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Positive Self-Perception of Japanese Language Learners in Groups

グループ学習における日本人言語学習者の肯定的な自己認識

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As a teenager I played the violin in the Colchester Youth Chamber Orchestra, conducted by George Reynolds, a Scottish professional trumpeter. A master of warm strictness, he was the only conductor I knew who insisted that all sections mastered basic breathing techniques. He conducted entire movements with the orchestra miming, his eye contact and wafting wisps of white hair inciting us to be our very best—silently. He always told us, “When you take your seats, you are the best orchestra in the world. So behave like it.” So we sat with our backs straight, feet solidly on the floor, attentively awaiting his signal. When we began playing, we were not the greatest orchestra in the world, but we were pretty good nevertheless, once performing in London’s Royal Festival Hall.

Why this nostalgic story?

In France, many French people informed me that “the French aren’t good at English”. In Japan too, I hear a similar chorus about the Japanese, from teachers, colleagues, and friends, all saying something along the lines that, “even after seven years of lessons, the Japanese still can’t speak English”. However, I have met numerous Japanese with fantastic English communication skills, casting doubt on the validity of this view. Self-identification with a supposedly linguistically inept group negatively impacts language learning in Japan (and France). Reality and perception are not distinct but are complementary and engaged in an evolving symbiotic jig. To change them, I suggest it is easier to shift perception first, steering the dance on an altered trajectory, inevitably leading reality. A shift in perception towards “I am Japanese and we are good at languages” will therefore have a positive effect. Before they say a word, the Japanese are the best English speakers in the world.

Having taught English as a foreign language in France and England, upon arrival in Japan just over two years ago, I immediately realised a change in certain strategies was required. Rarely could I depend on students raising their hands to answer questions, nor could I expect an answer “from anyone” when addressing an open question to the group. Even when I knew

students could answer perfectly, nominating students and employing other techniques (e.g., “Last Man Standing”, when standing students gain the right—for themselves and other students in the same row of desks—to sit down, by raising their hands to answer questions) were still required. Even the classic “what did you do during the school holiday?” seldom led to much discussion, since the answer “I studied” has limited scope for development at anywhere below an intermediate level of English. Whereas such strategies can be used in European classrooms to engage students or create a comfortable atmosphere through personal stories or opinions, in my Japanese classrooms they more often led to feelings of awkwardness and tension as students were put on the spot, visibly feeling isolated and unsupported.

Language learners are also human beings and the instinctive empathy we feel towards fellow individuals is embraced when we consider the concepts of agency, autonomy, and learner identity. By contrast, Japanese students are familiar with working as a group (Lewis, 1991; Poole, 2010). Instead of regarding students’ unwillingness to stand out individually as a hindrance to language learning, I propose that we should harness the existing strength of the Japanese group (Matsumoto, 1960) and use it towards achieving ambitious learning goals. When a group is formed there is outwardly a general swell towards conformity and harmony (Mizutani, 1981) although individuals maintain personal “inner” motives (Doi, 1973). These two elements are entirely interdependent and may or may not be recognised as distinct (Doi, 1985). Because individuals can influence the group goals and activities, learner autonomy (as part of a group), collaborative learning and motivation are all promoted. As a group identity evolves, lateral relations stemming from the individual’s role within the group can encourage self-identification as part of a group that can accomplish demanding language goals. At a Japanese school sports festival, one witnesses what a group of students—united towards a common goal—can achieve. From fabricating costumes, to creating props and choreographing a dance for two hundred students, the result is a stunning spectacle of originality and collaboration.

The orchestra may serve as a useful analogy here. Individual members each have a unique role within the orchestra, some preferring more prominent roles (section leaders or percussion), and others preferring more group oriented roles (strings). Responsibilities vary from supportive, to leading, to solo, to waiting-attentively-for-your-entry. Never did I see a conductor ask a second violin to stand up and perform his part alone in front of the rest of the orchestra; although this did occur in sectional rehearsals. The orchestra’s goals of harmony and synchronisation showcase individual talent only as part of the group. A musician knows when their “line” is exposed; there is no getting around the practice required to make it right. Other parts are more hidden, and one can get through them with a few unnoticed mistakes. Likewise, membership in a language learning group creates a genuine need to “do your homework”; or at least, the bare minimum on which teammates will be relying on.

The uchi内 (inside) and soto外 (outside) distinction (Mizutani, 1981; Fukue, 1988; Doi, 1985) is fundamental here, as foreign languages (外国語) are positioned as soto. By contrast, “as long as one is inside a family or an organization, one can expect its full blessings and benefits” (Fukue, 1988, p. 73). Establishing language learning groups therefore supports individuals, creating a safer context from which to collectively explore the “outer” spheres of foreign languages. If an “English allergy” (Tsuda, 1990) is a “defense mechanism to fight against the fear of identity crisis stemming from excessive or unsuccessful attempts to

acquire English and identify with English speakers” (Kubota, 1998), language learning groups can instead promote collaborative creation of English and identification as Japanese speakers of English.

Although orchestras usually have a conductor, our conductor—George—often left his podium so that we were on our own and forced to listen to each other and really communicate as a group. I teach four senior high students who all studied abroad for 10 months, as part of their participation in the special Nakamura International Course. The school sets a target TOEFL iBT score of 80, with students first taking the test in December of their first year of senior high, just before their departures, and numerous attempts after their return in their third and final year of senior high. I wanted to increase self-directed learning as I left the podium during the summer vacation, so I decided to trial a system whereby students are positioned as a language learning group. I have outlined the basic procedure in the chart below. All materials were received digitally.

Table 1. *Materials*

a. Calendar for the month (of August)
b. Numbered activities in four categories (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) <i>e.g., 13: Listening: Listening to the news</i>
c. Numbered resources, corresponding to the activity numbers above <i>e.g., 13 = http://www.voanews.com/learningenglish/home</i>
d. Spreadsheet to record study time (by skill) with a brief description of activity. (The four skills are colour-coded, the weekly total per skill, weekly sum total, and monthly grand total study time are automatically calculated)

Table 2. *Procedure*

1) After looking at their existing commitments, students individually decide how much time to allot to independent English study (outside of cram school).
2) Students calculate the total planned study time per week and write this on the calendar.
3) A “monitor” is nominated for each week and weekly deadlines established and recorded.
4) All students must email the monitor a) total study time for each skill, b) total study time for the week, and c) the percentage this represents of their planned study (a student planning on studying ten hours who studies eight, notes 80%).

- 5) The monitor is responsible for contacting any student who is late sending their record. She writes a short report of the group's achievements, and emails it to all members of the group and the teacher(s). This report includes a) the group's sum total of study time for each skill, b) the group's grand total study time, c) the average percentage goal achieved and d) the student who attained the highest percentage of their planned study time

The spreadsheet shows students if they are studying a suitably “balanced diet” while the resources page provides students with a choice, also minimizing time wasted looking for resources. Social obligations are created between group members since a student who fails to complete her target hours lowers the group percentage average. Receiving the group's total study hours may inspire further collective achievement and motivate students to exceed the total the following week. Earlier I stated that reality and perception are mutually interdependent; by making students explicitly aware of how much time they spend studying, the trajectory of perception will be nudged towards the reality that “mastering English takes dedicated practice and we know we are on the right track”.

Presently this system's focus lies largely on the language learning process, namely the independent study time required to master a language. In this case, beyond students' TOEFL iBT scores, there was no subsequent performance to be evaluated. This was the first time I have tried out this system and its effectiveness in promoting independent study will be difficult to ascertain. A student survey in October will provide insight into the nuts-and-bolts working of the system itself, and open-ended questions will offer students an opportunity to express how being linked as a group, while studying independently, affected their studies over summer. If feedback is positive, I will consider how this system can be incorporated to accompany both junior (i.e., non-International Course) and senior (The Nakamura International Course) students' learning throughout the school year. Were such a system to be incorporated into year-round learning, it would be logical to add evaluated final performances, such as poster presentations or debates. In that case, from working as a group, my students may begin to experience for themselves that they can be the best English speakers in the world.

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Autonomous Learning: How Can I Help my Students Foster it?

自律学習：学習者オートノミーの育成をどのように支援できるだろうか？



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One day, a few months into the new school year at St. Hilda's School in Tokyo, a first-year female high school student said to me, "It's beginning to get harder and harder to keep up with English classes, and I am getting a negative feeling towards English." I have been wondering what factors lay behind her words.

The classes in the school where I teach are organised according to a curriculum and syllabus in order to help develop the students' English language competence. Due to the introduction of the new curriculum by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT), the school syllabus has changed and new teaching methods and activities have been introduced in order to provide the students with more opportunities to listen to and use English in the classroom.

Traditionally, the Japanese classroom is teacher-centered, and each class consists of many students (from about 35 to 45 students in general) with differing levels of English competence. Students are not usually given the opportunity to take charge of their own learning. Teachers, including myself, tend to be perplexed at how to deal with large mixed level groups and find such conditions taxing. Speaking of my own classes, students who are all to take the entrance examinations in a few years, are required not only to learn how to read English newspaper and magazine articles, essays, and so on, but also to increase their knowledge of many grammatical rules, apply them to their practice of English conversation or English essay writing, and do all of this at the same pace. This may be why some students feel that it's difficult to keep up with the class. In addition, they are required to take numerous weekly mini-tests as well as term examinations, whose marks directly affect their grades. That is, the results of the tests tend to give the students a positive or negative attitude towards learning English. Those who have failed to achieve good results have particularly negative attitudes towards English, asking why it is that they have to study English even though they are Japanese and don't have to use English in their daily lives.

However, at the same time, the students do like to use English when they communicate with people from foreign countries. Last week, my colleague and I took some of the students to the tourist district of Asakusa so that they could interview foreign tourists in English. Every student tried to make full use of what they had learned in their classes in order to communicate. When they made themselves understood in English, they seemed extremely happy and felt what they had learned was really meaningful, which was in turn an