A comparison and contrast between learning English in Australia and Japan.

Introduction
Japanese are infamous for their poor English proficiency. For example, in 2002 the average score of Japanese examinees in TOEFL ranked 22nd among 23 Asian countries (Daily Yomiuri July 12th 2002). Considering that Japan is an economically affluent country and people have an access to English conversation schools, TV/radio program and textbooks easily, the result is disappointing. In her paper Hashimoto (1993) sets up a question “Why has the education of English as a foreign language in Japan been unsatisfactory for many people, particularly those who want to be able to communicate orally with native speakers?” However, at least Japanese students in ELICOS (English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students) of Charles Darwin University make progress just like other nationalities. So, I would like to explore the factors in ELICOS which can help Japanese speakers become successful English learners. The aim of this project is to provide useful information that teachers can refer to when they teach Japanese students in Australia. I’d like to focus on students’ motivation, as I strongly believe that it is one of the most important elements in language learning.

Exploring their motivation through interviews
Although the definition of motivation is controversial (Brown 1994, Ellis 1994) and I admit that motivation is not the only factor for successful language learning, I still believe that it is one of the keys.

I interviewed 5 Japanese students in ELICOS in search of a link between their progress and their motivation. They were all intermediate students (in IELTS 5.0-5.5) in their late 20s or early 30s. None of them are in ELICOS any more. Four students took IELTS, reached the English requirements and moved on. One student on tourist visa didn’t take the exam. She’s back in Japan.

Interviews were conducted in English and/or Japanese individually. I took notes during the interviews and showed them to the subjects after the interviews so that they could examine the contents.

One of the questions I asked was “Why do you study English?” Their answers can be regarded as their long-term goals.
Q. Why do you study English?
- For my future career x2
- I want to migrate into Australia/I want to live in Australia.
- I want to communicate with many people

Their answers are mixture of integrative and instrumental motivation.

Another question I asked was “What motivates you most?” Their answers are like this.

Q. What motivates you most?
- When I have a difficulty making myself understood in every day life, I feel that I have to study.
- For communication
- Although taking IELTS motivates me, the needs to communicate with people have a stronger effect on me.
- Thinking of IELTS is as stressful as English study in Japan. Studying English for exams is not for me.
- IELTS preparation doesn’t motivate me. When I remember new words or I talk with my friends in English, I feel a sense of attainment.
- I want to talk to people in English.
- I am motivated because; a. learning is directly connected to my everyday life, b. I can make a lot of friends, c. I have set up my goal (I want to do Certificate II in Business).

The subjects stated that communication motivated them while the exam they had to take was not a strong motivational factor. Several research papers support the importance of communication in language learning (McNamara 1973, Rosier 1975). Their desire and opportunities to communicate with people in English motivate them a lot. These opportunities are difficult to find when subjects live in Japan. Japan is very homogeneous. Of course, it is possible to have opportunities to speak in English even in Japan. But they are probably not frequent nor imminent.

What helps them keep motivated?
This environmental factor is what I’d like to pay attention to with regard to their motivation. Surely, the subjects were motivated either integratively or instrumentally to begin with. ELICOS students come to Australia to study English. Without determination and commitment, they would not do so. Likewise, TOEFL candidates choose to take the test. This test is not a part of school education in Japan. Therefore it can be thought that they are instrumentally or integratively motivated. However, it is easy to lose motivation as human nature. In Japan, English learners do not have to
use English much for their every day life. On the other hand, ELICOS students need to deal with day-to-day activities in English. According to the interviews, they experience positive and negative incidents in relation to use of English and both become their driving force to study English. One subject talked about his experience when he had bought a car. He said, “When I have difficulties conveying what I want to say, I feel that I have to study English. For example, when I need to negotiate with people, I want to speak English well so that people don’t rip me off.” Another student said, “When I talk with people I feel a sense of attainment.”

Probably, English learners in Japan are as motivated as ELICOS students. Unfortunately, they aren’t lucky enough to receive constant stimulus and to feel a sense of attainment in their daily life. And because they do not have these opportunities in their home county, ELICOS students probably appreciate them. If they were from a multicultural society such as Singapore, their reaction to their current environment could be different.

What should teachers do to keep them motivated?

I am not inclined to believe that being surrounded by English keeps students motivate forever. Even though students receive feedback in their real life, they get used to encouragement and stop feeling a sense of achievement. This is where the importance of class comes in.

As we can see in the result of the interviews, students feel good when they can connect what they learn in class with their real life. Also, students must learn something new and more challenging. The classroom is a place for input and practice. Topics and classroom activities need to be associated with everyday life. The teacher can create situations where students can use what they learn as well. For example, students can watch ER in class after they finished the chapter about medicine of their textbook. The teacher can also refer to other videos whose setting is a hospital. Of course, everybody can get sick. In that sense, medicine and diseases are related to their life naturally. Another example is what was actually conducted in ELICOS of CDU in Term 2 2004. Students finished a chapter about crimes and scam, and they watched the video “Catch me if you can”. They also visited the Supreme Court as an excursion.

Three factors, student’s motivation, their environment and class, must be connected. Student’s motivation is an integral part and their environment and classroom should
help them motivated continuously. Japanese ELICOS students at CDU are well motivated. As teachers, however, we should not solely depend on their motivation. The teacher must make what students learn in the class useful their daily life as the connection between the classroom and real life is important. The content of the course should be related to their life. Activities need to be communicative and practical, for example role-playing. Follow-up or reinforcement is desirable so that students can explicitly see how the lesson is related to their life.

**Conclusion**

This implication may be able to be used for other nationalities. John Park, a former English teacher in Japan whose nationality is South Korean, says that the problems the Japanese people face in learning English are quite similar to those in Korea (Daily Yomiuri On-Line December 16th 2003). David Barker, who has taught English in Singapore, New Zealand and Japan, states that other Asian students have a lot in common with Japanese students (p35 in Magazine ALC March 2004)). Information about their educational backgrounds, methods which other Asian students experienced, and class activities which they prefer has to be collected and investigated to compare and contrast other Asian students with Japanese students. I, however, hope that this project will help Japanese students learn English effectively and other Asian students can benefit from this as well.

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