Promoting Self-reflection and Strategy Use with the Strategy Tree

Satomi Yoshimuta, Huw Davies, and Mayumi Abe

This paper describes follow-up practice of the tool for language learners the authors developed, the Strategy Tree. It consists of a tree with roots, water and the sun, which is drawn by learners. Each part of the drawing represents self-perceptions of affective, cognitive, and sociocultural/ interactive second language ability, detailed by Oxford (2011). In order to foster self-regulation, it is shown how a three-phase strategy cycle can be followed with the help of a teacher or MKO. A case study is presented, which describes both the potential of the Strategy Tree, and its limitations, in a language school setting. Finally, the paper reflects on feedback from workshop participants at the LD20 conference.

本発表は、私達が゛発案した学習振り返りツールで゛あるStrategy Treeの追実践で゛ある。Strategy Tree は、学習者が゛描く木を模した絵で゛ある。その絵には、樹木、根、水、太陽が゛描かれる。各パ゜ーツは、オックスフォード゛(2011)のaffective, cognitive, sociocultural/interactiveストラテジ゛ーについての 学習者の認識を反映したもので゛ある。Self-regulationを育むためには、MKOとしての教師の助けに基づ゛いて三段階のストラテジ゛ー・サイクルを踏まえる必要が゛ある。それにのっとった語学学校のケース スタテ゛ィて゛は、Strategy Treeの可能性と限界を報告する。最後に、本論はLD20 conference における ワークショップ゜参加者のフィート゛バ゛ックについて述へ゛る。

Introduction

In our LD20 presentation, the audience was introduced to the “Strategy Tree”, a visual tool created by the authors (see Abe, Davies & Yoshimuta, 2014; Davies, Yoshimuta & Abe, 2014). It was designed to give learners a wide-ranging view of their second language ability, and is based on the Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) model of language learning (Oxford, 2011). This paper introduces Oxford’s theories, and then looks at how strategies might be implemented into everyday tuition. Next, we describe the Tree’s use in language school and university settings, before finally describing how our thinking about the Strategy Tree has developed since giving our presentation.

The Strategy Tree

The Strategy Tree consists of the images of a tree with subterranean roots, water from a pitcher, and the sun, which relate to Oxford's (2011) affective, cognitive, and sociocultural/interactive strategies respectively (see Abe et al., 2014). Oxford divided the principal language learning strategies into these three dimensions. The affective dimension is mainly related to motivational strategies such as creating positive emotions and attitudes, and maintaining motivation to learn the language. The cognitive dimension includes strategies such as constructing, transforming and applying knowledge to L2 learning. The sociocultural/interactive dimension is related to communication skills across cultures and contexts (Oxford, 2011). Additionally, in our Tree, the trunk represents pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and the branches embody the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and listening.

In pedagogical settings, learners are encouraged to draw their own tree based on their reflections on their L2 ability and learning strategy use. If the learners decide that they have insufficient grammatical knowledge, that part of the trunk becomes narrower, and if learners believe that they lack in reading proficiency, the branches representing reading do not look fully vegetated but hollowed out. Affective traits are illustrated by roots so that if the learner has strong motivation, the root becomes prominent. As for the sociocultural/interactive dimension, the perception of use of English in communicating with people is depicted by the width of the sun's rays. If learners believe that they have acquired good social skills in the L2, the light becomes more powerful. The three dimensions are mutually influential, and meta-strategies orchestrate and manage them.

When we used the Strategy Tree for the first time in our teaching settings, learners were describing their levels of proficiency and visualizing their strengths and weaknesses. However, Oxford details many other uses of strategic reflection.

> *Strategy assessment can serve as a baseline description, a source of predictions, a diagnostic tool, a foundation for deciding what strategies to teach, or a pre- and post-instruction measure to evaluate strategy instruction (2011, p.140).*

Focus on strategies need not be limited to one area, and should be revisited to satisfy a range of teaching and learning objectives.

The role of strategies in the learning cycle

According to Oxford (2011, p. 25), language learners typically follow a sequence of three phases for doing a task or solving a problem: *strategic forethought* (Task-phase 1), *strategic performance* (Task- phase 2), and *strategic reflection and evaluation* (Task-phase 3). In Task-phase 1, learners gain a general view of the task or the problem, set a goal and make a plan. In Task-phase 2, they implement the plan and monitor progress. In Task-phase 3, they reflect on the overall process and the outcomes. Additionally, each learning strategy in the S2R Model is likely to be useful in a certain phase; for instance, strategies related to planning are frequently used in Task-phase 1. With this in mind, we feel that language learning strategies can be learnt effectively within the three phases when teachers and learners select some learning strategies to use at each phase. Making strategic adjustments to planned strategies at each phase can foster self-regulation, which is the ability to make decisions on learning so that it becomes "something they do for themselves rather than [...] something that is done to or for them" (Zimmerman in Benson, 2001, p.41).

Learning strategies can be acquired with the help of others (Oxford, 2011, p.27). When a more knowledgeable other (MKO), like a teacher, advisor or classmate, is planning to help learners adopt a new strategy, she can instruct in the following way. First, during Task-phase 1, the MKO introduces a new strategy to learners and helps them understand the idea of the strategy and consider how and when to use it. Since this phase is for strategic forethought, it might be helpful to encourage the learners to utilize strategies such as *paying attention* and *planning* to provide learners with the means to tackle future problems independently. During Task-phase 2, the learners monitor whether the strategy is working effectively when they use it. At this time they can use strategies such as *implementing plans* and *orchestrating strategy use* while trying out the new strategy. At Task-phase 3, the learners assess the value of the strategy and make a decision whether they will use it again in their future learning, utilizing the learning strategy *evaluating* at the same time. In short,

learners can learn a new learning strategy in the process of the three phases while applying some other learning strategies that they are already familiar with.

Case study: a language school student

This case study was chosen because it illustrates the need to consider all phases of learning when discussing strategy use. The teacher was focused on Task-phase 2, performance or monitoring, while the learner desired assistance with Task-phase 1, planning.

Davies' learners in a language school setting were instructed to produce a baseline description of their current English performance, which was intended to be used as a diagnostic tool to highlight suitable strategies that could be fostered inside and outside the classroom. In an extension to their biannual counseling sessions, which form part of their course, adult learners drew their own Strategy Trees, based on a template (see Figure 1), and an example drawn by the teacher, which was a self-reflection on his own second language ability (see Figure 2). In the week prior to the counseling lesson, learners were asked to fill out a questionnaire designed to facilitate the creation of their own Strategy Tree. They were encouraged to focus on what they were able to do in English at that time and the drawing of the Trees was supplemented by one-to-one discussion with the teacher as the drawing was taking place.

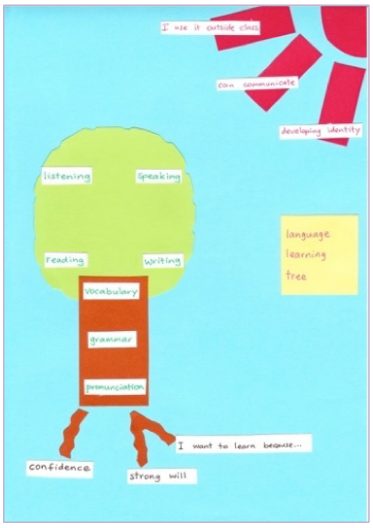

Fig. 1: *Template*
(Click here to see full size)

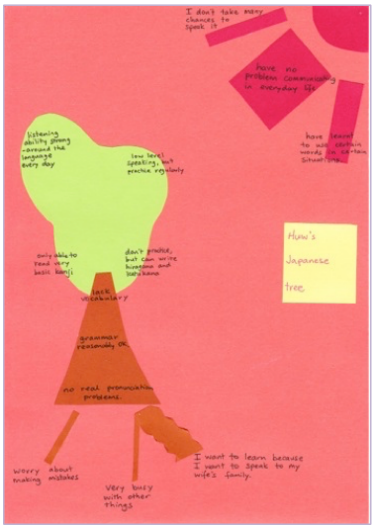

Fig. 2: *Teacher's example*
(Click here to see full size)

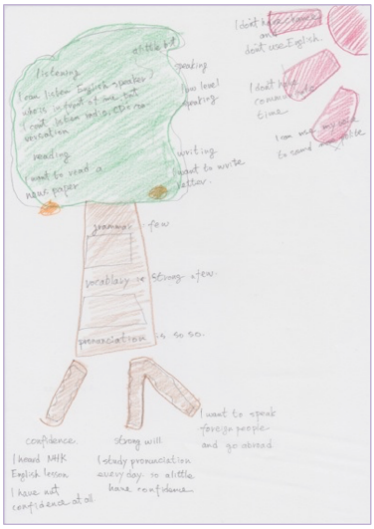

Fig. 3: *Shigeru's tree*
(Click here to see size)

One learner in particular, Shigeru (a pseudonym) who was a retired gentleman in his late-60s studying in a pre-intermediate group class, seemed not to engage so well with the task, and in discussion with the teacher gave minimal detail regarding his own feelings about his own ability. Initially it was felt that the activity had been of little benefit to him, and that he had not realized the opportunity to self-reflect.

On closer inspection, however, it became clear that Shigeru used the Tree activity to set his own language learning goals. The outcome of this activity was that Shigeru externalized his reasons for study: wanting to read an English newspaper, wanting to be able to write a letter in English, and to be able to speak to foreign people and travel abroad. Goal setting is an element of Task-phase 1, strategic forethought (Oxford, 2011), and by expressing his intentions, Shigeru, aided by the teacher, was able to formulate a learning plan. This also ensured that future lessons were centered on his needs.

The counseling sessions were introduced to both encourage and develop learner self- reflection, and to help each learner and teacher agree on a personalized learning plan for the next six months. Therefore, asking Shigeru to draw his Tree raised his awareness about strategies, both strategies he was using at the time– like listening to NHK radio programs and studying pronunciation – and ones which would enable him to achieve his learning goals. The Strategy Tree use here is, therefore, related to Task-phase 3, strategic reflection and evaluation.

However, perhaps because counseling is only done twice a year and strategy instruction does not feed into the syllabus, this activity seems not to have led to greater self-reflection from Shigeru. One puzzle moving forward is how long-term strategic performance can be encouraged.

Workshop at our LD 20 Presentation

Much like the language school and university students who had produced Strategy Trees in our teaching settings, it seemed the LD20 audience was motivated by the activity and excited to draw with colorful pens. Participants said the process was a lot of fun, very interesting, and the swells and bumps of the tree helped them realize the strong and weak points of their English proficiency.

One of the participants who taught at a language school commented, “It seems the idea of a Strategy Tree can be applicable to my workplace. Like others I really enjoyed drawing my Tree and it is helpful to recognize the current status of my English proficiency and is as well effective in discovering goals in language learning. It can surely be used at educational settings.” Another audience member, who works in a university, contacted us to say how enjoyable and motivating his students had found the Strategy Tree for reflecting on their improvement at the end of the semester. Looking back at the presentation, discussion with the audience reminded us that drawing the Tree for the purpose of promoting self-reflection could engage and motivate learners in a variety of settings.

Conclusions: promoting strategy use

In university and language school settings, learners reported that the Strategy Tree was useful in aiding their self-reflection, and in developing their awareness beyond the four skills. Some university students expressed in their feedback that it was valuable for promoting the affective and sociocultural/interactive dimensions of learning English. As a result, they developed an interest in finding strategies in different dimensions. However, although we provided some direct strategy instruction in our classrooms, as Oxford suggests, it was not sufficient (2011, p. 174). The instructor could not ensure the learners became aware of, discovered or recycled any strategies in the limited time frame of the school settings. The same pattern emerged in the language school. We feel that a concerted effort is needed by the teacher over time to introduce and implement strategies at each phase of learning. use. We feel that this will be far more effective than one-off activities. However, we are also aware that in many teaching settings, teachers do not have the authority or individual time with the learners to accomplish this.

Another option to encourage strategy use, which we discussed with visitors to our presentation, is to revisit the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), a 50-point questionnaire produced by Oxford (1990). Introducing parts of the SILL, a few points at a time in line with learner needs revealed by the Strategy Tree, might encourage awareness about learning strategies and develop greater range in our students’ approaches to

learning. In asking our learners to draw their Trees for the first time, we found all of our learners used language learning strategies, though many of them were unaware they were doing so.

References

Abe, M., Yoshimuta, S. & Davies, H. (2014). "Now maybe I feel like trying": Engaging learners using a visual tool'. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, *5*(3), 277-293. Retrieved from http://sisaljournal.org/archives/sep14/abe_yoshimuta_davies

Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Davies, H., Abe, M. & Yoshimuta, S. (2014). The strategy tree for language learners. In Hurrell, I., Abe, M., Brown, P. S., Bruce, S., Capouilliez, J., Chen, J., Davies, H., Kojima, H., Landicho, P., Opitz, T., Ray, D.,Taferner, R. H., Vye, S., Yoshimuta, S., LD SIG forum: Transitions in the lives of learners and teachers.In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 52-53). Tokyo: JALT. Retrieved from http://jalt-publications.org/proceedings/articles/3977-ld-sig-forum-transitions-lives-learners and-teachers

Oxford, R.L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle.

Oxford, R.L. (2011). *Teaching and researching language learning strategies*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Fig. 1: Template

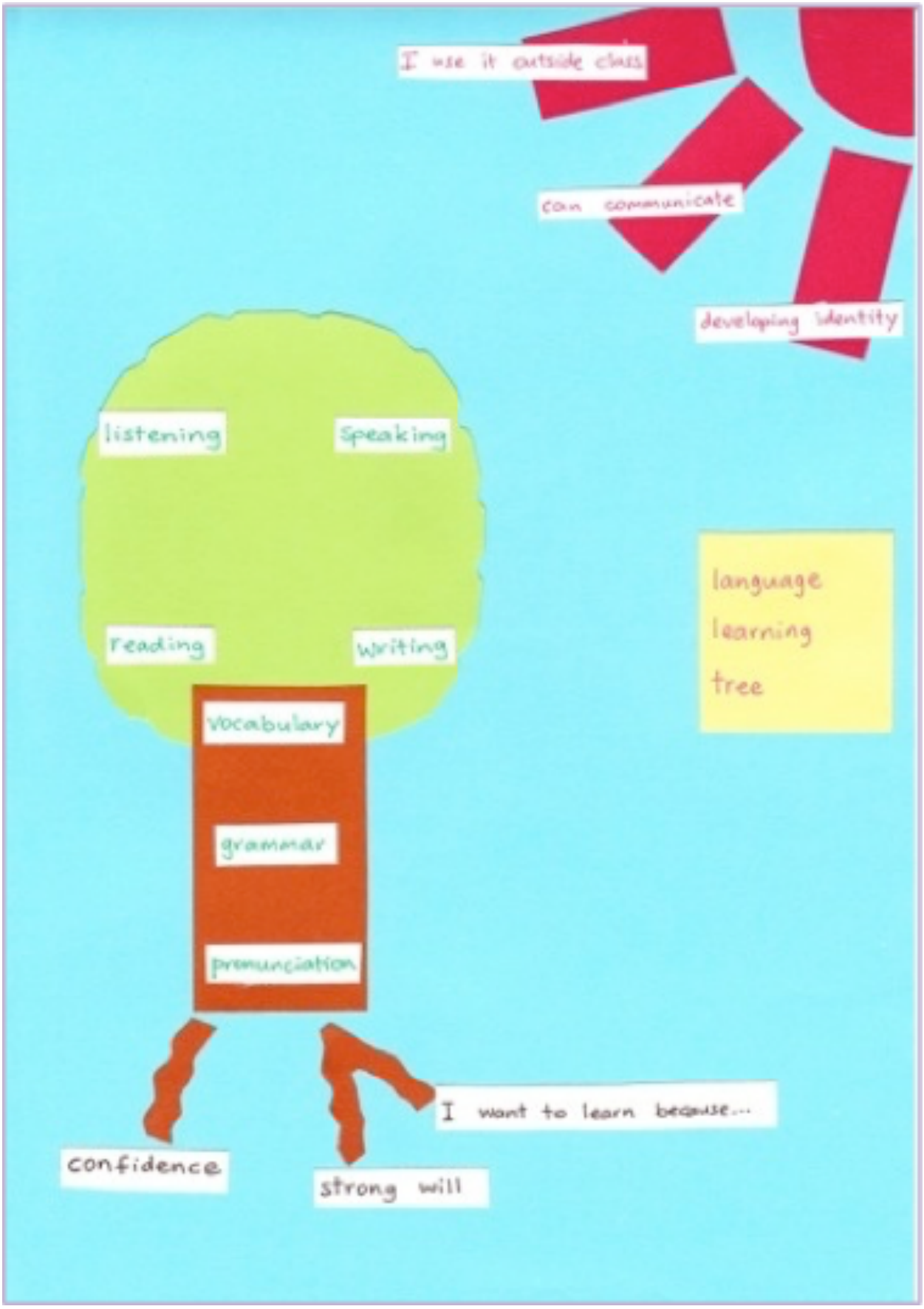

Fig. 2: *Teacher's example*

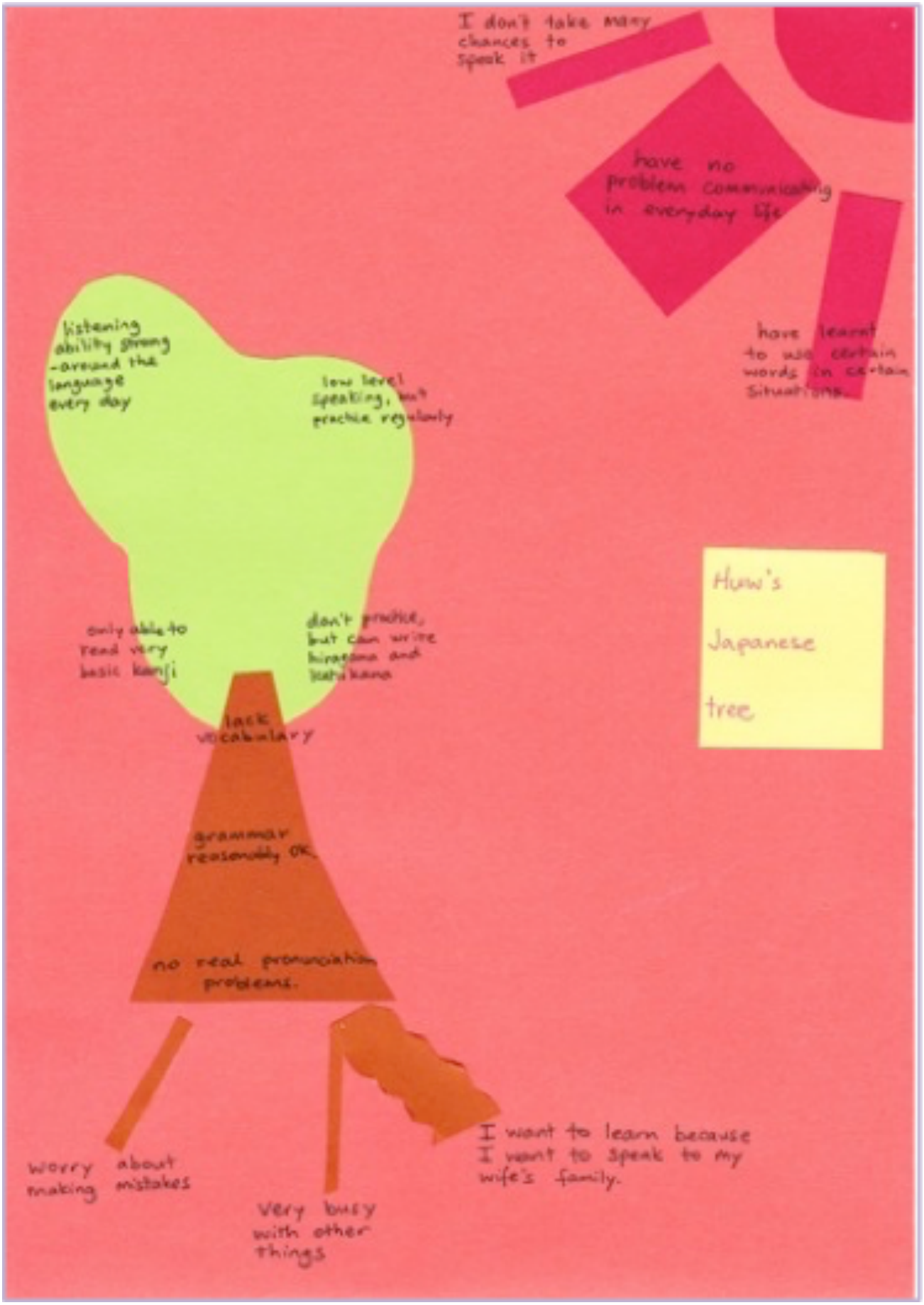

Fig. 3: *Shigeru's tree*