

Developing Teacher Autonomy in the Japanese ESL Classroom

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Foreign language teachers who are new to the Japanese university system usually have their expectations severely tested. The large size of the classes, a lack of motivation in many students, their passive learning styles, and a perceived lack of support from colleagues and staff are some of the factors that may challenge the new teachers' skills and training. Teachers trained in more learner-centered techniques may find their decisions in lesson-planning based on so much compromise that they may wonder if their formal training was of any use in Japan. Developing an intuitive awareness of what works with Japanese students takes time and experience. On the other hand, those teachers who have been in Japan for several years may have settled into a rut that no longer challenges their professional development. This paper will discuss the problems encountered in the Japanese classroom and attempt to provide theoretical and practical ideas to kickstart the stalled teacher.

Learner Motivation

In Japan, where students have had six years of compulsory English by the time they reach university, the student's attitude toward the English language will be shaped by those years of rote-learning, drills, and grammar tests. When they reach university, they find that English is still compulsory. Their expectations of what a university language classroom entails will be heavily influenced by the passive-digestion-of-information format of their pre-collegiate days. The obligatory nature of the Japanese student's exposure to English, the traditional teaching style of their grade school teachers, and the long lists of mindless memorization have left some students with a hostile attitude towards language learning by the time they reach college. "...the perception that courses have to be taken may spawn negative attitudes in students toward subjects that do not suit their present interests or ambivalence in ones that do." Research has been undertaken to attempt to understand the Japanese university student's motivation, expectations and attitudes towards learning English in an attempt to discover ways to assist their learning. Researchers have been encouraged by one study where it was found that most students are aware of the value of studying English and wish to study further. (Walter and Tajino, 1996: 74)

We may wonder then about the perceived lack of motivation prevalent in our classrooms. The answers may lie in how students imagine their future use of English. Will it take the form of faxed correspondence to an overseas customer? A holiday tour of Tuscany? A job transfer to a Chicago subsidiary? Language, like many pursuits, is taken seriously only when the need is immediate and pressing. Many of my former students, who displayed no interest in the language when they were sitting in my classes, would return from extended stays overseas with a newly found appreciation of English. Their learning was motivated by a need to know in real-life situations, rather than the artificial surroundings of the classroom. What can we do as teachers to encourage their sense of purpose,

while at the same time, deconstructing their negative feelings towards language learning? Despite the best intentions of the teacher, learning a language is ultimately the responsibility of the learner.

Learner Expectations

Even when the motivation is strong in the student, there are other obstacles that impede their communicative production in our classrooms. Learning to read their own language requires so much memorization through the rote-learning of Kanji that those habits of learning have influenced the teaching of other grade school subjects, such as foreign languages. Translating sentences word-for-word, and memorizing grammatical rules are activities that every Japanese student is accustomed to. Therefore, their expectations of what will occur at the university level will reflect these experiences, where language production occurs passively through reading, and silently through translating. The challenge for the language teacher is to take advantage of this passive knowledge of English, while introducing them to "Western approaches, where prediction, context skills, skimming, scanning, fluency are involved, and the need to memorize words is de-emphasized." (Cortazzi, 1990: 60)

Adaptation

How much will the teacher adapt to a different culture to exploit the safe learning styles of his or her students is a question that all foreign language teachers in Japan must face. Is the introduction of American or British culture in language learning a form of cultural arrogance? Or is it so integral to the language as to be inseparable? If our students communicate in English in the future, are they not more likely to deal with other non-native speakers, such as Korean, Thai or Chinese business associates? In such situations, how relevant is the envelope of culture? However you wish to classify it, culturally-based or culturally-biased, designing lessons that examine the differences in culture may be just the impetus to encourage their interest in the outside world.

Other decisions must take into account the prevailing attitude among students in Japan that college study is like riding an escalator: if you simply stand there, you'll reach the top. We must decide, as teachers, how much we wish to buy into this attitude. Do we let the dozing student be, knowing that his friends, club, part-time job, and other obligations may be more important to his future career than his time spent sitting in our classrooms? Do we forgive the chronically late student because his all-night karaoke sessions may be forging relationships that will help his future far more than our classes will? Do we absolve the student who has not done his homework because the club activities demand so much of his time? In one of my classes, I had a student who almost never came to class and certainly did no homework. At the end of the year, when she came to ask for clemency, she cited her club activities as the reason for not attending my class. I asked what club she belonged to, and her reply was the English Speaking Society. Even our role as the ultimate source of language communication is being usurped by the university clubs! Is it any wonder that we as teachers may flounder in such an environment?

The Pedagogical Maze

Language teachers need to weigh many variables when planning and implementing their lessons. What the teacher teaches is the easy part, but the how of it is what requires careful consideration. Constraints, such as classroom size, the passive learning style of the students, the difference in conversational styles, the different conceptions of what is a good student, and the adherence to a specified curriculum are some of the many factors that may be considered on the debit side of the decision-making balance sheet. On the credit side, a relative proficiency in reading, understanding vocabulary, translating, and using grammatical rules are some of the proficiency factors that Japanese students possess, and knowing this helps the teacher in his quest to design a lesson. Added to these variables are the teacher's own beliefs and assumptions about language learning, his training in methodologies, his cultural background, his interpersonal skills, and his experience as a teacher. It seems that flexibility and intuition are needed. The concept of the teacher as "chameleon" is useful to this discussion. (Stevens' 1979) Rather than conform to a set of rigid ideas on how to teach, the teacher should become neutral to the debate on methodology, and respond to the needs of his students from moment to moment. Acquiring teaching skills that focus on the instantaneous dynamics of the classroom are not taught in books, but in the classroom. Let the classroom become our ultimate resource to develop professionally.

Observing Other Teachers

In my first job as an ESL teacher, my supervisor asked me if he could come into my class to show me how he teaches. I gladly agreed, since it would be a great opportunity for me to pick up some tricks of the trade. In the next hour of being an observer in my own classroom. I learned more than I had in the many months of student practice. His ability to walk into any classroom without preparation and focus on the needs and interests of my students left a lasting impression on me. Through his demonstration, I saw that an effective teacher must have more important qualities than planning a great lesson. Making snap decisions based on instantaneous verbal interaction were qualities not taught in my graduate training. How does one teach such unscientific principles as generating a warm rapport, or intuitively knowing at what level the students can produce, or creating the right atmosphere of humor and mutual respect? These personal qualities of the teacher are usually learned through observing other teachers and through one's own experience.

Michael Wallace in his book, *Training Foreign Language Teachers*, states that there exist two kinds of professional development, received knowledge and experiential knowledge. The language teacher receives knowledge through research findings, scientific theories, and concepts that he uses to accomplish such skills as organizing group and pair work or becoming familiar with grammatical terms.

His experiential knowledge is developed as "knowledge-in-action by practice of the profession, and will have had, moreover, the opportunity to reflect on that knowledge-in-action." (Wallace, 1991: 52) He goes on to illustrate his ideas with a model of professional development which he calls the 'reflec-

tive cycle, whereby the teacher reflects on his received knowledge and experiential knowledge and then puts his ideas into action (practice) in the classroom, generating a continuous process of awareness followed by deed.

Classroom Observation

Much has been written about classroom observation from the perspective of the trainer and trainee, and it follows that it would be a useful tool for the continual development of an experienced teacher as well.

Using observation as a learning tool has the following benefits:

1. It gives the observer a different perspective on the teaching. Watching someone else standing in front of the blackboard releases us from the burden of 'having to perform'. From the back of the room, we can get a better idea about whether what is being taught is being learned.
2. It helps the observer see more of the reality of class dynamics. How many students are really engaged? Do they seem interested? The observer is in a good position to know if the teacher's expectations are being met.
3. It allows the observer to focus on specific issues of pedagogical inquiry. For example, the observer may be concerned with issues of how the class-time is spent, and can design a task sheet to measure teacher talk versus student talk.
4. It makes clear to the observer what seems to work well and what does not. Do the students seem confused by the teacher's instructions? Was the teacher's choice of methodology successful in achieving the expected goal?
5. It fosters, by demonstration, the intuitive skills of the observer. Prescriptive suggestions, read from a text or taught in a training class, cannot replace the direct experience of watching someone teach. The personal interaction between student and teacher becomes very apparent.
6. It serves as a basis for the collection of important data on teaching. The data may help the observer make judgments that reconcile his assumptions about teaching with the reality of teaching.

When assessing other teachers in the classroom, it is useful to have a clear idea of what pedagogical areas you wish to investigate. One such system for evaluating what occurs in the classroom was devised by Flanders (1970). It has 10 categories, seven of which focus on teacher talk and two on student talk. It serves as a tally sheet to let the observer keep track of how much time was spent on such actions as praising, giving orders, lecturing, accepting students' ideas, pupil-talk response and pupil-talk initiation. Other assessment schedules are variations on the basic need of how the teacher's aims are met. It is important to choose one that reflects the observer's particular realm of inquiry. In Ruth Wajnryb's book, *Classroom Observation Tasks*, (1982), there are practical checklists and task sheets to make the observer's time well spent.

Achieving a Charged Sense of Expectation

When athletes train for an event, they give themselves a harder task than normal. Runners wear weights around their ankles and wrists. Baseball players swing two or three bats before stepping up to the plate. There are similarities in mental training as well. Chess players like to play very fast games to get ready for a real tournament. How does a language instructor train for fresh ideas and intuitive skills?

All language teachers would agree that preparation and planning are most essential for designing an effective lesson, but what about those moments when planning before a lesson is not possible? "The trauma of being thrown unprepared into a full classroom situation is not calculated to ensure any kind of rational professional development, and has probably on many occasions led to the choice of another career!" (Wallace, 1991: 89) This observation was very different from my own experience, however. Such predicaments were a source of a new perspective on teaching, as well as a confidence-building exercise in creating learning opportunities for my students. The opportunity came when I was called upon in a particular school to substitute for other ESL teachers. Filling in for an ill colleague usually involves some measure of advanced warning, but the circumstances of this school required me to teach a class of strangers, with no time for preparation before class. Rather than feel a sense of foreboding, I found myself excited at the chance to walk into a class of strange faces and see where intuition would take me. The charged sense of expectation that arose from substitute teaching created a different set of rules and the strange freedom to experiment with new ideas. The challenges inherent in those moments of spontaneity actually inspired me to try new things, as if I were Santa pulling toys out of a bag.

The emergency nature of substitute teaching was arming me with an invisible toolbox of assorted ideas. Freed from the shackles of lesson-planning, I was able to modify the instructional process from moment to moment. I saw how teaching involved a spectrum from total spontaneity to rigid planning, and when I was standing before a group of fresh faces, I was training myself in the former end of this spectrum. Those moments of inspired stress were like a runner who trains with weights on his ankles, or a chess player who trains by playing very quick games. My regular classes were benefiting from my becoming more accustomed to spontaneity in the ESL classroom. I am certainly not recommending that teachers walk into their own class unprepared, but bringing those skills (learned through opportunities to teach other people's classes) has helped me see my own classroom teaching in a new light.

Substitute teaching may help the language teacher to develop the confidence to do something different, to follow the intuitive side of their range of skills, and gain the ability to make smooth transitions between activities. When the teacher's decision-making is devoid of specific tasks, subject matter, goals, or curriculum, he can pay closer attention to the needs, interests, and abilities of the students. He will make decisions based on instantaneous verbal interaction. There is a subtle intuitive processing at work when activities that the teacher decides to initiate spontaneously are reflected in

the instructional process. The characteristics of the students suddenly carry more weight than the teacher's wish to 'stick to the script'. The teacher gives a greater understanding of the interactional process.

A Set of Tools

A teacher's inner resources that can be called up at the appropriate time in the classroom are like a carpenter's set of tools. They should be student-centered and relevant to the students' lives, yet non-intrusive enough to maintain a comfort level suited to their culture. They also had to be universal tools that could be modified for any occasion. The following checklist may help us determine what constitutes a suitable tool:

1. Was the goal of the lesson achieved, even when the activity had been altered?
2. Were the students actively engaged in productive communication, rather than mechanical repetition?
3. Was the activity challenging, yet appropriate for the students' level of proficiency?
4. Did the activity encourage risk-taking, and de-emphasize error-making?
5. Did the activity make use of what students already know?
6. Did the activity provide ways to assess the learner's understanding of what was presented?

These are a few of the many criteria that a teacher may reflect on. The following activities may help provide EFL teachers in Japanese universities with enough breathing room to stand back and gain some perspective on their effect on their students.

Shuffle and Deal

Can a classroom be like a poker game? When playing poker, bridge or most other games knowing what cards one's fellow players are holding is an essential skill to have. In Japan, many students keep their cards close to their chests, that is, their opinions are not readily sought or volunteered, especially when the topic of discussion is a sensitive one. A non-threatening way to overcome this obstacle is to make their production initially anonymous. Pass out scraps of blank paper to the class. Asks the student to write the answers to your questions. What you ask, of course, depends on the level and goal of the lesson. Here are some possible questions for students:

- What do you enjoy most in life?
- What is your greatest ambition?
- What is your greatest achievement?
- Which person do you admire most?
- Do you like to spend time outdoors or indoors?
- Do you like to stay up late or go to bed early?
- Do you like to plan ahead or let fate take its course?
- Do you feel envious of other people?

Why do you think _____ is so popular/controversial/expensive?

Prepare stimulating questions that will generate differing points of view. Making mistakes in grammar or usage is no longer a problem for the students who know they can be completely anonymous. Collect the scraps, shuffle them and deal them to the students. They are naturally curious to know what their classmates are thinking. If your purpose is to make them aware of each other's varying opinions, the most efficient way (especially for large classes) would be to have them read and pass the paper on to the student behind or in front, in a long, snaking circle. In an intermediate or advanced class, this activity could be followed by forming small groups where their opinions could be discussed with a new perspective on each other's ideas.

Exchanging ideas with other students in a non-threatening way, without the teacher making his own culture intrusive, may be a worthy goal in some situations. For a class that are just beginning to know each other, you could ask them questions about their lives that they write on scrap paper (without giving away their identities). The teacher collects, shuffles, and deals the scraps out, and the students assume the new personality, according to the information they discover on the scraps of paper. The teacher collects the papers, shuffles and deals, while students continue to answer questions according to their new identities. Fun comes later when students finally discover whom they were impersonating!

Another variation would have them write the anonymous sentences on the board and their task might be to correct the sentences. Teams could be formed, points could be given to each 'correct' correction. There are no recriminations; it allows them to save face, without risking their sensibilities about being wrong among their peers. Listening or speaking activities could easily supplement this task, depending on the linguistic goal of the lesson. When the question asked by the teacher is particularly difficult to express in English, have them write their answers in Japanese, then, after shuffling their scraps, put them in small groups to translate what they have been given.

An added bonus is that, while this activity is going on, the teacher can go to the back of the classroom for that valuable perspective and 'breathing room' in the lesson, while the students direct the flow of activities.

Tell Me About It: Reading and Vocabulary Practice

Divide the class in half or thirds. Give each divided group a different article from a newspaper. Pass out scraps of paper and ask them to write down words that they do not know. Collect the scraps and write the words on the board dividing the blackboard into sections according to the class divisions. Assign each student one or two words to look up in the dictionary and have them write the words in their language on the board. Any list of vocabulary can be used in this way for greater speed and efficiency (this is an efficient way to get the meaning of many words in a short amount of time.) Then place the students in groups of two or three so that their new partners each have differ-

ent articles. In threes, one can be the leader, another the writer, and the third the reporter. Take the articles away. Ask them to tell each other what they read. They can summarize and write what each other said, and report back to the teacher orally and in written form. The articles can be related to the same general topic or completely different.

Discovering the Artist Within

There is a great misconception among language teachers that drawing must be skillful and that it is not learnable. What a waste of a wonderful resource! The irony is that the language classroom is the place where bad drawing is more effective than good drawing, because it puts the students at ease and in a humorously receptive mood. Almost any concept can be illustrated through a drawing, and that saves time, teacher talk, and a thousand words! If the teacher needs to explain a certain pair work dialogue, sketching a couple of talking heads on the blackboard, with speech balloons rising above them, puts everything into perspective. The natural appeal of cartoons for Japanese students is well known; they are visually sophisticated, and this resource can be exploited in Japan. Even abstract ideas can be illustrated in simple ways with the right amount of imagination. How can we expect our students to take risks if we are not willing to take risks as well? Many Japanese students draw very well, so it may serve the teacher's needs to give them the task of illustrating. Both the teacher and the student gain a new perspective on student-centered teaching.

One good resource book to help the teacher improve his artistic skills is Betty Edwards' book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. The exercises that she prescribes in her book are designed to stimulate the part of the brain that can draw, without the interference of the other part that says, "You can't draw, so don't even try!" The teacher can arm herself with a repertoire of stock doodles that conjure up many communicative situations.

Conclusion

Teachers are constantly asking themselves the question: Is what gets planned being faithfully reflected in what gets taught? And is what gets taught being faithfully reflected in what gets learned? From the front of the classroom, we may not be able to answer that question truthfully. But if we can provide ourselves with an invisible framework on which these interactive decisions are based, we may be able to equip our students with effective learning opportunities, and ourselves with meaningful understanding of what works in the Japanese university classroom. We can bridge the gap between our measure of success and our students' ideas of successful learning. We can also help introduce them to a learning environment where test preparation is no longer the purpose of study, and instead, meaningful negotiations of real-world language take their rightful place.

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