrases. This kind of study gives students direct access to English used in a variety of contexts, as opposed to the inevitably linear dialogues found in textbooks.

Volunteering

Participants who suggested volunteering may have interpreted the question as how they can increase their chances of entering their university of choice. Besides the entrance test, recommendation letters from teachers and extracurricular activities such as volunteering can strengthen students' applications. However, volunteering overseas or for an organisation that supports foreigners in Japan would presumably give students the opportunity to use English. Such opportunities to interact with foreigners are discussed further under the next theme.

Communicating with foreigners

Participants also emphasised talking to people from different countries to improve their English conversation skills. However, some elaboration on Participant 6's comment would raise a valid

point about native-speakerism. Though he encouraged speaking to people from other countries, he also de-emphasised the importance of only speaking with native English-speakers for improving English.

“Speaking with native speaker is, requires higher level of English but people from foreign countries ... rather kind of same ability to speak English. So we can get conversation with them. Can say same thing with, when I travel, so. Yes, so, I don’t think studying abroad ... [is] the only way to achieve English” (p. 16).

In mentioning “studying abroad” he referred to studying at a university or language school with native-speaker interaction being the main goal. He also implied that speaking to native speakers demands a high level of English, while speaking to people who are also speaking English as a second language, who have the same ability as him, was just as effective. The following anecdote shared by Participant 6 illustrated his idea:

“I met [a] student in that LASC [Language Scholastics]. LASC was [a] language university nearby that homestay house in LA. They’re from Chile. Their mother tongue was Portuguese. All of the three person[s], including me, cannot speak their mother tongues. We just have to speak English, have a conversation in English. ... Then I went to the supermarket with them and we could have a conversation in English. Now I think we are friends” (p. 16).

The quote above shows how he found that using English as a lingua-franca with other people for whom English is also a second language was as effective in building fluency as talking with native speakers. This was a refreshing perspective in a country where native speakers are usually sought for most teaching positions (Selvi, 2010) and white teachers are rated as most desirable by university students (Rivers & Ross, 2013). Phillipson (1992) coined the term “native speaker fallacy” to reflect the belief that “the ideal teacher is a native speaker” (p. 185). Holliday’s take on this fallacy was defined as “an established belief that ‘native -speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which springs the ideals of both the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (Holliday, 2005, p. 6). Sutherland (2012) challenged this idea,

firstly showing how supposed “nativeness” is difficult to define accurately, and secondly by outlining the advantages of being taught by a non-native English speaker, such as the teacher having experienced formally learning the target language themselves, allowing them to impart learning strategies that worked for them.

4.7 Summary

In this chapter, the findings from the study were presented and discussed in the context of the relevant literature. Several key findings arose from the interviews.

Firstly, the participants all indicated that the language of instruction at high school used by their Japanese teacher of English was predominantly Japanese. They reported a dearth of communicative activities and English language input, and expressed the will to hear and speak more English at high school in preparation for university classes.

All participants also reported that they had studied English using the grammar translation approach. This was deemed useful for passing the university entrance test but seemed to have little benefit for the students beyond this. As this method primarily involves translating English utterances into Japanese, students had few chances to hear their English teacher speak English, which may have led students to doubt their teachers’ English ability and knowledge of Western culture.

The ALT appeared to be absent for the final two years of high school. Though participants’ views on the usefulness of the ALT’s classes were mixed, the general impression I received was that students would have preferred more time with their ALT throughout their high school years to help them improve their conversation skills in preparation for university’s communication-oriented classes.

Initial challenges with adjustment to university included feelings of surprise at the all-English environment and shame when unable to understand the teacher and deal with communicative situations in the target language. Students also had difficulties with working independently, having been accustomed to a passive learning style at high school. These more abstract demands were different to the examination goals they had at high school, in which students were extrinsically motivated to pass the entrance test to enter university. Students realised in hindsight that high school lessons were only of value for the university entrance test, but not useful for their studies upon entering university.

After their initial challenges, particularly in adjusting to classes taught in English, students seemed to enjoy the university study environment. I got the impression that students found the classes at university more interesting than the textbook-oriented high school approach. The smaller class sizes, the use of media and technology, and a larger focus on current issues and presentations gave the students more opportunities for dynamic interaction and discussions in English.

Finally, participants shared their views on how to best prepare themselves for university study. They encouraged interacting with foreign people and using English in social communicative contexts, as well as music and films to acquaint themselves with natural expressions and the culture behind the language.

Chapter Five

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

In this research, a case study approach was used to explore Japanese students' reflections on high school preparation for university English classes. Interviews were carried out with seven university students who had been through Japan's high school system with the aim of gaining insights into how students would like to be taught at high school in order to prepare them for English-classes at university level, how useful they perceived their high school studies to be in preparing them for English study at university, and to illuminate how they might have been better prepared for this transition.

This chapter will begin with a brief summary of key findings on each of the research questions and reflections on theoretical implications. The limitations and strengths of the methodology and design approach will then be discussed, and possible areas for further research to smooth students' transition to university will be outlined. Based on the key findings, practical implications for Japanese high school teachers, ALTs, and schools and policy makers will be provided. The chapter will be concluded with my final reflections on this research journey.

5.2 Key findings

The research questions that guided this study arose out of gaps identified from a review of the literature around Japan's high school education system, in particular its focus on assessment, teachers' English language competence, the classroom language of instruction, and the issues involved in taking cultural perspectives into account. The key findings are presented beneath each research question that guided the study.

How useful did students perceive their high school studies to be in preparing them for English study at university?

A key finding from this study was that students found high school lessons were useful for the sole purpose of achieving in the university entrance test, but not useful for their studies at university. The English teachers reportedly taught almost exclusively in Japanese, and often employed the grammar-translation method. A paucity of communicative activities and English language input had students doubting the English ability of their teachers, which may have led to distrust in their teaching and reduced motivation. As well as language ability, participants also identified a lack of knowledge of Western culture among Japanese teachers at high school.

Another key finding was that the students were dissatisfied with the ALT's absence in the penultimate and final year of high school. While not immediately helpful for their university entrance exams, the ALT was judged to be a helpful influence for students in transitioning to university, with positive comments about the ALT's support of pronunciation development and conversation practice.

Upon entering university, students experienced feelings of shame when confronted with situations requiring them to interact and communicate in English. Shifting to a more independent learner responsibility from high school's linear format was also initially overwhelming for some students.

What kind of learning environment do students think would have been ideal for preparing them for English study at university?

The impression was gained that participants would have preferred more dynamic interaction with the English language in smaller classes, instead of their current large grammar-centered classes. They also expressed the wish to have had teachers possessing the benefits of overseas experience in terms of cultural awareness and confidence in speaking, which in turn would have given them a role model to gain confidence themselves.

Though some students felt that Japanese support was required for instructing English at high school, all students felt that the English classes needed to have more English input and speaking opportunities. One student felt that there needed to be more pressure to think in English and form sentences quickly, rather than take the methodical grammar-translation steps that ultimately hinder conversational flow.

Students tended to favor having frequent classes with the ALT throughout their high school years. However, some mentioned that they would have preferred more clarity and a more serious, studious tone rather than the playful, game-oriented tone often found in ALT classes. An ALT who can speak Japanese well was also described as ideal for students.

What might students be able to do to aid their own transition to university?

Participants encouraged the use of films and music to help students achieve familiarity with English prior to entering university. They also emphasised creating opportunities to use English in communicative situations, particularly with native English speakers. However, a key finding was one participant's opinion that the conversation partner need not necessarily be a native speaker, and that communicating with someone for whom English is also a second language can be just as beneficial.

5.3 Limitations of the research

A key limitation in this research was the small number of participants. While the seven participants gave rich and useful insights in answering the research questions, the small number of participants does limit the ability to generalize the findings to the larger population of Japanese students.

Within the small number of participants, there was little range of English language abilities, so the sample was not representative of the wider population. As the current study's participants all selected English as a major, it can be assumed that high school English study, despite the

challenges mentioned in the interviews, was a smoother process for them than it might be for students who struggled to keep up.

Another limitation was the senior university level of the participants. As each student was in their third or fourth year at university, their insights may actually reflect the state of English language learning in high schools three to four years ago, and this may differ from the current situation. The distance from the time participants were in high school may have therefore had an influence on the validity of the data with regard to current high school practices in Japan.

5.4 Strengths of the research

The qualitative case study approach used in this study was advantageous as it produced a detailed description of subjects' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and helped in interpreting the meanings of their actions (Denzin, 1989). Semi-structured interviews enabled discourse to be guided by a set of questions and prompts, which provided me with the flexibility to adapt to particular respondents and situations and elicit the most pertinent insights (Punch & Oancea, 2009).

The insights from the seven participants helped to identify and explore their perceptions on high school preparation for university classes. The participants were all majoring in English at university but had attended different high schools and had received varying exposure to extra-curricular study of English, including overseas experiences and English conversation school education. By comparing and contrasting the large range of data from the interviewees, the commonalities and differences were able to be analysed and the basis for their perspectives could be explored.

Interviewing university students who had been through high school and entered university allowed me to explore the process of how they adjusted to these challenges in detail. The third and fourth year interviewees spoke with the benefit of maturity and retrospect, which gave the data a level of authenticity that would be unavailable if high school students were asked about

their current experience. These insights revealed their true reflections on the quality of teaching, their initial challenges in entering university, and a richer understanding of what they thought should have been done differently in that process.

As the researcher I had the benefit of having a good foundation of knowledge and experience of teaching within Japan's education system, as well as interacting with Japanese students. I also had the ability to communicate in Japanese in cases where the participants had language difficulties. I believe this gave an added advantage in gaining trust from the participants and allowing them to relax. These benefits are affirmed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) who stated that when the researcher has a good sense of the subject knowledge, and an understanding about the case being researched, this establishes rapport with participants.

Creating an atmosphere of trust during the interview process was imperative as it allowed the participants to discuss their opinions and to elaborate on these freely without fear and judgement. It is important to add here that, generally, Japanese people are reluctant to criticize others, and like to maintain harmony by avoiding definitive answers to questions. It is only in a safe environment that they will reveal their true inner feelings, or "honne" (Naito & Gielen, 1992). Fortunately, the participants appeared relaxed, gave genuine answers, and seemed unreserved in sharing their views. A time lapse since high school may also have helped with this, effectively distancing students from the experience and allowing them to evaluate it objectively. The interview process also provided the motivated students with an opportunity to practice their English, so they were forthcoming with their contributions in the interviews.

5.5 Implications for further research

The current study, being of an exploratory and interpretive nature, raises a number of opportunities for future research which would expand on the key findings to refine and further elaborate upon them.

Though the seven participants had varying levels of exposure to English, it would be worthwhile

to gain a wider range of perspectives, incorporating not only those who have chosen to study English at university, but also those for whom high school English was a confusing ordeal. Gathering this wider range of perspectives could provide more focus on ways of increasing motivation or improving communicative competence in high school classes.

Participants had a lot to say about the ALTs, which made me curious as to what high school ALTs think of their impact on students' learning. Interviews that gather views from ALTs directly could offer some insight into how they would like to make the biggest possible difference for their learners. Questions about whether teaching high school learners in their second and final grade would be effective, as well as their views on their role in the classroom and what they would like to change, could help build a case for expanding or enhancing their role.

5.6 Practical implications

This study has focused on students' experience at high school and how effective it was in aiding their transition to university. A number of practical recommendations arose from these findings.

5.6.1 Recommendations for Japanese high school teachers

Participants generally reported that they would have preferred to hear and speak more English in their high school classes, and have teachers with greater awareness of foreign cultures. Their opinions provide support for exposing students to communicative English and the cultural contexts in which it is used at an earlier stage than their first year at university, which may have mitigated feelings of inadequacy and shame upon entering the university's more communication-oriented all-English environment. Based on these insights, recommendations for Japanese high school teachers are identified below.

1. Students should ideally be weaned off Japanese instructions in the English classroom at an earlier stage, prior to their university studies, to allow for maximum success in the

transition process. While there is literature to support the use of L1 in the class (e.g. Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Liao, 2006), there is no support for neglecting interaction with the target language besides direct translation. As suggested by one participant (P5), a gradual transition, going from a comfortable degree of L1 support at first, to almost all-English by the students' final year, may stand them in good stead for further English education.

2. A list of comprehensible instructions, beginning with simple ones such as “open your textbook to page 3” could be compiled in order of difficulty, helping students acclimatize from understanding simple instructions to more complicated instructions, such as explanations of grammar, in their final year of high school.
3. Instead of internally translating utterances, a measure of pressure to produce speech quickly, without referring to an inner catalogue of rules, could be a basis for some effective high school classroom activities. This may help students adjust to unfamiliar situations and deal with unclear utterances through negotiation of meaning and other communicative skills that would be useful at tertiary level. This willingness to communicate would be an important thing to impress upon students during their high school years in preparation for university.

5.6.2 Recommendations for ALTs

While not immediately helpful for their university entrance exams, the ALT was judged a helpful influence for students in transitioning to university. In general, ALTs were perceived to be useful for improving conversational English, but largely ineffective for helping students to improve their grades in English. There was also a surprising demand from two participants for Japanese competence in the ALT. Based on these insights, recommendations for ALTs are shown below.

1. The ALT's lesson could provide more of an academic basis than what was described by

one participant as “just a playing time for us” (P6, p. 11). Games and activities should be considered carefully, as anything deemed frivolous by students might be ignored at their own expense. It may be up to ALTs to make a case for their lessons as serious contributors to students’ success in English, not only in honing communication skills but also the ever-important entrance assessment.

2. While an ALT should teach in English in principle, noticeable proficiency in Japanese could also be a big help. This ability could also be symbolic, as a means of showing students that acquisition of a second language is achievable. As ALTs are essentially helping students to become bilingual, their influence in doing so may be diminished if they are not bilingual themselves. An ALT who can demonstrate proficiency in a second language could serve as a role model for students, showing them what is possible with application. It could also help the ALT to empathise with students more if they are familiar with the frustrations and hurdles involved in learning a second language (Barker, 2003).
3. While it may help with short-term comprehension if the ALT can provide a quick-fix answer in Japanese, it may not be ideal if the ALT uses Japanese too much in class (Burden, 2000). I for one was criticized for using it too much in my earlier days of ALT teaching. Balancing the use of L1 and L2 should be at the ALT’s professional discretion, in which they should always choose the language that students will benefit from most.

5.6.3 Recommendations for schools and policy makers

The most common response regarding ALTs was that they simply are not present often enough, particularly in later years of high school, to make an effective difference in students’ learning. Participants’ comments would suggest that the presence of the ALT throughout high school would help students who are aiming to continue studying English at university. At some point in the interviews each participant also mentioned that they would have liked an English teacher at high school who spoke English to them more frequently. Teachers’ reluctance to speak English may be a question of confidence rather than ability, yet from the students’ perspective this would

presumably not be apparent, causing the student to doubt the teacher's English ability. Suggestions for schools and policy makers are presented below.

1. It is recommended that ALTs have a stronger presence in the second and third years of high school to aid in the transition to all-English instruction at university. The absence of the ALT in the second and third years of high school is somewhat paradoxical, in that this would be an ideal time to have a native speaker of English with students who may be steadily moving toward all-English instruction.
2. Training of Japanese teachers should include communicative competence in English and some methods of building the confidence to demonstrate this to a class. There should be no doubt in students' minds that their teacher has this confidence and ability in English, so that students build trust in their teacher, who can serve as a role model to them.
3. High school teachers should be provided with opportunities to become familiar with the cultural contexts encountered when using the target language in practical situations. This could be helpful not just in terms of generating interest in foreign cultures, as seen in several comments, but in helping students to bridge gaps in comprehension of tasks involving a foreign setting or context, as demonstrated by Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989).
4. A foreign-educated Japanese teacher or the stronger presence of a bilingual communicative ALT in high school classes could give students the foothold they need to aid their comprehension and make faster improvements in university.

5.7 Concluding reflection

This study has taken me on an enlightening journey of looking at the factors behind Japan's current English education issues. Though the principal research question specifically concerned transition to university study, some of the key findings can be applied to any high school student wishing to achieve success in English, as well as to teachers wishing to be effective educators.

As a teacher at an all-boys boarding school, mostly teaching native-level students English as if I were teaching in my own country, talking to students who had been through the public school system gave me a refreshing perspective on what is happening in English education in Japan.

Semi-structured interviews took some getting used to, but through the pilot I managed to develop a systematic approach that ensured I asked everything I possibly could, while allowing flexibility to probe into areas that I thought could yield some helpful data. Given that interviewees were responding in a second language, I had to allow time for pauses and give them time to think, but as time went on I began to acquire a sense of when a participant had something to say that they were taking the time to formulate, and when the student needed my question to be rephrased.

Having been an ALT myself, I was interested in hearing about students' impressions of their high school ALTs. My experience as an ALT involved frequent observations by supervisors, but I never had the chance to hear students' honest opinions of my teaching style. That is why some remarks in this research surprised me, such as when one interviewee told me that he did not take the lessons seriously because it seemed like a "playing time". This finding might surprise many ALTs, considering dispatch companies tend to encourage ALTs to make English as "fun" as possible, when in reality students may prefer a more serious approach to their studies.

Lastly, exploring the participants' insights about how they would like future students' educational experience of English to evolve was inspiring. One particular quote stood out for me, one which surprised me both because of its insightful maturity and its characterisation of the key understanding I took away from the study:

"Ideal class is studying English not just for center exam or just not the preparation for entering university. I like to, if I was a teacher in high school, I'd like to teach students a more practical way to use English. How to speak, how to use ...We have to speak English, understand how to speak English, like how to express personal feeling or emotion in English" (Participant 6, p. 14).

After all, the days of studying English for the purpose of translating foreign documents and ideas into Japanese are behind us. Now is the time to give the Japanese people the best possible chance to express themselves directly to the outside world in English.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet



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Japanese students' reflections on high school preparation for English classes in university

INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher Introduction

This research will be conducted by Daniel Knox, based in Japan and supervised by Massey University Associate Professor Penny Haworth and Dr Judith Donaldson. It contributes to Daniel Knox's Master of Education (MEd) endorsed in Tertiary Education.

Project Description and Invitation

The study employs a qualitative case study design. My research question is: "How would students like to be taught at high school to prepare them for English-classes at university level?" The data will be gathered through interviews with Japanese university students. Interview questions will mostly focus on participants' English language learning experiences at high school, and their future goals for using English language after graduation.

University students currently enrolled in a university English course are invited to participate in this study.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

A brief introduction to the study will be provided by the researcher at their university classroom. The first ten students to respond will be interviewed.

Project Procedures

Each individual interview will last for one hour and will take place in Toyohashi city. The time and specific location of the interview will be mutually agreed by the interviewer and the participant. Transport costs will be the participant's own responsibility. The interviews will be audio recorded. It is preferred that students talk in English wherever possible, but will be able to confirm the meanings of any English words with the interviewer or in a dictionary.

Data Management

The recorded interview will be transcribed. Participants will then be invited to check and edit the transcript. After the thesis has been graded the audio recording will be deleted. No real names will be used in the thesis report, or in any presentations or publications. Personal information about university staff will not be included. After the research is finished, participants will have the option of accessing a summary of the project if they choose to do so on the attached consent form.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study (within two weeks after your interview);

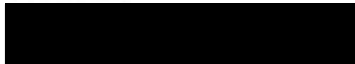


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- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.*
- *ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.*

Project Contacts:

Researcher:
Daniel Knox



Supervisors:
Penny Haworth
Ph: +64 6 3569099 (extension 84446)
Email: P.A.Haworth@massey.ac.nz

Judith Donaldson
Ph: +64 (06) 356 9099 ext. 84402
Email: J.Donaldson@massey.ac.nz

Participants are welcome to contact the researcher and/or supervisors if they have any questions about the project.

Massey University Human Ethics Committee Approval Statement

“This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University’s Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 86015, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz”.

Appendix B: Ethical Approval



Date: 21 March 2017

Dear Daniel Knox

Re: Ethics Notification - 4000017424 - Japanese students' reflections on high school preparation for English classes in university

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please contact a Research Ethics Administrator.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 86015, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Please note, if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again, answering "yes" to the publication question to provide more information for one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 350 5573; 06 350 5575 F 06 355 7973
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz W <http://humanethics.massey.ac.nz>

Human Ethics Low Risk notification

Dr Brian Finch
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Appendix C: Cover Letter (Japanese)

日本人大学生の高校の英語授業に対する意見

こんにちは！ダニエルノックスです。

ニュージーランドのマッセー大学院で通信教育で修士号の卒業論文を書いています。ケーススタディーの研究です。

論文の研究課題は：大学の英語の授業に上手く順応するために、高校でどんな風に教えられたかった？この課題に答えるために英語を勉強している大学生にインタビューをしたいのです。大学生に英語の経験について質問します。

できれば、1時間のインタビューをしたいと思います。インタビューは録音されて書き写されますが、参加者の名前と個人情報などは使われません。論文を提出したら録音を取り消します。

インタビューは英語で行いますが、質問に答えるときに辞書を使ったり、私に言葉の意味などを確認したりしてもかまいません。答えたくない質問があればスキップしても大丈夫です。いつでもインタビューをやめることができます。

インタビューは私と参加者双方が納得した場所と時間で行います。私は豊橋駅に近い穂の国豊橋芸術劇場（PLAT）が良いかと考えています。

英語のレベルは問いません。報酬はありませんが、英語を練習する良い機会だと思ってほしいです！

研究者

Daniel Knox



Appendix D: Cover Letter (English)

Japanese students' reflections on high school preparation for university English classes

Hello! I'm Daniel Knox.

I'm writing a thesis as part of my Master's degree that I'm completing extramurally with Massey University in New Zealand. It is case study research.

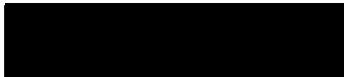
The research question is: How would students like to be taught at high school to prepare them for English-classes at university level? To address this question, I would like to interview university students who are majoring in English and ask them questions about their experience of English study.

If possible, I'd need to interview students for up to an hour. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. However, the participants' names and personal information will not be used. When the thesis is submitted the recordings will be deleted. The interview will be conducted in English, but participants may use a dictionary or ask me to clarify parts in Japanese. Participants also do not have to answer any questions they do not want to, and have the right to end the interview at any time.

The interview will take place at a location that is mutually agreed upon by both me and the participant. One possible option is the Toyohashi Arts Theatre (PLAT) building.

Any English level is welcome. There is no remuneration but please think of it as a good opportunity to practice speaking in English!

Daniel Knox (Researcher)





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*Japanese students' reflections on high school
preparation for English classes in university*

UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I request / do not request a copy of the final thesis.

I consent to students participating in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name _____

Email address _____

Phone Number _____

Appendix F: Consent Form – Individual



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*Japanese students' reflections on high school
preparation for English classes in university*

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name _____

Email address _____

Phone Number _____

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Interview Questions:

English studies

1. Why are you studying English at university?

Particular event or inspiration etc that made you choose?

Did you always want to?

From when did you want to?

Plans for after graduation

2. What do you hope to do with your English skills after graduation?

What made you want to do that? (Particular event or inspiration etc that made you choose?)

Have you always wanted to?

Has that changed over time?

Preparation at HS

3. How well do you think your high school studies prepared you for university? (Scale of 1-4)

Why? Why not this higher one/lower one? What would have made it that?

Can you give me an example that shows why you chose that number?

4. Think of an example of a teacher who was good/effective in preparing you for university-level English.

What did that teacher do in class that was good/effective?

*How about a teacher who wasn't effective? *No names!)*

5. Did your school have an ALT? (If multiple, choose the most memorable). How useful was the ALT for preparing you for university? (1-4 scale).

Why, what did they do?

What would make this higher/lower?

6. What style was used in your English classes at high school?

- All English/Japanese/mix
- How big was the class?
- Did your teacher use technology in class?
- Did you have interactive activities?
- What was the focus? (Grammar/spelling/speaking etc.)

What did you think of that? Any examples?

How does that compare to uni classes?

How did you adapt to that change?

General

7. What do you think are the best ways to improve English communication skills? (For example, talking to native speakers, reading, TV, music)

Any examples, friends etc. who have good methods?

8. In general, what are the best ways to prepare for uni study?

What advice would you give to other students?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

Appendix H: Interviewee Background Information

Interviewee Background Information

What would you like to be called? (a nickname is OK)

Please give some information about your high school (big?small?/private?/public?/co-ed?)

How long have you been studying English?

Have you ever been to an English-speaking country? If so, where/when/how long?

Do you have any other information about your experience of English?

Appendix I: Response Scale

| | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|