

Building Student Confidence in English as a Second Language and Communication in a Women's Leadership Program

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes educational effects on women's empowerment in a leadership development program at a traditional women's university in Tokyo. The program is conducted entirely in English. Not all students are English majors, but the program is English-only in order to promote students' empowerment as global leaders and to improve their confidence in using English. Fifteen students participated in the workshop, which was aimed at building effective teamworking and knowledge about diverse perspectives. The participants were required to use only English in discussion, role-play and team presentations. After the workshop, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire, which 14 students did. The questionnaire measured their confidence in communicating with people with different backgrounds and values, building an effective team as a leader, and speaking in English.

The results of the survey revealed that all of the students gained confidence in communicating with other people, but only about half ($n=8$) gained confidence in using English. Meanwhile, the other half ($n=6$) thought that using only English in the workshop did not affect their confidence in using English; some even lost confidence. This study suggests possible alternatives to avoid such pitfalls and possible methods to overcome challenges as non-native speakers of English.

KEYWORDS: Women's leadership, Japanese students, Education, English as a lingua franca, confidence

1 INTRODUCTION

It has long been controversial how global leaders use English as lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2009) and how non-native English leaders could break this language barrier. The number of English users in the world has been increasing year by year; most of them are not native speakers of English. But many people still believe the goal of acquiring the language is to become as proficient as a native speaker, which is generally unnecessary for most types of communication in business and daily life. The use of English is getting more attention in Japan as well as in many other countries. It may be more problematic to implement a project or to communicate with others in Japan because of its shame culture (Benedict, 1946), in which people traditionally care a great deal about what other people think about them. In particular, a leader tends to do their best to be seen as perfect and strong, and as a result Japanese people tend to assume a good leader is also a good speaker. Additionally, the Confucian hierarchy (Gates, 2016) that has shaped Japanese society means that top executives are revered as masters of their profession. Therefore, many Japanese leaders feel a great deal of pressure to speak English proficiently, even fluently, so as to be role models to their subordinates.

Due to the recent women's movement and advancement in Japan in higher education, English use by Japanese female leaders is no exception and is now considered essential. According to the Global Gender Gap Report in 2018 (World Economic Forum, 2018), a criterion illustrating the gap between male and female in terms of economic participation, education attainment, health, and political empowerment, Japan ranked very low, 110 among 149 countries, due to the low economic and political participation of women in Japan. Usui, Rose, and Kageyama (2003) argue that even higher educational institutions for women were primarily concerned with training women to be good wives at the beginning of the 20th century, and parents and educators worried that more advanced studies would hinder women's marriage prospects. Before World War II, women's higher education was only for elite families as part of their preparation for marriage to another good family. Also, female entrepreneurship had shown little progress in the last 25 years (Bobrowska & Conrad, 2017). Now, the gap report is a significant reason why people in Japan are now starting to take it more seriously, and recently there has been recent attention in Japan and government awareness of women's empowerment. However, the number of women in Japan who have participated in society and politics is still very small. Thus, at a higher-education level, women's universities are placing more emphasis on women's empowerment and leadership. English communication skills are considered essential for students and global advancement.

Contrary to the positive attention, most students in Japan continue to have critical problems with their English communication skills; they are not confident in their proficiency and do not feel comfortable using English even at a more basic level. This feeling is also true in multinational culture: for non-native speakers of any language, it is a great fear to be judged as less intelligent or skilled because of their lack of proficiency even though they are competent in the language (Tenzer & Pudenko, 2015). However, it is important to note that knowing another language is beneficial for leaders (McGregor, 2012). A research study by Krizman, Marian, Shook, Skoe, & Kraus (2012) shows that bilinguals have advantages in cognitive function, such as attention and working memory, that improve their decision-making and problem-solving skills. It is also a well-known fact that learning another language allows one to understand the other culture (Wierzbicka, 1992), and such understanding is essential in not only multicultural teamwork but any team, considering individual differences.

Therefore, for Japanese female leaders aiming at being a successful global leader, it is crucial to use English, and learning another language is beneficial for them not only to

communicate with colleagues but also to become a more effective leader in decision-making and problem-solving.

This paper describes a case study aiming to show women's empowerment in a workshop class held in a selective leadership development program at a traditional women's university in Japan, and illustrate the effect of education on understanding diversity and on using English as a lingua franca.

2 METHOD

The workshop for the students lasted two full days and was organized for students in the leadership program at a women's university in Tokyo. The class was conducted in English. The aim was to acquire skills in self-knowledge, building rapport, valuing diversity, co-creating results with team members from various cultural and religious backgrounds, and managing a variety of communication strategies to work with others and to achieve a successful outcome in a team. Students analyzed their own communication style and sought to understand others' to acquire new strategies for building successful relationships with others. Students practiced general communication within a team, to identify personal strengths and areas to develop their communication style, to learn speedreading others to build rapport, and practice goal-setting with team members. Fifteen students participated in the workshop. Only two were English literature majors; the others were studying education, psychology, and global studies. All the students were in their second year of university, and their average age was 20. The participants were required to use English in discussion, role-play in teamworking and problem-solving, and a team presentation during the workshop to improve their English skill as a global leader.

After the workshop, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire. 14 out of 15 did so. The questionnaire was online, and the students were able to respond when they wanted to. The questionnaire was a survey about their confidence in communicating with people from various backgrounds and with different values, about building an effective team as a leader, and about using English. The questions were in Japanese, and the students were allowed to use either Japanese or English so that they felt secure and comfortable answering all the questions and were able to express themselves accurately. They were informed that the results of the questionnaire would not affect their grade in the program or any schoolwork before answering the questionnaire. The questions were as follows:

1. After the workshop, do you have more confidence in working in a team?
2. After the workshop, do you have more confidence in working with people with different values or ways of thinking?
3. After the workshop, do you have more confidence in using English?
4. Do you find your idea of leadership changed after the workshop?
5. Do you find your thoughts about working in a team changed?
6. Did you encounter any difficulties in the workshop?

They were asked to choose from "Very confident," "A little more confident," "Same," "Less confident," or "I don't know" for Questions 1 to 4, and for Questions 4 to 6 they were to write their comments freely.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the 14 students' responses for Questions 1-3 in the questionnaire. Figures 1-3 exhibit the proportions of the results.

Table 1 Results for Questions 1-3

	Q1	Q2	Q3
Very confident	3	6	1
A little more confident	9	8	7
Same	1	0	3
Less confident	0	0	3
I don't know	1	0	0
Total	14	14	14

Q1: Do you have more confidence in working in team?

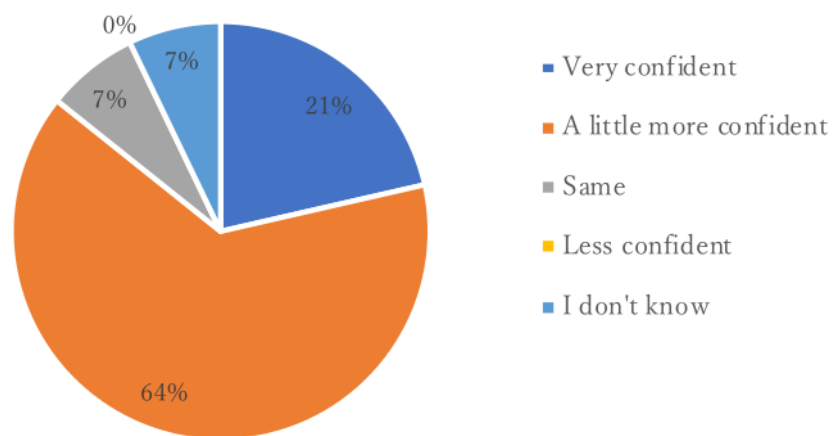


Figure 1: The proportion of the responses to Question 1

After the workshop, do you have more confidence in working with people with different values or ways of thinking?

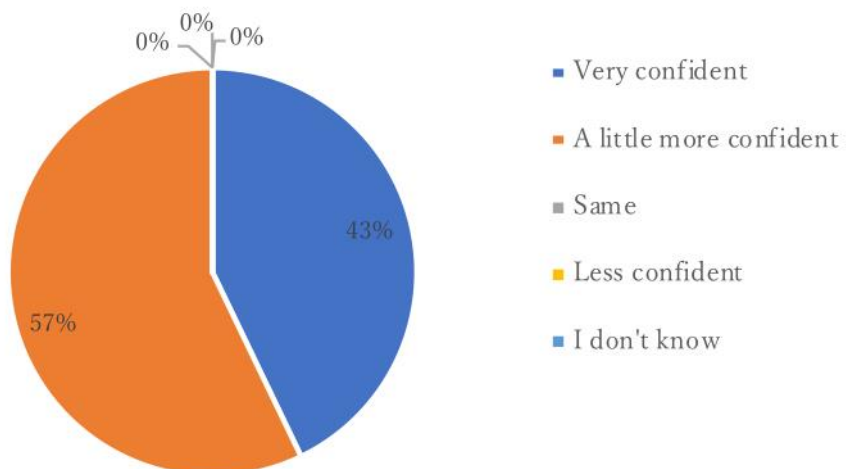


Figure 2: The proportion of the responses to Question 2

Q3: Do you have more confidence in using English?

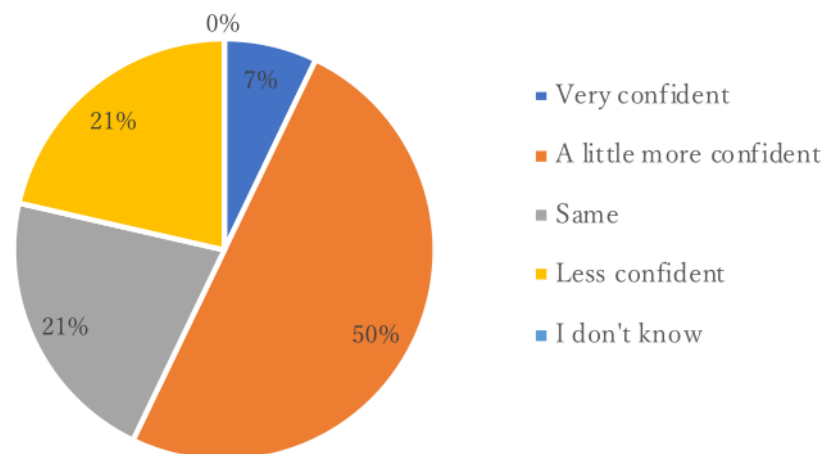


Figure 3: The proportion of the responses to Question 3

The results of the survey revealed that all the students gained confidence in working in a team (Q1, Figure 1); 85% was either “Very confident” or “A little more confident,” 7% for each “Same” and “I don’t know.” They also showed confidence in working with people with different values or ways of thinking (Q2, Figure 2); 43% was “Very confident,” and 57% was “A little more confident.” Meanwhile, only about half of the students (7% “Much confident” and 50 % “A little more confident”) were able to gain confidence in using English. Three students (21%) thought that using only English in the workshop did not affect their confidence in using English, and the other three (21%) lost confidence.

Two comments from the three students who answered “Less confidence” in English after the workshop, regarding Question 6: “Did you encounter any difficulties in the workshop?” were, “I had difficulty discussing and preparing a script for the group role-play in English.” and “I was not able to express my ideas in English and felt very frustrated in the discussion.” The other students’ responses for Question 6 were about class organization and management.

Two of the students with the same level of confidence ($n=3$) in English also commented that using the second language was a major obstacle for them: “I had difficulties in saying my opinions when I was discussing with classmates who spoke a lot than me, so I need to try harder to express my opinions.” and “Communicating in English was difficult.” Therefore, the qualitative results with their comments also reveal there is still a difficulty in English even though their response the experience did not affect their confidence in using English. Furthermore, two of them at the same level of confidence were considered to be at an advanced level in English proficiency, and the other was at a beginner level. These students at two opposite proficiency levels felt not much advancement in their English skill.

Interestingly, the only student who responded with great confidence expressed the opposite feeling in Question 6: “It was difficult to comment and to respond to ideas from the team members.” Moreover, four students among the seven with more confidence commented that English use was difficult to use in communicating. Hence, any students are likely to face difficulty with communicating in English as a second language in a team even if they are relatively confident.

The comments for Questions 4 and 5 reveal that the students gained confidence and increased the understanding toward diversity and teamworking. The comments are reproduced below:

Comments for Q4: Do you find your idea of leadership changed after the workshop?

"I found anyone can take leadership by using their strength even they are not a stereotypical leader."

"I used to think a leader should be charismatic, but I found that's not true. A good leader would read the team members' strength and choose an appropriate way to communicate with them."

"Before the workshop, I didn't want to be a leader. But now I think I can be a one."

"I found in the workshop it is important for a leader to adjust her communication style according to her team members."

"I found in the workshop a good leader would try to suggest a new idea and to make her team members feel comfortable and motivated to work the other members."

"I thought a leader was very strong in character, but the workshop totally changed my idea. A leader does not have to lead the team members all the time, but flexibility is important."

"It is important for leaders to analyze and to know themselves in teamworking."

"There are many ways to be a leader. A leader does not have to be extraverted all the time."

"A leader is not always on the frontline."

"I was able to exhibit leadership in the workshop thinking of my experience working as a team member."

"There are many ways to exhibit leadership."

"Knowing myself helped to be a leader."

"I used to think I wouldn't be a good leader because of my character, but I found in the workshop I have ways to contribute to a team and to become a leader if I know my strength."

"I used to think a leader would need to lead her members all the time, but knowing the members and adjusting communication style would help."

Comments for Q5: Do you find yourself different in your thoughts about working in a team changed?

"I used to think outcome focused person was a good leader, but now I know having more variety of people contributes to a good team."

"I like working with team members. Even if a project doesn't show a result, I now think I can change my leadership style to conform the team needs."

"In the workshop, I realized there are so many varieties even in a very small group. I want to learn how I can work with team members efficiently."

"I used to think it was more efficient to work alone, but now I know working in a team would bring a new and better idea, bringing the outcome more efficiently."

“I used to think we had to acquire a stereotypical leadership, but now I know integration of diversity creates a better team.”

“I used to feel awkward working with people with a different way of thinking and values, but now I'm keen to work with other members.”

“Everyone has each strength, and a good team would integrate the strengths.”

“Now I know team members from a different way of thinking would be the strongest to create a new idea/event.”

“I realized that communication is very crucial in teamwork.”

“I used to think only a perfect person would be a good leader, but the collaboration would make a good team.”

“I realized difference makes a better team because each can support with each of their strength the other member may not have.”

“A team consisting of people of the same quality would not make a good team. Diversity is the key to have a good team. It is important to be flexible and feel the team members feeling.”

“Now I know myself better. A good team requires diversity. Different ideas stimulate other team members.”

All the comments were positive about understanding diversity and showing flexibility in teamwork. Thus, the students' comments exhibit an appreciation of diversity in culture and ways of thinking and accepting different leadership styles, which is easy for young students to embrace.

4 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study showed that university students were ready to understand, and found it easy, to accept diversity in values and different ways of thinking in teamwork. Meanwhile, using English as a second language remains a significant obstacle at any level of proficiency. Furthermore, using and practicing English in a workshop or class do not always promote students' confidence in the language; rather, it may discourage them.

However, it is clear students require further simulation and experience in teamwork to learn decision-making and problem-solving skills in order to become effective leaders.

As this study was quite small, more participants would be required to draw a definite conclusion. However, the results of this study shed light on promoting female students' leadership in global society where English is used as a lingua franca. A further challenge is necessary to develop a teaching method where students can become confident communicators in English.

5 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to show my gratitude to anonymous reviewers for this paper. This study is supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 18K00882 (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C)).

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