

Feature Article フィチャー ド アーティクル

Private tuition as a learning format for Japanese adult learners of L2 English

日本人成人のL2英語学習者のための学習形式としての個人教授



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Abstract: Japanese learners of L2 English in secondary and higher education have often been characterized as group-oriented and risk-averse. Yet adult Japanese continue with L2 development for necessary employment and career purposes, often in private lessons, to an extent that may contradict stereotypical characterizations. While commercial language schools have responded to such needs and interests for adults, cost is often a factor. Adult learners are nonetheless seeking this format both inside and outside of commercial ELT, perhaps with a latent desire for learner autonomy and a rationale grounded in adult life experience. Such desire, with life experience as a component, may enrich the profile of Japanese learners across the board if taken into account, and may elevate one-on-one lessons into a broader scheme of private tuition for adult L2 learning.

Keywords: Japanese adult learners, private lessons, private tuition, andragogy

キーワード：日本人成人学習者、個人レッスン、個人教授、アンドラゴジー(成人教育学)

要旨：中等及び高等教育において英語を第二言語(L2)として学ぶ日本人は、「集団主義的」且つ「危機回避的」と特徴づけられることが多い。しかし、成人の学習者は雇用維持や昇進の目的でL2学習を継続し、多くは個人授業を通してこのような既成のイメージには一致しないレベルに達している。このような成人のニーズや関心には、民間の語学学校が対応しているが、費用がしばしば問題となる。それでもなお成人の学習者は、民間の英語教育機関の内外で、この学習形式(個人教授)を求めている。これはおそらく自律的学習を潜在的に求めているためであり、且つ成人としての人生経験に基づいた理由からであろう。このような欲求が存在することを考慮することで、我々は、日本人学習者が全般的にどのような特徴を持つのか理解を深めることができる。また、成人のL2学習のための個人教授という広い視野の中で、マンツーマンレッスンの地位向上に貢献しうる。

Allwright's (1995) paper on the social context of classroom language learning highlighted a dynamic that he believed had gone largely unnoticed: the potentially negative influence of L2 learners in groups on individual L2 learners. He traced this lack of attention to the striving in second language acquisition (SLA) studies for research legitimacy in applied linguistics rather than education, and to a preoccupation with details of methodology and psycholinguistic accounts of SLA. Such details increasingly, and ironically, centered on the what the individual underwent, rather than the role social interaction played, in the SLA process. This had the effect, in his view, of ignoring the classroom as a social setting in its own right and how social dynamics shaped the learner (p. 7).

In Japanese ELT contexts, however, the social dynamic is significant to the extent that some teachers, especially those new to the country, may see individual Japanese learners as defined by the group so completely as to be unable to rise above it. In such a view, the needs of the individual may be seen as lesser in importance to the needs of the group, reinforcing Allwright's (1985) concerns all the more and circulating an image of Japanese as ultimately too dependent on the group to be capable of full L2 mastery.

Yet if such an assumption of group definition is even true, it is true only part of the time. Mainstream Japanese university research in English, understandably focused on its predominantly late-teens/early-twenties learner demographic, overlooks what many Japanese may be capable of achieving in the L2 once they leave higher education and make their way into the working world. Indeed, Japanese adults must often continue L2 development for the purpose of real-life engagement across a spectrum of public and private interests wherever the L2 is required. Given the action, choices and demands involved, there is no room for passivity or inhibition.

For adult learners, the joys and difficulties of their lives may form a powerful source of L2 motivation and development. Yet such a source is still largely untapped as a basis for expanding the sense that Japanese are ultimately more capable of realizing greater L2 learner development than what they have often been given credit for. This paper will therefore explore Japanese adult L2 learner capability by way of a format that may draw the most from their life experience - the private lesson. Such a framework could potentially serve as a developmental context for the autonomy that fits with adult learner orientation, unobstructed by negative social dynamics and connected to the bottom-up initiative that adult deliberation calls for. The following will be an account of two adult learners I have had in private lessons – one at a language school where I was once employed, and the other in a private arrangement.

A reflection on two adult learners

Dr. Takeda (a pseudonym) was a highly educated medical science professional in a hospital affiliated with a medical school northeast of Tokyo. In once-a-week sessions, he made it clear from our first meeting about how the lessons should go and what materials he wanted to use. While the materials were recommended by the school, he had a sense as to what he wanted from them - specifically, smoother spoken output with improved pronunciation and grammatical cohesion. While I privately questioned such emphasis given how proficient he already seemed, I agreed to work with him on these terms.

In each lesson, we would work through some structures he was comfortable in as warm-up activities towards his target structures. He insisted on repeated dialog pair practice with me on these structures, and based on these forms we would create new personalized conversations, with work on pronunciation points if needed.

As the year continued, we would deal with readings in the text with these forms as his confidence grew. He challenged me on the structures and insisted on deeper answers for their rationale and use. Any preparation on my part soon focused more on supplementary exercises, including my own materials which centered on particular structures and their use.

He showed me, progressively over time, what his particular goal for the week's session was. He knew how to discuss issues in his field; he was drawing from the outside as a way of attending to what doubts he may still have had with his output. I soon stopped assigning homework; he did it without being asked. At the end of the year, when my schedule was to change and I could no longer continue our lessons together, he brought me a box of Belgian chocolates and a letter of praise to the school director about my work.

A few years later, a private student I had taken on directly was similarly unique for the reflective character he brought to bear. Mr. Nishimura (also a pseudonym) was a young minister in a church who expected to be sent to Canada for a number of years with his wife and infant daughter. His aim was discussion on topics of his choosing with social issues, particularly those that overlapped with what he expected to hear from his Canadian church members should he be posted there.

He had selected a reading text and had ideas about what he wanted from it, and while I believed it was suited for him, I advised him to push beyond it into discussion based on reflection of the topics themselves, rather than weekly updates on what he had read. He undertook this eagerly and soon began emailing me in advance on what he would talk about from a particular reading, saying that this would enable us to focus on discussion in our sessions.

While he wanted to hear my thoughts on these issues, he also wanted feedback on how well he had presented himself in his talk on them and how thought-out a certain view on an issue at hand had been. He told me that he did not expect me to agree with him, and sometimes I did not – but that was

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not central to the aim of our sessions. I nonetheless advised him on how he might handle himself with those who may disagree and push things with him with strategies that would be most useful in such cases. Based on his own initiative, he began using such points in discussion, asking for critiques on them. I began emailing him these critiques, which he then replied to in unsolicited but well-thought reflections that sometimes showed change in his views. He eventually received his assignment to Canada, thanking me in a card for our sessions and confident that his English came away substantially improved.

Both of these learners brought a sense of purpose, great confidence, initiative and determination to their learning, even with any doubts they may have had in areas of their language. The case of Dr. Takeda in particular fits with Krashen's (2006) description of the autonomous language acquirer, in terms of the vigorous pro-activity in execution he shared with Mr. Nishimura in what he wanted to achieve in the L2. If fully maximized in these terms, the one-on-one setting for adult learners moves away from a group lesson tailored to one person towards an individualized vehicle more like an ongoing tutorial. It may therefore be better to refer to it as private tuition, and requires a different approach by a teacher and realization by the learner engaged in it. The notion of an individualized learning scheme may nonetheless be problematic, and calls for a review of issues that may negate the effects of private tuition.

Issues of private tuition

The marketability of private lessons in commercial ELT may admittedly represent a personalization of choice among learners in that connectedness to the instructor, particularly the native-speaker, and the L2 can be bought, reinforcing the notion of learners as consumers. As many English conversation schools also tend to charge more for one-on-one lessons than in groups, a narrow learner base may only be reached – namely, middle-class corporate workers with the disposable income for such lessons. The greater learner capability that the one-on-one format may show promise for may therefore not develop over a wider range of adult learners.

In addition, the type of psychosocial dependence with a corresponding expectation of indulgence identified by Doi (1973) as peculiar among Japanese, explored further by Benu (1983), Clancy (1986), and McDaniel (2005), and treated as an aspect in a number of L2 learning issues involving Japanese by Bohn (2004), Doyon (2000, 2003), Pritchard (1995) and Yoneoka (2000) may indeed play a role in hampering learner capability even into the adult years, to a degree that the private lesson format may not be able to remedy.

While outside of ELT, Hofstede's concept of uncertainty avoidance (1980), which emerged from his insights about the scope of interaction within cultural boundaries, has bearing as well. His uncertainty avoidance index (1991) expanded this concept further; on this scale, countries and their cultures were gauged on the degree that withdrawal from ambiguous or uncomfortable outcomes within sociocultural interactions are permitted to individuals. In his findings, he ranked Japan somewhat highly for the great importance attached by a significant number of Japanese to procedure and certainty in outcome over ranges of interaction across business, educational and other societal settings and situations (Hofstede, 1991). Doyon (2000) also provides an account of shyness in the Japanese university L2 classroom that may be formidable as a learning barrier. He traces this phenomenon to the compulsory educational years, particularly on the secondary level, where student performance appears to be evaluated to a degree that goes beyond learning and into the assessment of students themselves as people; as a result, low self-esteem can arise in many students, with the possible result of a performance-oriented dependence on the approval of others, especially those in authority (p. 13). As most Japanese leaving school will have likely gone through such an orientation, those teaching in higher education will receive what it may produce – hesitant, easily overwhelmed and fearful learners who may be unlikely to develop a heartfelt love of learning free from external approval.

Breaking through issues and stereotypes

Given the economic and sociocultural obstacles present, why are adult learners still seeking out one-on-one learning? One explanation is that dissatisfaction with the typical group lesson may have emerged and that they have perceived a learning format they can engage in within a safe haven, where proactive effort can be freed. With regard to the learners in my reflection this may have been the case, as they controlled the question of their learning, but on their terms and time.

More importantly, it may be possible that they are seeking out this format as a release from the social

tensions Allwright (1995) points out. They may have accepted the interpersonal risks that can come with one-on-one interaction as a price that must be paid in order to break through the L2 pain barrier, perhaps even coming to feel that such a barrier is best broken away from their peers. On these terms, a more meaningful conception of private tuition is enhanced when it maximizes greater release from such psychosocial tensions and sets learners as agents who can shape their learning.

The negative influence of the group in the L2 classroom what Allwright found may be seen as a network of patterns among individuals in relation to groups – perhaps of value in tracing certain aspects of behavior in relation to other learners, but falling short when examining individual learners. Indeed, accounts of dependence, avoidance and shyness may even be unhelpful when we look at adult learners themselves, let alone men and women with rights and responsibilities.

On those terms, if Japanese adult learners are to be taken with their existential characteristics into consideration, tropes of dependence, avoidance and shyness must be put aside. Even more, there must be a departure from the temptation to see these elements as forming a narrative about Japanese as a whole. Only then will it be possible to see them in their own right as workers, professionals, spouses, parents, travelers and returnees to Japan. Ultimately, for Japanese adult life to meet the demands placed upon it, the group dynamic may not hold sway in the long run. An account by Kirk (1999) of adult students admitted into EFL classes at a regional university in southwest Japan demonstrate the advantages they bring in interaction, motivation, and networking to their younger classmates. If such students can have this kind of impact in a higher educational context, what might be gained by explicitly seeking it out in a one-on-one format?

Realities of adult learners and Knowles' andragogy

The lives of adult Japanese living and working within the current social and economic realities of Japan may be increasingly contradicting stereotypical images. Those who have left the country for travel or extended living and working situations more often than not return changed from their engagement with foreign cultures. Many are increasingly forced into changing jobs and careers as well given the erosion of traditional patterns of lifetime employment. The societal pressures that may have given rise to certain psychosocial conditions in the past may now be gradually breaking down - or being engaged with by a newer type of Japanese adult, one more resilient.

In the light of such realities, teachers could ask who these learners are in their work experiences, career paths and daily lives. Indeed, what are they looking for? What has been the character of their previous learning and life experience? Where do they wish to position their current and future L2 use? What is in the research literature that will help us to understand who they are? Adult life experience may be expressed within such learners consciously or not, because such experience goes to the heart of who they are as people.

Such questions were raised by Knowles (1973), in holding that adult learners situate their learning in relation to their life experience. This was the culmination of his research on the differences between adults and children in learning styles, and rounded out his body of thought about adult learning, dubbed *andragogy*, or the education of adults (Knowles, 1970; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). To Knowles, the adult learner is driven by a sense of application that is direct, immediate, and instrumental, centered in the way "(...) both programmed experiences (psychotherapy, adult education) and unprogrammed experiences (marriage, child rearing, occupational activities) produce deep-seated changes in the ways adults approach problems, handle risk and organize their thinking" (p. 46).

Knowles' scheme is grounded in a North American context of individualism and bottom-up initiative that seems at odds with Japanese sociocultural patterns. Yet what may reconcile these seemingly opposed sources is an instrumental focus that may possess cross-cultural applicability. Such focus draws from an adult what a given situation may require – something that demands, for example, as much from the new recruit at a Japanese company as it does from his or her counterpart overseas. The ability to handle what emerges may therefore be a sign of mature adult development regardless of cultural contexts and societal factors.

Extending this line, he proposed that one's readiness to learn coincided with one's developmental maturity towards the assumption of social roles:

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This assumption is that as an individual matures, his readiness to learn is decreasingly the product of his biological development and academic pressure and is increasingly the product of the developmental tasks required for the performance of his evolving social roles. In a sense, pedagogy assumes that children are ready to learn those things they “ought” to because of their biological and academic development, whereas andragogy assumes that learners are ready to learn those things they “need” to because of the developmental phases they are approaching in their roles as workers, spouses, parents, organizational members and leaders, leisure time users, and the like (1973, pp. 46-47).

How may private tuition bring this formulation into Japanese adult learning contexts, especially with regard to the existential characteristics of learners? It may be best imported through a focus on the content of adult experience, contextualized into L2 areas most relevant for the learner, and on the character of communication that most fully brings out the richness of such content.

Structure and features of private tuition

While private tuition may not necessarily be about conversation, the character of discussion, either to personalize the content of lessons, or as an extension of themes within it, is central on three counts: first, in the freer range of discussion and engagement that will be opened up from the nature of one-on-one interaction; second, from the way that alternatives to the grammar-orientation in much Japanese instruction of L2 English can be explored; and third, in how context frames the spoken discourse that occurs in analytical and practical terms.

Brown (2000) points out that the rules governing conversation, even where they belong to a fundamental area of linguistic competence in the learner's L1, have been given little attention in the L2 classroom (p. 255). Attention-getting, topic nomination, topic development, and topic termination, with skills such as turn-taking and clarification, are culturally-specific and may not always transcend cultural boundaries. Grice (1967) gave what Brown calls conversational “maxims” that form a four-point guide for topic development, clarification, and maintenance that may aid in bridging such gaps:

1. Quantity: Say only as much as is necessary for understanding the communication.
2. Quality: Say only what is true.
3. Relevance: Say only what is relevant.
4. Manner: Be clear. (cited in Brown, 2000, p. 257)

Where conversation may make the whole, or even part, of content, Guest (1998) argues against the use of written forms as models. His corrective focuses on ellipsis, in how it shows what the L2 and L1 have in common with regard to unmarked forms and other less complex structures. In his view, ignoring spoken forms in favor of so-called “standard” language not only tends to overemphasize the differences between the L1 and L2 at their greatest points of divergence, but circulates a false image of the L2 to the extent that it “may increase psychological barriers to acquisition” (p. 22). His response is concise: “Freeing students from unnecessarily complex grammatical deliberation by focusing on the common shortcuts and interpersonal features of English that are manifest in spoken grammar (SG) can serve to lessen possible resultant cross-cultural misunderstandings and interpersonal friction” (p. 22).

In choice of material, the previous reference to Krashen's (2006) autonomous language acquirer may, at least in some cases, fit the characterization of some adult learners and make room for a similar degree of liberation in content. His analysis of the potential of narrow listening and reading for pleasure holds promise for the autonomous acquirer (p. 4-5); the focus that may be enabled was realized by my two learners in their approach to their material even given their more instrumental purposes, and may suit a wider range of adult learners in one-on-one interaction as well. When taken further with the conversational features described, more meaningful discussion from such material may be realized.

Rights and responsibilities in private tuition

The question still remains on what is there to prevent individualized tuition from becoming a reinforcement, rather than a release, from any misconceptions of learner role or L2 learning an adult student may have. Could this prevent a learner from drawing on the fullness of his or her social roles as valuable assets? What indeed is there to prevent individualized tuition from enabling dependence?

Teachers must make it clear that private tuition still calls on learners to draw from the changes

Knowles (1973) captured that leads to adult response to situational events. Yet given the expectations attached that are still reasonably within what adult responsibility can handle, there is little room for dependence or avoidance, as the purpose of the format will be defeated.

To summarize, here is a set of guidelines for both teachers and learners that may be used to structure an individualized plan of tuition. For learners:

1. Private tuition gives an adult learner the right and responsibility to control the method and content of learning.
2. Private tuition necessitates proactive effort by the learner to a greater degree than in group lessons.
3. Private tuition requires the learner's life experience to form some part of its content.

For teachers:

1. Private tuition calls on the teacher to be a cooperator and facilitator with the adult learner.
2. Private tuition necessitates as much thinking on the part of a teacher as that of group lessons.
3. Private tuition dictates proactive thinking by the teacher to respond to a learner's direction.

These guidelines can be laid out with prospective students as conditions of private tuition, with room for more to be added. As a whole, they can form the structure for a plan tailored for a learner that dictates equal input from both sides.

Conclusion

What Japanese adult L2 learners may be capable of achieving in private tuition, despite sociocultural and economic barriers, may make it worth more than what it has previously been conceived. Yet its true measure comes when there is understanding about how private tuition differs from group lessons, placement of learners and their life experience at the center, and clarity by both teachers and learners on what it calls for. The maturation of Japanese adult learners from their life experience and the learning orientation it may result in could nonetheless enable them to realize greater autonomy.

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