

The Role of Reduction Techniques in the EFL classroom in Japan

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1.0 Introduction

English is a common language used in EFL classes taught by foreigners throughout Japan. Part of the difficulties in conducting such classes in English is that students do not have frequent opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Teachers, therefore, are often faced with the challenging tasks of both communicating in the classroom in what is a second language for the students and getting the students to use this language creatively and constructively. Such situations often require that the teacher devise certain techniques to compensate for any inadequacies students may have in trying to speak a second language in the classroom. Many times, these covert techniques are formed to counterbalance in areas where official policy (i. e., Ministry of Education, see 5.0 Conclusion) lacks sufficient influence. Reduction, as these techniques are sometimes called, is often employed in a variety of classrooms and teaching situations. This paper examines some of these techniques from a collection that I have taken from my own classrooms, and after a comparison with Mackay's (1993) list of reduction techniques (he calls them 'hygiene resources'), I will trace their origins back to language policy and discuss their influences on teaching in Japan.

2.0 Literature Review

Mackay (1993) has given us an interesting study of what he calls 'counter-

planning' to make up for student inadequacies in speaking English. From data drawn from the Canadian Arctic, he cites instances where Eskimo secondary school pupils, educated through English as second language, are unable to complete classroom language tasks in English due to inadequate levels of English. He also mentions how embarrassment, brought on by a hindrance of linguistic inability, can cause student silence to teachers' questions, delayed responses, incomprehensible and inarticulate responses, a delay in producing written work, or incomplete written work. In the face of this 'embarrassment', he goes on to explain how teachers may employ certain solutions to these problems or ways around the difficulty by using what he terms 'hygiene resources' or what could also be called reduction (simplification) to alleviate the embarrassment. It is called 'reduction' because achievement in the classroom is reduced by using these 'hygiene resources', demanding less from the students. Although these strategies, in appropriate contexts, can be acceptable and even effective, I think, they are hardly the answer to all such problems we encounter in the classroom.

Kachru (1994) introduces language policy by stating that each country has to determine its own evolving linguistic destiny and that it is the wider political, ethnic and religious considerations which primarily influence language choice and language hierarchy. He adds that the spread of English is not necessarily planned.

For some clarification, Tollefson (1991) illustrates how we can look at learning problems in two ways. One is a historical-structural viewpoint, and the other a neo-classical view. The latter viewpoint derives from a view of learners as individuals with success or failure in language learning residing in these individuals, in their capacity, aptitude, and learning strategies. Motivation is also seen as residing in individuals leading us to believe that some learners 'want' to learn and some wish not to. Tollefson criticizes this viewpoint since it tends to overlook certain factors outside the learners which may be of some significance to their learning. This can lead, he claims, to

partial or distorted appraisal of the situation. For example, evaluation questions in language tests may be directed at materials and methods, rather than an evaluation of the situation that led the learners' to learn the language in the first place.

The former viewpoint, the historical-structural view, as the name suggests, is concerned more with looking at historical factors surrounding the success or failure in language learning and the structures in a particular society that may influence learning for particular groups in society. This approach also assumes that rational planning rarely occurs, and that planning more often results from conflict, politics, vested interests, and ideologies of the groups involved in the planning process. The historical-structural viewpoint, Tollefson continues, looks beyond individuals choices to why they have to make those choices, and what structures exist within their society to require decisions to be made about whether to learn a language or not. In terms of evaluation we would ask not whether the language learning was successful, but whether the conditions that led to it are the ones which we would wish to improve or change. The Mackay findings are a good example of the Tollefson illustration of the two viewpoints. From the historical-structural viewpoint we can see why teachers in certain situations would resort to using hygiene resources. Hopefully, this view can lead politicians to review policy, if the system so allows. Also, it is hoped that teachers under this view will be more aware of problems with policy. Mackay defends the neo-classical view by saying that teacher should not the historical-structural view to absolve themselves from action. Teachers can use classroom data to analyze strategies and create ways to help their students deal with cognitively more demanding tasks. The two approaches serve different purposes, but can interact with each other. Teachers need to learn how to balance the two to enhance their teaching.

Tollefson (1989) also gives us an useful model describing the potential links between language planning (LP) and second language acquisition (SLA).

His model of SLA consists of four variables, (a) input (whether acquisition occurs in natural or classroom environments; the nature of teacher-student interaction); (b) the learner (age personality, attitude and motivation); (c) learning strategies; and (d) the linguistic content of what is to be learned. Tollefson's framework here starts from an analysis of the language situation, which forms the content for planning procedures. In a hierarchal system of language planning, language advisers and syllabus designers can distinguish between SLA variables that can and cannot be negotiated or modified. Such analysis can help us avoid inappropriate and overambitious formulation of policy at all levels and the inevitable frustration in implementation. This can lead to methodologies and materials that are both appropriate and successful in the classroom, depending on the particular learning situation or setting. Tollefson concludes with some good advice for researchers. He proposes that one outlines potential areas for planning, possible effects of decisions made in particular settings under specific conditions, and the interaction of planned and unplanned variables. He adds that researchers should maintain an international perspective toward language acquisition.

Haugen (1987) suggests four processes or stages to language planning (see Figure 1 below, each dealing with a different aspect of decision making). The key to the processes is that they assume rationally in decision-making rather than beset by any political or internal interests.

Figure 1. A model of language planning

Type of planning:	Stages/Processes of planning:	
Status	(1) Selection	(3) Implementation
Corpus	(2) Codification	(4) Elaboration

Selection in the first stage (status) refers to decisions that have to be made about which languages are to be used and for what functions in order to solve stated problems (economic, social or political). Codification (in corpus

planning) occurs when the languages chosen in stage one cannot perform their functions linguistically. Implementation is the process that turns policy into practice. Implementation is necessary if a policy's objectives are to be successful. This includes the development of syllabus and tests, materials and textbook, and the training of teachers. Decisions on whether policy will be mandatory or voluntary are also made at this stage. The last stage is elaboration, an extension of the codification process. Although it may be difficult to distinguish between the two, elaboration is a sort of 'cultivation' in which a standardized language undergoes further development, whereas codification refers to the process of changing from a spoken to a written form of a language and subsequent standardization. Both codification and elaboration combine to form a facilitation/preservation process and if not part of the natural process of language change, are often carried out by various gatekeepers.

Kaplan (1987) has stated that Japan is a country where English is an important second language. He also suggests that Japan has developed its own variety of English, and says that now many other varieties can commonly be found throughout the world. In Japan, he continues, English is a foreign language and not used for any practical purpose in the society. Nevertheless, English in Japan is a mandatory subject in school from junior high school on, and it is a main feature of the national college entrance examinations. To a large extent, the kind of knowledge of English required is a reading knowledge, predominately learned through grammar-translation methodology. You will find, therefore, several language schools throughout the cities in Japan that teach spoken English. He closes by saying that local governments should plan language to meet the needs of its people since not every citizen must learn English. He suggests that governments ask themselves to what degree of proficiency English should be learned and for what social purpose, and exactly who should learn English. He also asks them to question the costs of teaching English and what benefits are to be achieved through Eng-

lish learning, along with who will be doing the teaching.

The conditions Kaplan states above often necessitate that some adjustments be made by language teachers to cope with any challenges they might face in their efforts to make their classes more conversational and interactive. The section that follows offers some insight as to how 'hygiene resources' help compensate for student inability and comprehension.

3.0 Hygiene Resources in the Classroom

This section includes a collection of some of the reduction techniques/hygiene resources that I use in my classrooms 'in the face of (student) embarrassment' to compensate for inadequate levels of English language abilities to perform classrooms tasks. A critique of my list (similar to Mackay's also given below) is provided as well.

3.1 My collection of hygiene resources with examples and critique of what I do in the classroom.

3.1.1 Answer my own questions. By doing so, pressure ('embarrassment') is taken off the student and a 'good'/appropriate answer is supplied. For example, I may ask the student 'Where are your from?'. After a delay, I might then supply an answer to prompt a response like 'You're from Fukuoka' to which I most usually get a positive response since I teach there. However, communication has been lost, and the students ends up only saying 'Yes'.

3.1.2 Rephrase the student's answers to make them acceptable. In a sense, one step beyond (in the right direction?) what I do in 3.1.1. Here, I often correct, or rephrase rather, the student which more frequently and successfully attains the desired response. To use the above example, 'Where are you from?', I may get a response like 'I'm come from Oita' to which I would correct, 'Oh, you are from Oita'. More often than not, at least more than in 3.1.1 I will get the student to correct themselves by saying the correct response on their own.

3.1.3 Substitute an easy task for a difficult one. This relieves the embarrassment and gives students more confidence. A good example of this would be where, in a listen exercise for instance, the students have to tell what happens in a short conversational exchange. Instead of having them write full sentences (e. g., The man bought a return ticket to London for 70 pounds) I would have them only write down the 'key words' they hear in the exchange (e. g., 'return ticket', 'London', '70 pounds' answering such questions as Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How). This is yet another instance where the students do less and reduction takes place.

3.1.4 Expand minimal student responses. By prompting the students to speak I 'take them by the hand' so to speak and try to get more language out of them. For example, if they stop in the middle of a answer, e. g., I ask 'Where did you go last weekend?' to which they reply 'I went shopping. . . .', I will respond with 'in?' (to prompt a place) or 'to buy?' (to prompt what they bought). Here, I am encouraging the student to offer more than they do, but in the meantime, am doing an awful lot of the work to get them to speak.

3.1.5 Break down questioning into simple yes/no answers. Again this puts the student at ease knowing that they do not have to produce elaborate answers. Another thing I do that is similar is to ask 'or' questions. So, rather than asking 'Who is you favorite rock star?' (Students may not always know the word 'favorite'), I may ask 'Do you like Madonna?', then later ask 'Who do you like most/best?'. Also, I ask questions like 'Do you like rock or classic better?' instead of the seemingly more difficult 'What is your favorite kind of music?' which sometimes draws blanks from students.

3.1.6 Write down instructions, explanations and examples. Students in Japan always seem to understand better when things are written. This is a clear case where I have to do much more work than I should. Dependency on written text seems to be common in Japan. To simplify explanations and clarify examples this seems to work. However time is lost from what could be spent in speaking and listening work.

3.1.7 Give instructions, explanations and examples in the students' L1. Of course, this is done as a the last resort. Here the purposes and results are similar to those mentioned in 3.1.6. Unfortunately, all communication in L2 is lost, and even more detrimental to students, the fact that I can speak their native language is exposed and knowing that, they may and do resort to their L1 in times of trouble (e. g., misunderstanding).

3.1.8 Summarize what I think students want to say. Again, much like what I do in 3.1.2. This is a step back though, I think, in that less is done by the student.

3.1.9 Begin and end lessons with easy tasks. Following the idea in 3.1.3, I try to allow the students to start lessons easily and finish them with a feeling of accomplishment. I do not know if this is truly a hygiene resource or not, but the time spent on such activities may deviate from the original lesson plans thus resulting in reduction of the overall lesson aims. Something I often do is begin lessons by asking 'What's new?' and end them by asking 'What are your weekend plans?' to which they are expected to respond by talking briefly about both what they did the previous weekend and what they are planning to do this following one. I think it is reduction in that they are questions that they are overly familiar with and can respond to rather easily and without much anxiety. Therefore, they could be labeled a hygiene resource since they take the place of more challenging exercises and activities in the language.

3.1.10 Let students take turns reading texts sentence by sentence. I do this rather than read text by myself as Mackay does in 3.2.7. I find that making one or only a few students (two or three) read aloud even a text of medium length (100–150 words) can result in some 'embarrassment' by the fact that they may not have much confidence in their reading abilities and their pronunciation of more difficult words. By reading aloud text in larger groups (6–10 students), such embarrassment (to a certain degree) can be avoided.

3.1.11 Allow students to first write down their thoughts before giving them orally. I feel that allowing the student to write their thoughts allows me to go around the classroom checking the students' work so that error, and embarrassment can be avoided in their oral presentations. However, this is getting away from verbal communication and is in effect a form of reduction.

3.2 Mackay's list of hygiene resources. Teachers:

- 3.2.1 reason aloud
- 3.2.2 answer their own questions
- 3.2.3 rephrase the student's answers to make them acceptable
- 3.2.4 substitute an easy task for a difficult one
- 3.2.5 expand minimal student responses
- 3.2.6 break down questioning into simple yes/no answers
- 3.2.7 take over reading aloud if the pupils perform too slowly
- 3.2.8 produce simple gap-filling exercises
- 3.2.9 get students to copy and learn by heart
- 3.2.10 dictate notes
- 3.2.11 create written texts orally with the whole class

4.0 Student Preferences: A Survey

In Appendix 1 is a survey I created in order to examine students' preferences of learning and what they expect from their teachers in the classroom, based on the assumptions made by both Mackay and Tollefson and commented on by myself in earlier sections. Twenty-four students of levels varying from intermediate to advanced, ages college to older adult, were surveyed.

4.1 Results

Below is a table of the results from the survey (*) in section 5.

Table 1. Survey Answers (see Appendix 1).

Question No.	No. of Answers:	a	b	c	d
1		2	10	12	0
2		1	6	10	7
3		10	13	1	0
4		1	7	15	1
5		5	2	15	2
6		3	11	5	5
7		1	3	10	10
8		5	4	6	9
9		13	11	0	0
10		11	11	2	0
11		14	10	0	0
12		2	4	13	5
13		9	8	6	1
14		4	15	5	0
15		5	12	7	0
16		18	6	0	0
17		19	4	1	0
18		3	5	16	0
19		6	5	8	5

*AN IMPORTANT NOTE: It should be perhaps understood that such instruments as this survey may not be all that reliable to get accurate opinions and self analysis, especially in Japan. (Many researchers have even found them worthless!) Moreover, administering the survey in English instead of Japanese might have swayed students from offering their more honest sentiments.

4.2 Discussion.

Several important points arise from this survey, some predictable and some rather surprising. First case in point, although students seemed to be split in their responses to the question on whether they are 'embarrassed' when called upon by the teacher in class (no. 1), they are particularly 'shy' about making errors when speaking English in class (no. 2). Error correction has long been a major role of teachers in English classes taught by Japanese natives so this should not come as any surprise. This is something the students want and expect from their teachers. Most teachers here are aware of that already, I think. Although many teachers may not put error correction very high in their rank of teaching priorities or see it as an important

role in teaching, students in Japan view it quite differently and it is something to consider while teaching classes here (see no. 3). (Interestingly from the learners' perspective, Nunan (1995) points out that error correction by the teacher is highly valued by almost all learners and that student self-discovery of errors is given a low rating. This thinking seems to be especially prevalent in Asian countries where learners can be categorized, as Nunan (1995) writes, as 'authority-oriented', meaning that they prefer teachers to explain everything, like having their own textbook, writing everything in a notebook, studying grammar, learning by reading, and learning new words by seeing them.)

Number 6 predictably supports one 'hygiene resource' I do (3.1.6). That is, I write down explanations or examples on the board to both introduce and clarify points made in my classes. Although doing so relieves them from the task of listening (carefully) to try and comprehend what I am asking them to do, they seem to favor that much more than trying to give explanations and examples in Japanese (no. 7). This came to me as a small surprise. I try not to use Japanese in classes, but I would have thought that occasionally students would welcome some more difficult explanations, for example, in Japanese. Perhaps, they are replying more with their ideal of how things should be rather than how they actually feel. Mentioned at the end of 4.1, we probably should be cautious of such responses as they may not be totally accurate or truthful. Their motivation to study and learn in English is high (or rather they want to be able to/think they should say they want to learn English and speak the language 'fluently', as they often say here to me no surprise!). Despite their self-acclaimed motivation to learn English (based on their responses in numbers 16 and 17), most students seldom speak English outside the classroom (or perhaps they are still too 'embarrassed' to do so, see no. 15). However, most do want to (expect to) speak English outside the classroom often in the future (again, it is their 'dream', see no. 13). Lastly, the students' willingness to study in small groups (no. 18) reflects the

well-known social and psychological aspects of society in Japan and perhaps the fact that embarrassment is decreased when in small groups as opposed to learning individually.

5.0 Conclusion

The language that my learners are exposed to is English, mostly within the classroom walls. As I am American, interaction between the learners and myself is done in English. Due to the fact that the students have so very little exposure to English outside the classroom, added to the fact that they are expected to interact in their L2 with a native speaker of English, presents an obvious challenge and often results in the use of the hygiene resources, as seen in sections 3.1.1 to 3.1.12. Hygiene resources do have their place in the language classroom. If used correctly, they create a positive classroom atmosphere and can help students, particularly weak or unmotivated learners, cope with 'embarrassment' and encourage them to progress in their language studies. One of the challenges for any language teacher is to use such reduction techniques to work for them and their students rather than against them. Careful attention needs to be paid so that lessons are productive for the students, and to ensure that the original lesson plans and aims are not totally lost when employing such techniques. Of course, after using hygiene resources sparingly, they should be dropped as soon as the students can cope on their own. All students need is to be able to deal with the language they learn in a manner that is not rushed nor overly complex and demanding. Plans and classroom policy can be structured to clearly address what is expected from the students and how they will be expected to communicate both between each other and with the teacher (e. g. 'only English', etc.).

Embarrassment experienced in the classroom and the hygiene resources used to deal with it can be traced back to certain aspects of language policy, such as the official policies set down by the Ministry of Education in Japan.

Often hygiene resources are created covertly out of the necessity at a given moment to make up for any deficiencies in official policy. Such alterations to official policy would obviously have some impact on the students and their learning. Unfortunately, successive government guidelines together with an often untrained teaching force here have rendered the situation inadequate in the areas of speaking and listening. Still today, the covert aim of teaching in Japan is to teach reading, and very little has actually changed since the Meiji era when the ability to read Western books was highly valued, since Western knowledge (technology, ideas, etc.) could be thereby imported free into Japan. Moreover, the idea of interacting with foreigners (giving as well as taking) is still not really accepted in Japan generally, or by native teachers in particular. Governmental guidelines in a sense pay lip service to communication and certain loopholes are always left open for schools to do nothing in this area. Even the introduction of Oral Communication in 1994 made only minor changes in existing arrangements. As teachers become more aware of the relationships between policy and what actually occurs in the classroom, better planning and policy improvements should be made more quickly and more appropriately, thus decreasing the need for using hygiene resources. In the future, teachers will most likely have more influence on planning and policy and their role in the classroom will include that of 'strategy analyst' as their abilities to help students learn cognitively improve.

Hygiene resources have their place in the language classroom. If used correctly, they can help students cope with 'embarrassment' and encourage them to progress in their language studies. This paper has brought up some important points for language teachers to consider in their teaching, and the findings here can spur teachers on to more of their own classroom observation and adjustments. A summary of such important points is as follows:

1. Teachers are often faced with the challenging tasks of both communicating in the classroom in the students' L2 and getting the students to use

this language creatively and constructively.

2. Frequently covert language policies (hygiene resources) are formed to counterbalance areas where official policy lacks sufficient influence.
3. Mackay mentions how embarrassment, brought on by a hindrance of linguistic inability, can cause student silence to teachers' questions, delayed responses, incomprehensible and inarticulate responses, a delay in producing written work, or incomplete written work.
4. In the face of this 'embarrassment', Mackay goes on to explain how teachers may employ certain solutions to these problems or ways around the difficulty by using what he terms 'hygiene resources' or what could also be called reduction (simplification) to alleviate the embarrassment.
5. Kachru introduces language policy by stating that each country has to determine its own evolving linguistic destiny and that it is the wider political, ethnic and religious considerations which seriously influence language choice and language hierarchy.
6. The historical-structural view assumes that rational planning rarely occurs, and that planning more often results from conflict, politics, vested interests, and ideologies of the groups involved in the planning process.
7. Japan has developed its own variety of English. However, English here is a foreign language and not used for any practical purpose.
8. Nevertheless, English in Japan is a mandatory subject in school from junior high school on, and it is tested in the national college entrance examinations.
9. Governments such as that of Japan need to ask themselves to what degree of proficiency English should be learned and for what social purpose, and exactly who should learn English.
10. They also need to question the costs of teaching English and what benefits are to be achieved through English learning, along with who will be doing the teaching.

11. Students are particularly 'shy' about making errors when speaking English in class.
12. We probably should be leery of surveys in Japan as they may not be totally accurate or truthful.
13. Students' willingness to study in small groups reflects the well-known social and psychological aspects of society in Japan.

Appendix 1: Survey

Instructions. Read over questions and statements below and answer and reply to them as honestly as you can. Circle your answers, please.

1. How do you feel about being called on by the teacher to answer questions in class? a) very confident b) confident c) a little nervous d) very nervous
2. How do you feel about making errors while speaking English in class? a) very embarrassed b) embarrassed c) just a little embarrassed d) not embarrassed
3. How important is it for you that the teacher corrects your errors in class? a) very important b) important c) a little important d) not so important
4. Do you feel your English course is too easy or difficult? a) too easy b) a little easy c) a little difficult d) too difficult
5. How do you think you could improve your English more? a) speaking more b) studying more c) both speaking and studying more d) going abroad
6. How important do you think it is for the teacher to write down explanations and examples on the blackboard in English? a) very important b) important c) a little important d) not so important
7. How important do you think it is for the teacher to give explanations and examples in Japanese? a) very important b) important c) a little

- important d) not very important
8. Do you think that your English teacher speaks too much in class? a) yes, always b) yes, sometimes c) no, not so much d) no, not at all
 9. Do you think that your teacher allows you to speak enough in class? a) yes, always b) yes, usually c) no, only sometimes d) no, never enough
 10. How much confidence do you think you have gained in this English class? a) a lot b) a little c) not very much d) very little or none
 11. Do you feel you have enough time to respond to the teacher's questions? a) yes, always b) yes, usually c) no, usually not d) no, almost never
 12. How often do you use English outside the classroom? a) often b) sometimes c) seldom d) never
 13. How often do you expect to use English outside the classroom in the future? a) often b) sometimes c) seldom d) never
 14. Do you think this class has prepared you to speak English outside the classroom? a) yes, very well b) yes, somewhat c) no, not very well d) no, not at all
 15. Do you feel embarrassed to speak English outside the classroom? a) yes, very b) yes, a little c) no, not very d) no, not at all
 16. How important do you think learning English is? a) very important b) somewhat important c) not so very important d) not important at all
 17. How much do you enjoy learning English? a) very much b) a little c) not very much d) not at all
 18. How do you like to learn English? a) by myself b) with a partner c) in a small group d) in a large group
 19. How much do you think learning English in junior high and senior high school helped you to speak English? a) a lot b) a little c) not very much d) not at all

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