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An Investigation into Teachers' and Students' Perceptions on “What do you think?”

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Abstract

“What do you think?” or similar variations, either in spoken or written form, is a question that teachers ask frequently in their classes for the purpose of examining and understanding learners' perceptions, views, and values. While this type of question can be effective to some extent in understanding more about students' thinking or decision-making process, it does not always serve its purpose in facilitating learning or teaching due to the possible discrepancies in expectations and perceptions between two sides. In this empirical study, the author will first describe the motivation for the research, and then discuss how thinking is defined and viewed followed by the results of the interviews from both teachers and students in the context of a Japanese University. Finally, the last section will discuss the implications for teaching.

Introduction

Thinking skills, like any other skills, should be practiced and made aware to students. In many educational contexts, teachers' primary aim is to teach for understanding. However, in the context of Japan, particularly in junior high and high schools, teaching to the test and memorization are two main foci. As the results of the frequent and immense number of tests that students have to endure on a daily basis, teachers do not usually have the freedom to promote “thinking skills”. Thinking skills are, therefore, despite the efforts of many progressive educators in Japan trying to advocate, often absent in the Japanese secondary education curriculum. While this might not be an issue since the students only have to perform well on tests, it is often a struggle for many university teachers, particularly English

language teachers coming from other cultural backgrounds, to introduce and attempt to cultivate thinking cultures and promote the importance of thinking skills. University teachers in Japan, particularly those who want to promote thinking skills, can experience certain degree of difficulties in some of their classes, if not all of them. Most Japanese students are encouraged to focus on tests and getting the correct answer rather than exploring and forming personal opinions in school. Additionally, the Japanese society is known for its homogeneity and the tendency to be obedient and risk-averse, so voicing opinions or being critical can sometimes be seen as undesired and breaking the harmony. This is especially true in work places in Japan, and university students are aware of the situation, so it becomes a possible resistance and dilemma for some of them as in whether there is a need to develop thinking skills or voicing their opinions. Instead of valuing workers' diverse, creative, and individual skills, companies in Japan tend to value conformity and unity, which in turn affects how students view education when they are in the university. As a result, while thinking skills might still be beneficial and interesting to certain university students, many might not see the skills useful once they start working.

On a different point, it is unseemly to assume that university students do not value thinking as an important skill without further understanding the students' perceptions of "thinking". As conforming as the Japanese people are as a big group, individual differences are still doubtfully present. It is easy to fall into the misconception that because thinking skills do seem to be highly valued on the surface, we assume that they do not exist. For many teachers coming from different educational and cultural backgrounds from their students, especially in an EFL context like Japan, they could easily have certain fixed ideas of what thinking skills are without making efforts to understand how similar or different their perceptions may be to their students. It is not to say that all Japanese university students are the same, but they do tend to be more homogeneous as a group in many regards. Therefore, as an educator in Japan, I find it

even more challenging but also very crucial at the same time to understand what “thinking” is and what “thinking skills” are valuable to them in this particular context.

This empirical study was inspired by a recent book, *Making Thinking Visible*, by Ritchhart, Church, and Morrison (2014), they emphasize the importance of making thinking visible in classrooms in order for “understanding” to take place. Without understanding, information retention cannot sustain. Therefore, thinking is the key in learning, and as educators we need to cultivate and facilitate learners to see the value of thinking. Consequently, teachers would normally want to promote thinking skills in their classroom. “What do you think?” is a question that many teachers ask frequently in a second language (SL) or a foreign language (FL) class for the purpose of examining and understanding learners’ understanding, opinions, and ideas. One simply cannot learn to grow or reflect without the ability to think.

However, very often teachers ask this particular question without having thought about what exactly what they intend to find out from their students or how deep they want the learners’ to express their thoughts. Teachers use various assessment tools in or outside of class in order to observe learners’ progress, detect learning-related problems, and sometimes to obtain feedback from their learners. However, while beginner level students might not always be able to express their thoughts syntactically in their L2, it can also happen to advanced level students (in terms of language proficiency) if the ability to think (or think critically) is highly valued and emphasized by teachers. Consequently, as teachers, we often experience missing certain angles on learners’ perspectives. By reflecting on one’s own practice, asking questions to stimulate thinking, and utilizing certain tools (e.g. graphic organizers) in class, teachers can get a much clearer picture of learners’ insights.

This empirical study explores how university English teachers and Japanese students perceive the concept of “thinking” in a private foreign language university in Japan.

Moreover, by understanding more about teachers' and students' perceptions on "thinking", educators and more effectively design their courses

Thinking & Understanding

It is essential yet challenging to discuss what "thinking" and "understanding" mean, but in a broader sense, thinking can mean thought, judgment, or intelligence. Kahneman (2011) in his book "*Thinking, Fast and Slow*", used *system 1* and *system 2*, which were adopted from the psychology field to explain how the mind works. *System 1*, according to Kahneman, is often associated with tasks that require very little or almost no effort of the mind and with low demand of attention. Examples of system 1 tasks that he gave in the book include simple math equations such as the answer to $2+2$ (pg. 21) and recognizing emotions. On the other hand, *system 2* deals with tasks that require concentration and that are mentally more demanding. We rely on system 2 to make sense of the world and ourselves. Based on this definition, thinking which often involves constant reasoning and concentration would require the use of system 2 and a huge amount of "attention".

When discussing 'thinking' in educational contexts, we often refer to critical thinking and creative thinking. The current empirical study is more interested in critical thinking skills, so we will look at critical thinking more closely in this section. While the definitions of the two kinds of thinking are inclusive, DiYanni (2016) in his book "Critical and Creative Thinking" defines critical thinking as the ability to analyze and evaluate, and use what one interprets and reflects to make certain judgment and make sense of the world in order to understand oneself (p. 4). In addition, as Wiske (1998) indicated in his book, "Understanding is not a precursor to application, analysis, evaluating and creating but a result of it [thinking]". In order to understand, critical thinking is a necessity. However, certain characteristics are crucial in order to develop critical thinking. For instance, the first step is to "notice" perceptively. Based on the

Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1990, 2001), the current study argues that similarly to learning any language skills or linguistic features which requires ‘noticing’ and ‘attention’ to the input, thinking skills need to be made “aware’ of and practiced through constant evaluation and reflection. In order for understanding to happen, ‘thinking’ is an essential element. If we can assume that learners with higher and independent thinking skills can understand more, we can make argument that thinking skills should be taught in every educational context. Not only should thinking skills be taught, but they also should be explicitly taught and ‘noticed’.

However, this does not suggest that learners do not already have existing thinking skills. Rather, on top of the thinking capacity and skills learners might already have acquired prior to entering the university, we are interested in looking at how or whether teachers are further cultivating thinking skills. Moreover, since thinking is highly subjective and individualized, educators have to be aware that the different perceptions between them and their students could create a gap in understanding and expectations.

With the assumption that thinking skills can be taught and should be explicitly made aware of, the current empirical study aims to explore teachers’ as well as learners’ perceptions of “thinking”. There are two research questions:

1. When teachers use the word “think”, what do they intend?
2. When learners hear or see the word “think”, what do they infer?

By asking these questions, I hope to propose the opportunities for educators to reflect on their own teaching practices and to widen their understanding of learners’ thinking process. These questions will hopefully provide more insights into learners’ and teachers’

Method

Participants

There were two groups of total 16 teachers interviewed in this empirical study. Eight teachers are foreign teachers because they grew up outside of Japan, and they are English lecturers at a private Japanese university that focuses on foreign language education. The other eight teachers are either teaching in Japanese junior high or high school, and they are mostly intermediate to advanced level English speakers.

13 university students from the same major were interviewed and recorded voluntarily, and eight of them were in their 3rd or 4th year in the university while the other five students were freshman. Each interview was roughly 30 minutes and conducted in English, and they were given the questions before the interview to prepare for their answers.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to gain a deeper understanding into what teachers and students thinking about thinking or how aware they are when teaching and learning. The interview data was collected with participants' consensus. It was a voluntary participation, and a consent form with detailed explanation in regard to the procedure and the purpose of the study, the risks that the study might have on the participants, and confidentiality issues were included on the form. The interviewees were informed and voice recorded with their permission, and the recordings are for data transcribing only.

Results

The study aims to gain more understanding into both teachers' and students' perceptions on the question "What do you think?" – when asking and being asked. The results were selected due to the length of each interview, and they are organized by questions and the answers are grouped by similarities in this section.

Interviews with Teachers

- a. *Have you ever asked your students “what do you think” in class or any assignments? If so, what is your intention of the question? If not, please share your reasons.***

All junior high and high school teachers answered yes, and they all have used the question in both the class and assignments. When asking about their intentions, some answers include:

“I want to know their ideas...if their answers are good or bad...correct or not.”

“To check if their opinions are different from teachers, if it is different from teachers, [I] can think how the lesson proceeded should go in a whole lesson.”

“I intend to ask the students’ thinking process. [...] it’s supposed to be the right answer, but when I think about this question ‘what do you think?’...actually it should be ‘what’s the right answer?’”

“When I ask my students this question, I want to know if they understand the content and if we can move on.”

When asking the same questions to university English lecturers, one out of 13 said no while the rest answered yes. Those who said yes to this question shared their intention of using this question in class or assignments:

“to find out what each individual’s opinion is”

“push them to reflect on their thinking and make connections between what they are learning and personal life, and maybe something that can be difficult and see whether I can help clarify or what they can work on”

“to check where they are now in learning and in developing their ideas. I want to check their progress and if I am being clear.”

“to show respect to the students by showing that I care about their opinions.”

“to learn more about the students and encourage all kinds of thinking”

The one English lecturer whose answer was “No” stated the reason, “*Because I don’t think thinking is something you can do in class. It takes time to think and you do it on your own. I don’t use this question in class because it just takes too long.*”

b. *What do you think your students think or how do you think they understand this question?*

Most teachers said that they were not sure, but some teachers thought:

“Most of the time I think they find this question scary...and they want to see what others say first before they answer”

“I’ve never thought about this question...judging by the students’ answers maybe they just want to say what’s safe...the correct answer?”

Interview with students - What do students infer?

A similar version of the question was also used when interviewing the students. They were asked “*Have your teachers ever asked ‘What do you think?/What do you think about ...? Either in class or in any assignments?’ If so, how do you infer/understand this question?*” All of them answered yes, and here are some parts of their answers:

“They want to know what I think about a topic. My personal opinion.”

“I go to class and I know they will ask me what I think, so I try to always say something...but I am not sure how to answer sometimes”

“They want to hear the correct answer.”

*“I think they have something they are looking for...I usually want to *guess what they want to hear.*”*

“We should have an opinion...like agree or disagree.”

*“It’s what *western* learning style is...so they want us to learn this way.”*

The students were also asked about how they actually answered “What do you think?” when being asked during their English classes. Their answers include:

“I worry about whether the answers are correct, so I wait until someone else shares first to start talking.” (3rd year student)

“I want to hear what everyone else has to say first, and say the opposite.” (3rd year student)

“I guess what the teacher wants to hear and say it... I am good at that.” (3rd year student)

“Depends on which class...I feel really *free* in this class (an elective course) to say what I want...and it’s expected to be like this isn’t it? Just be creative. I want to give completely different answers from others (from good discussion experience before)” (4th year student)

“I just say what I honestly think... because there is no point to lie, right?” (4th year student)

Discussion and Educational Implications

No conclusions can be definitely drawn or generalized from the responses due to the limited number of N size. The study has many limitations and future possibilities such as conducting the interviews in the participants’ first language. However, a few interesting comparisons and observations can be further discussed here.

1. *The responses between junior high/high school teachers seem to provide some possible reasons why university English lecturers from non-Japanese background find this question “what do you think?” ineffective in their classes.*

Junior high/high school teachers seem to focus more on whether the students can give “accurate” answers when using that question. To those teachers, correct answers seem to mean correct thinking. They use the question to find out whether their students understand the lesson and can answer test questions correctly. This kind of training becomes what the student are accustomed to and further carry this thinking habit with them when they enter universities. From most university English lecturers’ responses (e.g. “it’s almost never directly in class

because that would just *shut them down.*”), they seem to have tried but realized from experiences that directly asking this question in class almost never works in class. They have developed different strategies to find out more about students’ opinions on certain topics or issues. For instance, one teacher shared:

“I tried to do group discussion with those worksheets. Quite group this year, so I don’t do a lot of discussions because that kinda shut them down. It’s always after small group discussion, I let them ..kinda come up with answers together. Sometimes I have people...I have students say this ...“Our group thinks this...” anytime I ask them before group discussion, they always freak out. [...] Sometimes when they are discussing in groups I will walk around, and ask them individually. So I will get their individual answerssometimes it’s difficult...”

While it is logical for teachers to adapt into different teaching contexts, it is particular challenge for those teaching in Japan to generate discussions or idea sharing in class.

2. *Japanese Students do not seem to understand their foreign English lecturers intentions on certain tasks or instructions*

There are a few reasons why this happens. As teachers, we tend to focus on giving clear instructions as to what the tasks at hand are and the expectations of the assignment. However, Clear intention should be just as important as clear instructions. Through the interview, I noticed that many students consider their English classes as “western style learning”, so they attend those classes with the assumption that they are expected to “say something” and that they will be asked, “What do you think?” Whether they truly understand the purpose of the question or not, they might not always be able to give “real” answers due to peer pressure. This is something that we see in many Japanese social context a lot, and they have a saying that “出る釘は打たれる”, meaning “the nail that sticks out gets hammered”. This idea may

have hindered cultivating the thinking culture, so even though it is essential that teachers clearly establish what “thinking” or “opinion” means in their classroom, students might still feel hesitant and unsure about whether they can give the “correct” answer.

Implications

Thinking skills should undoubtedly be seen and included in any educational curriculums if we want to cultivate life-long learners. Particularly when a lot of information is available on the internet but sometimes incorrect or as we call it today, fake news, is unfortunately found and spread on the Internet from which many young people obtain their information and news, and learn, critical thinking skills seem more important than ever. On the other hand, for teachers to plan effective lessons, they need feedback from their students to adjust their lessons accordingly. If being able to observe and understand our students’ thoughts and ideas can help us understand their learning more, it would be helpful for them to see and understand their own thinking/teaching as well. We need more effective and useful classroom tools to enhance the communication for our language students, to help them visualize their own thinking processes and provide teachers with more insights to students learning. However, what teachers mean by “thinking” and their intentions to use “What do you think?” as one of the instructional methods should be more clearly conveyed to students, especially students who have no or very little prior experience with expressing their opinions or ideas in class. The real challenge, although also lies in that most Japanese companies and the society do not yet highly value critical or creative thinking as much as they should, is how educators can appeal thinking abilities and make learners see the values of being a critical and independent thinker while the reality might encourage otherwise.

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