

Learning Together across Borders: Correspondence between Hungarian and Japanese Learners of English

国境を超え共に学ぶ - ハンガリー人と日本人英語学習者の文通 -



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The Learner Development Special Interest Group's Forum at the 2016 JALT International Conference was a very positive experience for me. As always, it was organized in a friendly and welcoming way, so members as well as first-timers could join easily. The title of the forum, *Learner Transformation as Personal Maturation*, invited us to recollect our own memories of learner transformation and maturation and called our attention to our learners as individuals, each of whom have their own needs, goals, and challenges, as well as ourselves as learners who always find new puzzles that keep us busy after classes. My presentation focused on a bilingual correspondence project that I set up with my students, but before coming to that, let me start from a bit far, with my own story of transformation and personal maturation.

A Story of Transformation and Personal Maturation

The situation of English language education in Hungary is similar to that of Japan: English is seen as a foreign language, even though there are minorities whose mother tongue may not be Hungarian, 99.58% of the population speak Hungarian (Kozponti Statisztikai Hivatal, 2011), and there is no obvious daily need for most people to speak a foreign language. However, contrary to Japan, Hungary is surrounded by land and has seven neighbouring countries (Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia). Whichever direction one may take, one will be out of the country within three hours' drive, so it is effortless to travel abroad. Although there are many Hungarians in the neighbouring countries, the official language is different in all of them, so it is easy to experience the need for foreign language competence.

I had been learning English for at least five years before I ever had a chance to use it. Back in Hungary where I grew up, I was a member of a folk-dance group and we were invited to participate in an international folk dance festival in Germany. I was about 12 then. All the participants in the festival were around this age, and we had a few events where we could meet each other. I was mature enough to know people from other countries do not speak Hungarian; however, I am not sure now whether English was a deliberate choice for communication or I simply tried to answer in a language that others were using to talk to me. Whichever the case was, I ended up talking to people in English. When we did not know how to say things in English, we tried to use gestures and body language. Trying to communicate was amusing. We also taught songs to each other and danced together. At the end of the festival, we exchanged addresses and started corresponding. When I received the first letter from Finland, I was amazed by the beautiful handwriting. It was different from Hungarian cursive writing. I loved receiving letters, and I always spent a lot of time choosing the paper and envelope, and writing my letters neatly. Sometimes we sent pictures to each other.

Corresponding was a means to learn and practice English. My pen friends' English was much better than mine. I clearly remember looking up words so that I could understand

their letters and express my own thoughts. Reading and writing letters also helped me to keep up my language learning motivation. I wanted to be as good as they were and to become able to write about everything that had happened to me. I often introduced my everyday life and topics that interested me then. I was also very curious about their lives. Due to my pen friends, I became interested in foreign cultures and languages.

All in all, corresponding with foreign people of the same age had a huge impact on me as a person, as well as a learner and later as a teacher. It taught me to try hard, concentrate on what I *can* do, be persistent, and not be afraid of making mistakes.

A Correspondence Project with Students in English and Japanese

Remembering the good times of having pen friends when I was a teenager, I wanted to provide an opportunity for my students to experience something similar to what I had done when I was young. So, I contacted my teacher from my university in Hungary and asked him if he would be interested in a correspondence project between our respective students. He was, and so together we set up a correspondence project for our students.

The participants were nine of my second-year students at Meisei University with pre-intermediate level English; eight Hungarian students with beginner level Japanese and intermediate or higher level of English; and a British-Belgian adult, a colleague of mine who agreed to help out as there were not enough participants from Hungary. Participation in the project was voluntary. The correspondence was bilingual: English and Japanese. My students wrote their letters in English first, then translated them into Japanese. This is how I could make sure they did not use overly complicated vocabulary items or sentence structure in their mother tongue. The Hungarian students, whose target language was Japanese, read the Japanese letters first and checked the English only when they needed help to understand a writer's specific meaning. Whenever my students got a reply from their Hungarian pen friends, they first read the English letter and then wrote their replies in English. In most cases I only gave them the Japanese after they had written their reply in English. This provided the opportunity for meaningful communication in the foreign language. They could experience the struggle of understanding someone's letter and replying to it. Reading the Japanese at the end ensured they did not rely too much on their mother tongue, and allowed them to check their understanding and make changes in their reply letters if they had misunderstood something or used too complicated language in the Japanese version of their letter.

Questions and Puzzles

Before the project, my teacher and I had to think about how to execute it. The first problem we faced was the differences in the academic year in Japan and Hungary. In Japan, the school year starts in April, and the first semester ends at the end of July. The second semester is between mid-September and the end of January. However, in Hungary the academic year starts in early September and classes finish before Christmas, with the second semester running from February to the end of May. Therefore, the time during which both countries' students attend classes, especially in the Spring semester, is short. Finally, we managed to finish three rounds of correspondence in each semester. However, I have to mention that in the Spring semester, the Hungarian students continued their participation in the project until July, even though they had finished the school year. The Autumn semester was easier to coordinate as the overlap is longer between the two school years.

Time difference and online translation programmes.

Another question we faced was whether to use e-mail, chat programmes, or offline language exchange. These days a large number of online chat programmes and communication software offer the possibility of real-time language exchange; however, with a time difference of 7-8 hours and set timetables, it would have been hard for both of us to use such technology in class. As a result, real-time chat was discarded. There is also e-mail, which would expedite communication. However, especially with Japanese students, the risk of using online translation programmes instead of creating their own sentences and texts was high, I therefore decided to ask my students to handwrite their letters, many times in class. Their first reactions to this were not utterly positive, but they quickly realised that it also provided them with a chance to decorate and personalise their letters more easily.

Pairing.

A third issue was to do with pairing the students. As we did not know each other's students, and I had just started teaching mine, we decided to pair them on the basis of their interests, which students introduced in their first letter. My Japanese students wrote the first letter, so the pairing was done by my colleague in Hungary. He had known his students for at least half a year by then, so after reading my students' letters, he knew which Hungarian student had the same interests or hobbies. Pairing this way helped to ensure that there were topics which were mutually interesting to the students.

Late response – absences.

Another question was how to deal with absences and late responses. Although students agreed to keep the deadlines for writing their letters, in reality, this did not work out perfectly. During the Spring semester, it was the Hungarian students' participation during their summer holiday that kept the correspondence alive until the third round. Originally, we planned to give two weeks for students to write their letters and hand them in to their teacher. However, when a student was absent and received the letter after a delay, this often resulted in a late submission of the reply letter. Delays also happened when someone missed the class of the submission deadline or lost their letter on their way to university. Consequently, the two-week response period could not be kept. There were delays on both sides, which meant that the semester had ended and the examination period had already started in Hungary when we finished the three rounds of correspondence at the end of June.

How to keep the conversation going.

The most serious issue we had to work through was how to keep the correspondence going without too much intervention or too many adverse effects, such as losing the authenticity of communication or students losing interest. It is not easy to correspond with someone whom one has never met. It is all about sharing and inquiring. Some people like to talk about themselves and easily ask questions, but others need time to develop the bond and talk, or here write, about themselves with ease. Some of the pairs turned out not to have much in common, which hindered communication. In addition, some of the participants were not good responders, that is, they did not react to or were not interested in what their partner wrote about, so some students did not write about or continue a topic proposed by their partner. Asking questions seemed to be difficult for many of my students also. They simply wrote about something and expected their partner to ask for more

details, but they did not try to facilitate the communication by asking questions themselves. The length of the letters varied, probably affected by the topic and the amount of free time they had. Naturally enough, when students had tests, they tended not to spend much time writing their letters.

As a result, by the time the summer holiday started here, most pairs had reached a point where they did not know what else to write about. To solve this problem, in the second semester I decided to impose topics for the letter writing. This was easy to do for my students, as I chose from the textbook that we were using. One of the most interesting topics was superstitions. First, students collected information and ideas about Japanese superstitions using the Internet. They then shared and discussed what they had found. A few students even tried to test some of the beliefs in their free time. They chose the superstitions they liked the most and introduced them in their letters, asking what their partner thought of them and what superstitions they believed in. When the replies came from Hungary, my students had a good time reading about Hungarian superstitions (for example, if one accidentally bumps their elbow on something hard, it means they will get an unexpected visitor soon) and checking if they worked. (Try to imagine how students attempt to bump their elbows on the desk by accident.) This way, they had the opportunity to learn about the topic in class, discuss it with their classmates, learn new words and expressions, and only then write to their Hungarian penfriend. This helped to keep the communication going and introduce new perspectives regarding the issues.

The question may arise here, “Where is learner autonomy if the topic is set by the teacher?” Obviously, I did not restrict the whole letter to be about the topic I set each time. Students were still free to add other things and continue ongoing conversations about other topics, I simply asked them to add another topic too. As a result, students not only managed to write more, but they also became able to use more complicated vocabulary items and grammatical structures.

Student Feedback on the Project

My students wrote their last letter before the winter holiday. In class, we talked about Christmas traditions around the world and what they were planning to do for Christmas. As it was the last letter, I did not tell them what to write about; however, most of them wrote about their plans for Christmas and included their reflections about corresponding. Here are a few quotes from their letters:

“(...) Thank you for exchange letters with me. I was glad to talk with you ☺, I want to talk to you more (...)”

“(...) This is a last letter. So sending letter is very good experience for me. Thank you ☺(...)”

“(...) This is the last letter I send. I'll miss you so much ...!! I enjoyed and learned a lot of things to write letters for you. Your Japanese is very good! So, you will be good speaker more than now! (...) I hope you spend lovely life! Thank you so much!!! (...)”

“(...) This is my last latter... I was glad to talk with you ☺♥ I'm interested in learn about other country's culture, so I learned about Hungary. I want to keep talking with you. (...) I hope you spent great holidays. (...)”

Interestingly some of the extracts from the students' letters resemble oral conversation. They use phrases that make us feel as if they had been actually talking to each other. I see this as a positive result, as students had started to bond directly with their penfriends.

During the project, they got to know each other and learnt about each other's cultures. My students sometimes drew pictures to illustrate their letters. These all helped them gradually feel closer to one another. In addition, the fact that they included their personal reflections without being told to do so seems to indicate that they enjoyed the project.

Learner Transformation as Personal Maturation

The very first letter in the Spring semester and the last letter in the Autumn semester were written in class. It was a task for all students in the classroom. Project participants addressed their letters to their partners, while the rest of the class wrote to each other, to a friend, or Santa Claus. The speed of production was measured on both occasions, and a comparison showed that those who participated in the project increased their speed of production more and could make decisions about the content more quickly than those who did not participate. The structure of students' letters also improved: They had introductions, body texts with at least two paragraphs, and closing paragraphs.

Comparing the letters in the Spring and Autumn semesters, there was some increase in word count, namely from an average of 130 words, to an average of 140. Normally, students wrote their letters at home so they had as much time as they needed. The style remained friendly all through the year. The letters in the second semester also displayed the use of more complex grammar and an increased number of language functions, which, on the other hand, resulted in more mistakes. While there were very few mistakes in the Spring semester, most of which were spelling mistakes, in the second semester most of them became grammar related.

The post-project survey revealed that students enjoyed the project and felt their English had improved. Compared to the results of the pre-project questionnaire, they reported a higher willingness to strive to use the language learnt in class, rely less on automatic translation software, and look up words in the dictionary more often. Their letters showed the use of more complex language structures and vocabulary items in the second semester compared with those of students who did not participate.

The project also provided the opportunity for my students to act as native speakers, and as a result they discovered a new self. As native speakers of Japanese they wanted to be models, and they tried to use correct and easy-to-understand language. Even though the Hungarian students made mistakes, my Japanese students did not mind them, as they concentrated on the meaning. In addition, they appreciated their partners' efforts to learn and communicate in Japanese. Consequently, my students gained confidence, which I consider the greatest positive effect of the project. They now understood that one does not need to speak—or write—perfectly to be understood and they were much less anxious about their mistakes even in oral communication. Their attitude to their own L2 learner self changed and became more positive.

At the Learner Development SIG Forum, I managed to talk to people from various universities about this project. They all seemed interested. A few teachers who came from overseas institutions reported they had implemented similar projects in their beginner-level English course curriculum and had observed similar results. Although the correspondence took place between the students, we all found that teacher assistance, such as setting topics, fostered student communication.

I believe that projects like this can enrich the curriculum. Students get the opportunity to use their target language in authentic communication, learn about other cultures, discover their own culture from new perspectives, and make friends with someone thousands of miles away. Students' attitudes to language learning may change as they see

the usefulness of the foreign language, and their motivation may also increase. Collecting and distributing the letters, as well as encouraging students to keep the deadlines creates extra work for the teachers; however, it is very much worth it. I would love to continue the project at my present workplace as well and extend the project to oral language exchange also.

Reference

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Reader Response to “Learning Together across Borders: Correspondence between Hungarian and Japanese Learners of English”



Farrah Hasnain
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The voluntary pen-pal program that Agnes Patko initiated allowed her students to communicate with English speakers abroad and motivated them to use English to maintain their relationship with their partners. In her reflection on the letter exchange, Agnes empathizes with her students' potential limitations by drawing on her own experiences with exchanging letters after her trip to Germany. Since she had had a parallel English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) experience, she was able to avoid many potential mishaps and ensure that her students would receive many benefits from this letter exchange.

The students' previous education may be strongly related to why they find writing in English difficult. As an ALT in a public high school, I notice that English writing assignments are generally not assigned as often or are as long as they are in other countries. The Ministry of Education's policy for secondary English education does not provide specific guidelines for writing assignments, so the amount of prompts would vary depending on the school. I imagine that Agnes' students probably had a wide range of writing experiences. Public high school English instructors usually assign 2-3 writing prompts on average per semester. Each assignment would be only one paragraph long for low-level schools, two paragraphs long for intermediate schools, and 2-3 paragraphs long at the higher-level schools.

Although my students had the opportunity to write in English under my supervision, I did not know at first how to motivate them to write on topics beyond self-introductions. I decided to assign topics for their writing prompts. The topics would range from rhetorical questions (e.g., “If you had a super power, what would it be?”) to responses to short foreign videos with English subtitles (e.g., a response to a *Buzzfeed* video featuring non-Japanese people trying Japanese food for the first time.) The prompts would flow as if they were conversations, and the theme would change every 2-3 weeks. Like Agnes, I also had them peer-review each other's prompts and write comments in English. By the end of the year, the students were able to express their thoughts more clearly and confidently. Based on these assignments, I learned that continuity is one of the main aspects to learner development.

By providing different topics for the students, instructors initiate the conversation for the students, but also allow room for progression. There was a sense of continuity in Agnes' pen-pal project and students could use English to expand their own insights on the assigned topics. This is mainly because they were exposed to different views and were able to familiarize themselves with the person reading their letters. My students' experiences were similar in that they were anticipating a response from someone else, and used that as a main motivator to develop their skills in the target language.

There are many features of this project that can be easily adapted to support the development of students' reading and writing abilities in other educational contexts. Introducing topics/themes and continuing them throughout the semester can help students retain and reflect on information. Instructors can also be more hands-on in the beginning to help students branch off into more complex themes and concepts. ELF could be utilized between teachers and students so that the students would come to use English as a tool for communication more actively. Since Japan is relatively close to other countries in Asia, I wonder if it would be possible to implement a similar pen-pal project using ELF with an Asian partner school or university. I am also curious about how these objectives could be adapted for larger classes as well. Interactive assignments such as Agnes's support the students' development by providing the key element to communication: a response. Knowing that someone is genuinely listening to and reading a learner's work can motivate them to express themselves as naturally as possible.

Reader Response to "Learning Together across Borders: Correspondence between Hungarian and Japanese Learners of English"



Adrian Wagner
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The first thing that struck me in this short reflective article was the author's memory of her own language learning history, "I had been learning English for at least five years before I ever had a chance to use it." Connecting our own learning experiences to those of our learners is a pertinent starting point for considering learner autonomy and language education in general from the perspective of both learners and educators. The differences and connections between language learning and language use are certainly matters that we all should consider.

As educators endeavouring to support the development of our learners, perhaps we feel that we are creating opportunities for students to use the target language in our classroom. We design communicative activities, give assignments, and facilitate discussions. Of course though, from the perspective of learners, this can be seen, and often is seen, as merely *study* or *practice*. Perhaps it is never real language use when it is only in the "safe space" of a classroom. It is using the language for the purpose of learning. Perhaps, only when language use has a purpose beyond the goal of language learning, outside of the confines of a classroom does it really become *use* in the eyes of some learners. Students are often told about globalisation and the international community without being given opportunities to participate in it.

The author of this short reflective article had a wonderful opportunity at the age of 12 to communicate with people from different cultures in a shared second language. It is clear that this shaped her perspective of language learning and instilled the value and opportunities that come with being able to use another language. Now as a teacher, in facilitating this exchange program,

the author creates a similar opportunity to the one that she had. Furthermore she has her students physically send their language outside of the classroom, forcing a transition from language learning to language use.

For me, an outstanding and completely unexpected aspect of this project was the use of both Japanese and English. Of course this added benefit for the students of Japanese in Hungary, while also ensuring the complexity of language used in either language was controlled so as not to be daunting or demotivating to participants in either country. From the perspective of the Japanese students, communicating with foreigners in Japanese would also broaden perspectives on the journey of second language acquisition. They could understand that even if an individual's skills in a second language were not advanced, if there is a willingness and effort to communicate, then valid exchange of ideas and information is possible.

I also appreciated the way the author dealt with two questions that I often struggle with while setting up autonomous learning programs for my students. Whenever assigning homework, research projects, or anything requiring submission of writing, I am in constant battle with the temptation translation software poses to students. The "old school" back-to-basics approach to letter writing by hand employed in this project was a neat side-step.

This project also successfully negotiated another tricky aspect of trying to foster autonomy; as facilitators, how much should we scaffold or steer the students in their choice of learning materials or output content? While it seems the author was somewhat reluctant about imposing topics to be written about the selection from the class textbook of the theme, superstitions, was a great choice as it could stimulate broader cultural as well as individual responses and was an effective way to both keep the conversation going, and shift the language use of the students away from the textbook and out of the classroom.

Overall, I was inspired by this short reflective article. It has encouraged me to think from the perspective of language learners and consider the differences between language learning and language use. Furthermore, I believe it shifted the perspective of the participants as it allowed Agnes's students to engage meaningfully with peers in a different country in both their native language of Japanese, and in the shared second language of English.