

A Preliminary Exploration of Asian Englishes-Oriented Classroom Activities: A Data-Driven Approach

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Abstract

This study explored concise data-driven learning activities which were designed to expose Japanese university students to authentic data of Asian Englishes in order to raise their awareness toward differences between the varieties of English. By implementing six activities oriented to Asian Englishes, this preliminary exploration showed that short classroom activities served the purpose of having students notice characteristics of Asian Englishes and that activities in which students indirectly accessed data in corpora or databases were suitable as short activities of approximately 20 minutes.

1 Introduction and background

English has been playing a significant role as an international language in today's society. The number of people who speak English as their second or foreign language exceeds the number of people who speak it as their first language, and the language is now used as "a non-local lingua franca, the means of communicating between people from anywhere in the world" (Mauranen, 2018, p. 7). As a result of its global spread, English came to have diverse features, thus becoming "Englishes" in the plural (e.g., Jenkins, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007). This phenomenon is also observed in Asia, with varieties of English in Asia referred to as "Asian Englishes."

Based on the Three Circles model of Englishes (e.g., Kachru, 1985), Japan belongs to the Expanding Circle. English is the most widely studied foreign language in Japan despite its limited use for communication outside of the classroom (e.g., Seargeant, 2009). Native varieties of English are still dominant in English teaching materials although their relevance has been questioned (Galloway & Rose, 2015, pp. 196-197). Textbooks used at Japanese universities also tend to have complimentary

audio files recorded by native speakers of English.

However, due to its nature as an international language today, "the majority of English learners will likely use the language as a lingua franca with fellow non-native English speakers" (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. x). Japanese university students are no exception to this trend, and it is likely that they will encounter different varieties of English especially if they use English at work after they graduate. As such, it would be advantageous for them to become familiar with, or at least become aware of the presence of, various Englishes in their English classes at university. It is not necessarily feasible to dedicate a large portion of the course to this theme when the curriculum requires the instructor to follow a certain syllabus. Therefore, it is worth exploring how to introduce diverse Englishes to university students through short classroom activities.

One potential way to achieve this is to integrate data-driven learning (DDL) because it can help students notice authentic language use. According to Chambers (2010), DDL utilizes data from corpora and lets students use such data "either indirectly by allowing them to learn about language use by studying concordances prepared in advance by the teacher, or directly by allowing them access to corpora and concordancing software to carry out their own searches" (p. 345) (see also, Boulton, 2012; Flowerdew, 2015). DDL typically involves the use of corpora, however, Boulton (2015) for example indicated that the data on the internet can be utilized for DDL along with search engines. DDL has been incorporated in English language teaching (e.g., Ackerley, 2017; Bardovi-Harlig, Mossman, & Su, 2017) and has also been utilized in English classes in Japan (e.g., Mizumoto & Chujo, 2015). It has not necessarily been associated with World Englishes (WE) or Asian Englishes (AE). In fact, despite the abundance of

corpus-based research on WE (e.g., Lange & Leuckert, 2020), it still remains to be seen how to actively engage students in exploration of authentic data of WE/ AE through short activities in the classroom.

The current study aims to explore the possibility of incorporating data-driven AE-oriented learning activities in English classes to raise Japanese university students' awareness toward AE by implementing three types of short classroom activities based on authentic data. Only the first type (see below) qualifies as typical DDL, yet the second and the third types could be considered as DDL in the sense students actively explore authentic linguistic data. This is a small-scale, preliminary study of practical examples intended for looking into possible options. Activities such as presentations and discussion of relevant concepts (as seen in Rajprisit, 2021) and writing about WE (as seen in Thompson, 2021) qualify as activities on WE/ AE; however, this paper deals with activities which focus on the use of authentic data.

2 Methodology and context

Three types of classroom activities (approximately 20 minutes each) incorporating AE were planned and prepared: 1) corpus-based activities, 2) audio-based activities, and 3) video sharing platform-based activities. For each type, direct activities and indirect activities were included; “direct” here means activities which asked participants to directly access the corpus or the database, while “indirect” means activities which utilized the data retrieved from the corpus or the database by the instructor beforehand.

The activities were conducted in at least one of the following English courses taught by the researcher as the instructor in the academic year 2021: Class A (communication, 9 students), Class B (speaking, 12 students), Class C (grammar, 15 students), Class D (communication, 3 students), Class E (communication, 17 students), and Class F (seminar, 11 students).

3 Corpus-based activities

For the first type of activities, the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) (Davies, 2013) was utilized. GloWbE consists of approximately 1.9 billion words of web-based texts from 20 countries and areas, and it is suitable for conducting comparative analyses

between varieties of English (Davies, 2015). GloWbE includes 8 countries and areas from Asia with varying number of words: India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and Hong Kong.

3.1 Direct corpus search activity (A, D)

For this activity, the instructor asked some of the students to suggest a word or phrase they would like to search on GloWbE. The instructor then conducted the search by using the built-in concordancer. The students looked at the results on frequency along the concordance lines and discussed how the word or phrase was used. This format was taken to minimize the time the students needed to familiarize themselves with the tools because the activity was intended to be a short one. As mentioned in Boulton (2012), it can be time-consuming to have students learn how to use the tools accurately (p. 153).

For example, one of the students in Class A suggested the phrase “you know” to be searched in the corpus. The search showed that there were 313262 instances of “you know” in the corpus but that speakers of some varieties (e.g., American English, Australian English, Philippine English) used the expression more frequently than speakers of other varieties (e.g., Bangladeshi English, Hong Kong English). The frequency data on the screen were not normalized, but the students could evaluate the data by looking at the hue of each cell. The students then read several concordance lines from different varieties. This activity enabled the students to actively select and explore the words or phrases they were interested in. However, they tended to choose expressions which occurred frequently across the varieties, which made it difficult to compare the usage across varieties in detail. In other words, this direct corpus search activity did not seem to focus the students' attention clearly on the features of AE.

3.2 Indirect corpus search activity (A, C, D)

For this activity, the instructor chose the target forms beforehand, ran the search on GloWbE by using the concordancer, normalized the frequency, extracted data relevant to selected varieties of native and Asian Englishes, and presented the data on a worksheet (see Appendix) along several concordance lines. The students

were asked to follow the questions in pairs or in groups to analyze and explore the forms and usage.

As the target forms, expressions commonly observed across Englishes (e.g., “I mean”) as well as expressions characteristic to AE (e.g., “lah” in Singapore English and Malaysian English) were selected. The first type was to have the students pay attention to the differences in the frequency of occurrence of common expressions across the varieties. On the other hand, the second type was to have them notice that there were characteristic features in AE and to encourage them to inductively explore their usage based on the concordance lines. There was more control to this activity compared to the direct corpus search activity, and as such, it seemed to be more effective in focusing the students’ attention on AE within a short period of time.

4 Audio-based activities

For the second type of activities, audio files from the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) (Meier & Meier, n.d.) were utilized. The archive includes audio files of English speakers across the world including Asia; each speaker reads *Comma Gets A Cure* aloud and also provides a short unscripted monologue about themselves. It was developed as a resource for performers to learn English accents, but now it is used for various purposes including academic research (Persley, 2013, p. 63). IDEA has also been used in English classrooms (e.g., McMahan, 2021).

4.1 Identifying features activity (A, D)

For this activity, the students used their device to directly access IDEA in pairs or in groups. They first chose a country from Asia available on IDEA with their partner(s) and selected two or three audio files. Next, they listened to the audio files multiple times, focusing primarily on the unscripted monologue part. They were allowed to look at the script after they listened to the audio file once. They then followed the instructions on the worksheet (see Appendix) and tried to identify characteristic features of pronunciation, grammar, and expressions. After spending approximately 15 minutes, the students reported their findings to the class.

For example, a pair from Class A chose to explore Korean English. They initially struggled to express their

findings in words but eventually succeeded in identifying the replacement of [z] with [s] in the speech of one of the Korean English speakers. Another pair focused on speakers of Philippine English and wrote that the rhythm (or intonation) was different from English speakers they were familiar with. An intriguing comment was made when we listened to audio files from different countries as a class; one of the students remarked, “zenzen chigau! (it’s so different!)”, indicating that the student noticed how accents of AE may dramatically differ. Overall, this activity turned out to be beneficial for having students focus on pronunciation and intonation of AE through listening to authentic yet somewhat controlled audio data of their choice. However, it was difficult for them to identify grammatical features or characteristic expressions in a short period of time, indicating that corpus-based activities (typical DDL) as above are more suitable for exploration of such features.

4.2 Listening comprehension activity (B, C)

For this activity, the instructor selected audio files of AE speakers from IDEA and prepared listening comprehension questions beforehand. The students did not directly explore IDEA, and in that sense, the students utilized the database indirectly. They did not have access to the script and had to solely rely on listening to answer the comprehension questions. As this activity was meant to be a short one intended to draw the students’ attention toward differences in accents, only two, easy questions were prepared for each audio file. The questions were given orally; for example, “Where did the speaker learn English?” and “What is the speaker’s favorite food?” The students listened to the audio files and then confirmed their answers with their classmates sitting around them. The instructor then asked the students to discuss if they had any trouble understanding the speakers, and if so, what the contributing factors were and how they could become more familiar with different varieties of AE. The students were encouraged to access other audio files outside of the class. This activity was flexible in terms of length and content.

5. Video-based activities

For the third type of activities, that is, video sharing

platform-based activities, YouTube was utilized (<https://www.youtube.com/>) because of its popularity and the variety of videos available on the platform.

5.1 Finding videos activity (F)

For this activity, the instructor asked the students to find videos in English produced by YouTubers from any country in Asia in pairs. Instead of randomly searching on YouTube, the students first tried to identify popular YouTubers in the country of their selection. This part went successfully for most pairs as they were able to find websites introducing YouTubers from different countries. However, the activity soon encountered a major problem. Popular YouTubers tended to speak in the most widely spoken language of their country. Even when they found videos in English, it was difficult to tell if the speaker was from that country or an expatriate from another country. YouTube also tended to suggest Japanese videos even when they typed search words in English. This means that this “direct” search activity did not work well for exploration of AE.

5.2 Watching videos activity (B, E)

For this activity, the instructor compiled a playlist consisting of English videos produced by YouTubers from different countries in Asia (Singapore, Korea, Philippines, India, Malaysia). The videos were on food, fashion, and lifestyle. There were videos on AE on YouTube, but such videos were not included in the playlist because they somewhat went against the purpose of inductive learning. The playlist was shared with the students in Classes B and E along with the note to encourage them to pay attention to differences in English. The two classes were chosen for this activity because the students were making a YouTube-style video for their final project. As this was partly conducted as an optional assignment outside of the class this time, it was difficult to confirm the extent the students noticed features of AE. However, unlike the “direct” activity, this “indirect” activity enabled the students to access authentic English videos from Asia produced for entertainment purposes.

6. Discussion

This study explored three types of “data-driven,” short classroom activities which aimed to raise students’

awareness toward AE. The results of the implementation of “direct” and “indirect” activities in English classrooms showed that exposure to authentic data of AE can potentially facilitate Japanese university students’ awareness toward the diversity of English in Asia even when it is not possible to spare a significant portion of the class time to this type of activities. However, from the perspective of the instructor, the students were more responsive to indirect activities than to direct activities; perhaps, the latter type of activities would have required more explanation. This indicated that for short classroom activities, it is necessary for the instructor to organize the data beforehand to a certain degree without decreasing their authenticity so that students would be able to access and handle the data efficiently within the allocated time.

Among the six activities explored in this preliminary study, the indirect corpus search activity (3.2) and the listening comprehension activity (4.2) seemed to actively engage the students in a way that their attention was directed to the features of AE inside the classroom in a relatively short period of time of around 20 minutes. Although it was essential to encourage the students to discover the features of AE by themselves, it was also necessary for the instructor to emphasize the purpose of the activities clearly so that the students would not consider “differences” as “learner mistakes.” This study was a preliminary study with the primary aim of exploring possible options, and as such, only informal feedback was collected from the students. Informal comments from the students indicated that they were able to notice that there were differences in AE.

7. Conclusion

This preliminary exploration of activities has shown that short and concise activities based on authentic data of AE, especially “indirect” data-driven activities, can be incorporated into English classes to have university students become aware of different varieties of English. This study was limited in that structured and quantitative analysis of the effects of the activities was not conducted. It would be more ideal to implement longer data-driven activities; however, within the restriction of time and requirement of syllabi, concise in-class activities are likely to become the first step in raising university students’ awareness toward Asian Englishes.

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