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Perceptual mismatch between meso and macro policy at Tokyo International University

Introduction

As the world continues to globalize, bilingual schools are becoming more popular. Japan is a country known for its English Language Teaching (ELT) programs and opportunities for English speakers. Educational institutions rely on clear communication strategies to effectively teach students curriculum, and that becomes even more difficult when a university operates at an international level. To have such a complex system, explicit goals are crucial for effective teaching of topics. However, many teachers have difficulties communicating their curriculum goals to students effectively which leads to a misconnection between meso and micro level policy. Aizawa et. al. (2019) found that these miscommunications can lead to an ineffectiveness of curriculum and a drop in students' confidence in their own production skills. This not only negatively impacts the student, but the teachers and administrators as well. Researchers like Aizawa et. al. (2019) have aimed to discover if there is a mismatch between stated and implemented language policy at universities. Others in the field such as Grant (1997) have investigated what this means for these programs and how these affect the students.

Many scholars have gained their knowledge through literature reviews, surveys, and interviews that allow them to gain insights about the academic policy perceptual mismatch between macro, meso, and micro level policies at the institutions. A perceptual mismatch, according to Kumaravadivelu (2002) is the potential for inconsistency between intentions and interpretations of the learner (micro level), the teacher (meso level), and the administrator (macro level). However, these studies have yet to investigate policy perceptual mismatches through qualitative ethnographic methodology. This approach allows for a personalized, in depth understanding of policy documents that factor in participants' views of how the programs are implementing these policies and whether they are successful. The current study aims to investigate if there is a perceptual mismatch between documented university English proficiency standards at Tokyo International University (TIU) and what is communicated with students. More specifically, this study aims to answer 1) is the English program achieving its stated goal(s) and 2) Do students believe they have sufficient communication skills to conduct English conversations?

Literature Review

There has been a considerable amount of research on the use of English in other countries, especially in English Education. World Englishes explores the adaptation, ownership, and use of varieties in countries where English is often learned as a second language. Scholars such as Matsuda (2003), Honna (2020), and Grant all look at World Englishes through the lens of ownership and relationships, while scholars such as Fukunaga (2016), Aizawa et. al. (2019), and Kumaravadivelu (2002) explore educational planning and policy.

A study conducted by Matsuda (2003) aimed to explore such ownership in Japan. The study was conducted at a private senior high school in Tokyo in 1999. This study aimed to explore English as an international language (EIL) users' beliefs about English and their ownership of the language. Matsuda found that out of the 33 students that participated in the study, the majority of them believed that speakers of English are people that come from the UK

or America. This means that the participants believe that the language can be used for international communication but don't feel like they identify as English speakers. Matsuda urges that there is work to be done in the classroom to expose students to different varieties of English so that their definition of English is not bound to "Western" countries and also mentions that work needs to be done on a larger scale to encourage the interaction between people of other cultures. This study focuses primarily on attitudes towards English ownership.

Similarly, Honna is a scholar who explored the use of world Englishes, their places in society, and the way that they're treated. For example, Honna (2020) focused on the acceptance of variations of English, specifically East Asian dialects to help learners understand that they also speak a fluent form of English. This research looks at the history, implementation, and creativity in Japan's use of English. In his investigation, he concluded by stating policy advice on how to better incorporate world Englishes into classroom instruction. Honna's research also focuses on the ownership of English.

Grant wrote an unpublished work in 1997 that investigated a private university in Japan. He focused on foreign English teachers and Japanese teachers at a secondary institution hoping to see if and whether students would ask specific kinds of questions with the different instructors (emotional, technical etc.). The goal of this investigation was to see if students carried an emotional connection with a specific language user. This investigation also analyzed the role language plays in emotional communication at an institution. Grant found that students asked foreign and Japanese teachers different types of questions and that deeper emotional queries were reserved for Japanese teachers alone.

There have also been many studies about language policy in schools. Fukunaga (2016) conducted extensive research on how intersubjectivity, and individual subjectivities are present throughout macro-, meso-, and microlevels of education policy's implementation in Japan. The results emphasize how examining the processes of local agents can help teachers' understanding of complicated policy changes that coincide with national interests within the world economy. This study examined qualitative data from the Happy Hill District and analyzed the data to help provide educators with an understanding of the changing English Education policy in Japan. This work follows closely with my study and bridges the gap between analyzing language policy and contextualizing it.

In a similar way, Aizawa et. al. (2019) aimed to highlight the differences between institutional policy (meso) and classroom instruction (micro) and what these differences meant for students' linguistic preparations in English. The studies found that there was a lack of policy communication in classrooms that led to a lack of relevance in the teaching program being implemented. The meso-level policy goals of the universities were not communicated to micro-level practice as envisioned, thus exposing challenges that come from policy diffusion (Aizawa et. al., 2019). This research impacted students and staff at the micro level at institutions offering English instructed courses.

Kumaravadivelu is an important researcher of language policy and planning, especially in perceptual mismatches. In his book *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*, Kumaravadivelu (2002) explores aspects of educational policy including how to maximize learning opportunities for both administration and students, and minimizing perceptual mismatches. Much of his recommendations are aimed to help teachers better equip themselves to maximize learning in and out of the classroom. The recommendations alert teachers to

potential sources of perceptual mismatches and help aid teachers in minimizing these mismatches.

Matsuda (2003), Honna (2020), and Grant (1997) have aimed to unveil the beliefs of English ownership in students and generate policy advice for institutions to better aid students in their academic journey. Although there are studies that use qualitative research, the studies focus more on ownership than policy implementation. More similar to studies by Fukunaga (2016) and Aizawa et. al. (2019), my research aims to use qualitative data to analyze the quality of English education in a secondary institution and possibly recommend policy changes based on the results. This study uses a mixed methods approach to explore the issue and aims to gain a holistic view of language program design by having individual perspectives from both students and staff members.

Methodology

Rationale

This qualitative study draws upon ethnographic interview methodology. My data collection process is similar to ethnographic studies that look to understand the inner workings of a culture by looking at detailed depictions of a small number of participants. Studies like these aim to gain understanding of an issue through a cultural lens, which is necessary when looking at a system outside of one's own culture like education in Japan. In most studies, surveys are sent out to get an understanding of the people who will participate in the research. It is important that the interviewees are different enough to get a range of viewpoints during interviews from class and socioeconomic status to gender and educational views. Interviews are used to narrow the amount of participants and gain more detailed information from the prompted questions attached below. This study will only be utilizing interviews to collect data and participants will be selected from volunteers.

Procedures

The university is located in Kawagoe and is one of Japan's 86 national universities. The university has a student population of over 6,500 that are spread out between 4 campuses in 2 countries, and is rooted in regional and international development. The school currently hosts 1,300 students from 68 different countries. The consent form was presented in both Japanese and English along with the opportunity for verbal consent and is available in the appendix.

Data was collected from 18 college students and 3 staff members at TIU. The student data was taken from two classes, one with 11 students and one with 7. All of the students that participated in the study were sophomores who were majoring in English communication. The interviews were conducted in small groups of 4 and 3 students on Zoom and a consistent interview protocol was followed with each group based on a set of 10 guiding questions (see appendix). These questions pulled from topics such as general studies, the use of English in the classroom, the use of English with instructors and peers, and the speaker's confidence to use English with other English speakers. The staff members all originated from the English department and spoke English as their first language. Similarly the staff members were asked a set of 11 guiding questions. These questions focused on their teaching experience at TIU, their use of English in and outside of the classroom, and goal implementation. The interviews were not recorded to promote comfort on the part of the informants. Interview responses were then coded and aggregated.

Analysis and Discussion

From the interviews conducted with students and staff members, I found that there was not a perceptual mismatch in regards to goal setting from the meso and micro levels. However, it seems there is a mismatch between instructors and both administrators and students in regards to culture, at least in the Global Teaching Institute (GTI). The teachers noted that the entirety of the nearly 50 staff members in the GTI are mostly White westerners from the US or Canada who don't speak any Japanese. Those who did were mostly not allowed in work settings because of TIU's English only policy in most of its English Department buildings.

All instructors and students made it very clear that in both tracks (both Japanese and English), English is the medium of instruction. The first instructor I interviewed said, "It's a policy at TIU that you can't use Japanese in the classroom, [but] there has been a lot of pushback" (p.6). Many of the teachers have struggled to communicate with entry level students because of the language barrier. Instructor 1 spoke about their experience with entry level classes when they started teaching at TIU. Initially, they knew very little Japanese, so they couldn't support students who were thrown into an English classroom but couldn't understand English, at least not in the way they wanted to.

The second instructor I spoke with said that they're allowed to use small amounts of Japanese with entry level students, but that the courses must be taught in English (p.9). They mentioned that most of the documents, like the syllabus, are given in English with a Japanese translation available. They said that students receive adequate scaffolding and support, but the instructor will occasionally allow students to ask questions to their peers or themselves in Japanese. Instructor 2 also stated that, "The vaccine notice went up in English and Japanese" (p.9). Instructor three said that they only use English inside and outside of the classroom with students (p.12).

One of the instructors noted that the college doesn't give much if any support on curriculum and goal setting, that is left for the teachers to do. Instructor 1 explained that a lot of the policy for schools is made by bankers who fund the school or others who have no experience teaching in an educational setting. There is a group of teachers that is appointed to create curriculums, but lots of the ideas get shot down by administration. When asked if teachers establish learning goals in the classroom, they mentioned that they have to do all the heavy lifting themselves. When they started TIU, the main goal was to pass the class and as long as students passed the class, everyone was happy (p.7). Most instructors aim to have their students set their own language learning goals. Instructor 2 explained that in the J-track, the courses align with the Super test (a placement test designed for APIs). A needs assessment is conducted during the first week of class and the instructor also takes the goals that the more advanced learners have for themselves and helps them with these goals like question creation. There is a year to year adjustment of goals (p.10). When students were questioned on their goal setting and English language standards, the students seemed in agreement that goals were being set by each student for themselves and that they felt like they were able to get all of the information about classroom expectations.

Teachers also noted that there are differences in cultural expectations for college students in Japan as contrasted with those in the US. This is not just to TIU specifically, instructor 1 explains. They said that other staff members that they are connected to from other

schools have noticed the same things. Instructor 1 mentioned that there seems to be a cultural mismatch between the Japanese expectations for college, and the Western ideas of college that the English department is bringing in. They have observed that it seems college is less important than high school test scores. Not only that, but there also seems to be a taboo around taking longer than 4 years to graduate. Realistically, students have 3 years of study and one year to look for a job, but they say people often don't hire those who don't complete their degree in 4 years. (p.7). When questioned about the standard of English being taught, the instructors all mentioned that the school was teaching a western, native speaker standard.

Attending to this mismatch becomes an entangled web itself because culturally, Japan has been one of the main forces of striving for a native speaker standard in which White westerners are doing the teaching, not other Japanese people. To change that view would also question if it is the outsiders' role to try to enforce western ideals of representation, educational practices, and diversity in the employment sector of education because the push isn't being done by the people themselves. This brings to question agency and who has the "right" to alter the current status quo. In the book *Critical ELT practices in Asia*, Sung & Pederson (2012) attempt to address some of the cultural mismatches in EFL education in Asia stating that:

Some administrators and teachers complain that foreign teachers are native speakers of English but are ignorant of school cultures and lack classroom management or administrative skills. For example, some of them are less qualified or not really serious about teaching as they are called "backpackers" who are more interested in traveling Asian countries as soon as the break starts. Therefore instead of building collaborative collegial relationships with foreign teachers, they consider foreign English teachers expatriates who leave after some years and these foreign teachers also act as such, after all. In a sense, foreign teachers are thought [of] as migrant laborers who just come for easy or high paying jobs and do not [make] an effort to accommodate [the] culture of the hosting country let alone teaching students well. In the meantime, foreign teachers may complain of the lack of information about governmental and institutional rules and regulations about hiring, visa extension as well as schools, curriculums, and daily events or long working hours on the weekend, especially in private institutes. So both construct the world of their own and others' without making enough efforts to understand each other or work together.(2012, pp. 32-33)

This quote also attempts to understand the motives of these teachers from a critical, colonialist perspective and challenges western intentions. It needs stating that any teaching abroad done by westerners or former colonist societies needs to be thoroughly examined because of the immense role that colonialism has played in history. Although Sung & Pederson make a fair point about some of the population of educators who move abroad to teach EFL, this quote leaves out the countless others who want to live in that country for the indefinite future, those who have made an effort to become global citizens and learn the culture of those around them.

It is critical to have an understanding of the nuances of not only the people but the culture of that particular school and department. In cross-cultural interactions, there will always be misunderstandings that can lead to frustration, however it's important to adapt to educational norms of that place while also maintaining one's educational philosophy.

Conclusion and Reflection

This study has aimed to identify if there is a mismatch in expectations between the instructor and student level and how this might impact students at Tokyo International University. What was found is there is less of a mismatch between meso and micro level and more between the macro and meso levels, not just one expectation for the instructors initially, but culturally as well. Teachers' expectations stemming from their own US educational experience influences their expectations for their teaching abroad.

Being a McNair scholar has allowed me to get a more in-depth understanding of the research process and myself as a researcher. There were many unpredictable struggles that I faced that led me to see that conducting research isn't always as easy as it looks, especially internationally. There is a lot of collaboration required from translation, to connecting with others inside a school. I have learned that connections and letters don't guarantee a foot in the door, but that they can often aid in gaining knowledge about a particular company or institution. If it wasn't for those who assisted me such as Professor Watanabe, Professor Brown, and all of the PSU Alumni at Tokyo International University, none of this would have been possible. Perseverance and dedication to conducting research is what I've gained personally from being a McNair Scholar which will follow me wherever I end up in life. I never would have imagined I would be doing anything like this in college and I'm thankful to the many instructors in the department of Applied Linguistics who encouraged me to take this leap. I will be eternally grateful.

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