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Engendering Confidence in the English Communication Classroom

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英語コミュニケーション教室で自信を引き起こす方法

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ABSTRACT

Developing communicative confidence in the second language classroom can be a difficult proposition. In this paper we discuss a number of components involved in the development of language learner confidence and suggest techniques that can be incorporated into classroom pedagogy. We discuss motivation and its importance in language acquisition. We also consider the applicability of task based learning to the Japanese, tertiary setting. Additionally, the use of the learners' first language, scaffolding, and the utilization of collocations are all offered up as potentially useful techniques for the language teacher to incorporate into their methodology. We conclude with some practical steps that a language teacher can take in order to build confidence in a language learner.

1. Introduction

Speaking in a second language (L2) can create anxiety and stress, while confidence to express oneself is difficult for a learner to obtain without a focused and well-researched approach. Although these are obstacles ubiquitously found in the English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, they are not insurmountable. Steps can be taken, by the teacher and learners alike, to allow for

communication to flow in a smooth and positive manner. The teacher plays a key role in facilitating a learner's communicative improvement and the aim of this paper is to outline some processes and strategies a teacher can implement to aid the acquisition of English in the language classroom. The perspective of the learners will be taken into account when discussing this issue and the particular context at hand, Japanese university students, will also be a salient point to consider.

It is well known that Japanese learners of

English focus on grammatical translation throughout their secondary school education. Humphries and Burns (2015) found that teachers were entrenched in their ways and Japanese teachers of English have generally succeeded by following the teacher-led, grammar translation method. As a consequence, even though Japanese learners often have a solid grasp of grammatical rules and vocabulary meaning, they can struggle when it comes to productive output. Therefore, the ability and confidence to use English in a communicative fashion is often lacking. This is an issue that has been a continuing theme of research in the Japanese context, “The Japanese themselves are painfully aware of the inadequacy of their communication skills” (CJGTC, 2000, p. 4). This awareness has in turn had a considerable effect on official policy (see MEXT, 1989; MEXT, 2002; MEXT, 2003; MEXT, 2014). In an increasingly globalized world, the need for communication skills is more important than ever. Teachers should be aware of how to engender confidence and provide learning opportunities for learners that reflect real world situations. Building confidence can occur in numerous ways and several of these will be outlined in this paper. Some techniques for preparing learners for communicative activities, with the goal of increasing communicative abilities, will also be looked at with practical recommendations for teachers to use in their classroom planning.

2. Review of the Literature

Motivation is a strong indicator of language acquisition and understanding how to motivate learners is a key plank for the language teacher. As Kimura, Nakata, and Okumura (2001) found

in their wide ranging study of Japanese students, motivation is a key factor for success and the educational setting must be paid close attention to. In the study, they found that Japanese EFL learners were inhibited by anxiety, the impact of past negative experiences and also a desire for a teacher-led classroom. The latter shows a distinct difference in pedagogical approaches from Western cultures, with Western views leaning towards empowering learners to take charge of their own learning through making decisions within the language classroom.

Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) made a distinction between three main dimensions of motivational components; dividing them into language, learner, and learning situation levels. For the purposes of this discussion, the learning situation level comprising of course, teacher, and group-specific components is the most relevant as it deals with “situation-specific motives rooted in various aspects of language learning in a classroom setting” (Dörnyei & Csizér, p. 206). Dörnyei and Csizér produced a list of “commandments” for motivating language learners that focused on teacher practice in the classroom. Although they tested and refined this list in the context of Hungarian EFL teaching, many of the themes and strategies they put forward have universal applicability and some of them will be introduced in the discussion section below.

In regards to word level strategies that can facilitate language learning, the teaching of collocations and how they differ to the first language (L1) is a method that has been shown to be beneficial for English communication classes. Nesselhauf (2003) looked at the influence of the L1 on the production of collocations and found that mistakes occurred

due to an over reliance on the L1. In other words, there was a lack of awareness of the difficulties the language presented and according to Nesselhauf, the learners' L1 probably influenced about half the mistakes that occurred in the study. Nation (2013) states the importance of meaningful input as imperative to exposing learners to "real" language. Understanding, confirming and then producing the language in a controlled, communicative activity, can methodically follow up this exposure to embed the language in a learner's "word bank".

Judicious use of the learner's L1 in the language classroom has been shown to facilitate language acquisition. Swain and Lapkin (2000) concluded that considered use of the L1 can indeed support L2 learning and communicative use of the L2. They also found that the students in the study lacked the opportunities to use the language in meaningful and relevant ways through speaking and writing. Encouraging the learner to produce the language is suggested as the trigger needed to acquire the language. The Japanese, teacher-led perspective contradicts more modern approaches to language learning such as Swain (2000), who advocates a collaborative approach to language learning. Swain found that the social and interactive nature of language can aid acquisition, and working together can show areas of insufficiency to peers whilst also revealing linguistic capabilities. Learners can negotiate meaning, learn from mistakes and share in each other's successes through working together.

The dichotomy found between cultural approaches can lead to ambivalence from learners who are simply not adapted to a more student-led classroom. An understanding of the local context and being flexible when

implementing an approach can reap benefits for the language teacher. Tapping into the strengths of a culture, classroom or demographic can indeed engender confidence, as learners are able to call upon known strategies for learning. Therefore, when thinking of language learning in the Japanese context, a task supported approach along the lines of the Hong Kong example in Carless (2004) may be more appropriate.

Tasks, in terms of language teaching, have been defined quite rigidly by those such as Ellis (2009), who gives a list of 4 criteria that must be met to qualify as a task. These criteria include the presence of an "information gap" in addition to an outcome not solely dependent on utilizing the target language. Others, including Skehan, have advanced more relaxed definitions of the term. Skehan simply refers to a task as a meaning based activity that requires the use of the target language to be completed (2003). Benefits that have been attributed to the use of tasks in the L2 classroom include the automatization of interlanguage, creating opportunities for "noticing the gap", and helping form-function-meaning mapping (Robinson, 2011).

Incorporating the particular cultural strengths of the local culture may be a way to overcome perceived obstacles to language learning. Although Carless' (2004) study focuses on primary school level students and not those at the tertiary level, his findings point to the potential use of tasks in the Asia Pacific region to reconcile cross-cultural differences between teacher practice and learner expectations. Bridging this gap through a mutual understanding of learner strengths and scaffolding of tasks is critical. However, he does note that the type of tasks covered in his study

correspond much closer to Skehan's definition than Ellis' and therefore may be more accurately termed as "task-supported" teaching rather than "task-based".

3. Discussion

Ensuring learners are motivated to learn is a constant battle, one not only limited to teachers in the language education environment. However, language teachers, especially in the EFL context, face the added difficulty of navigating waters muddied by cross-cultural considerations. As Kimura et al's (2001) study showed, learners in the Japanese context often expect a teacher-led classroom. This expectation, however, can run counter to the language teacher's goal of creating a student-focused learning environment with the aim of fostering L2 communication. Therefore, understanding the learner's goals and reflecting this in class planning can facilitate the learning process.

How can a teacher aid motivation in the language classroom? Two of the "commandments" of motivating students that Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) suggest are to present the tasks properly and to increase the learner's linguistic self-confidence. One way of conforming to both of those recommendations is by providing clear and concise instructions that allow for planning time in communicative activities. This will enable a learner to manage their trepidations better and have a clear path to successfully completing the task at hand. For example, setting time limits for preparation will allow for a focused planning period. Another aspect that can help is empowering the learners to take control of the activity they are undertaking. This will lead to processes being

decided and executed by the learner, which are requirements for out of class communication. As Dörnyei and Csizér (1998, p. 217) point out, "enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning".

One aspect of the planning process that can mitigate a lack of L2 proficiency is use of the L1 in the initial stages of a task. By doing so, learners can focus on the planning of a task without the cognitive load of using the L2 before the task begins. Providing planning time in the L1 ensures production time is optimized through fleshing out of ideas, communication can flow more smoothly and the learners can reduce the stress of speaking in another language. Throughout the duration of a language course, the time limits set for this preparation can be reduced to reflect the real world need to speak spontaneously. This "soft landing" approach builds confidence, allows for pertinent language items to be discussed with peers, and clarification of task goals with classmates and the teacher. The level of learners should also be taken into account when allocating time for preparation.

Providing learning opportunities that stretch the learner's capabilities, within a reasonable limit, can also enhance motivation. If a learner is constantly covering material that is too easy for them, motivation will likely decrease (Nation, 2013). On the other hand, if the material is too far out of their linguistic capabilities, learners will suffer from the demotivating factor of an overly difficult activity. Therefore, a teacher needs to know their learners' communicative proficiency. Pre-course testing and interacting with the learners during the course will enable understanding of their linguistic repertoire. Presenting the tasks in an effective manner will also help to build a learners understanding of

what is required. This can be achieved through clear, simple instructions that outline the goal of the activity, and which align with the goals of the learners. Confirmation can be elicited from the learners and should the teacher be proficient in the L1, clarification can be done at this time.

Collocations can highlight L1 differences and the teaching of these can expand a learner's proficiency in L2 communication. Collocation learning allows for revelations on correct communicative practices distinct to a language and helps learners to speak and write effectively. An example that outlines an L1-L2 difference is the use of "make a reservation" in English, compared to the Japanese equivalent which translates to "do a reservation". Highlighting this difference and similar collocations such as "make a mistake" will alleviate stress derived from interlocutor confusion in speaking situations. Although this is one example of the teaching of collocations that learners can benefit from, there are a myriad of context specific situations that can improve the likelihood of language acquisition. Making learners notice language forms is an important step in the process of acquisition (Schmidt, 1990), and when in the production phase, creating an environment that allows for mistakes, and repair, is imperative. As noted in Nation and Newton (2009, p. 143), continual correction will discourage the learners from speaking or from saying things that might contain an error. Correction needs to be provided in a non-threatening, learner-focused manner that the learner can benefit from.

4. Conclusion

As outlined, motivating learners through clear and easy to understand instructions will build

confidence early in the communication task. It is also vital to foster learner-autonomy that allows for the continued development of language skills outside of the classroom context. Judicious use of the L1 where possible can ease the cognitive load and ensure the communicative aspect of the activity is the focus. Stretching the learner to produce language beyond their current capabilities will allow for acquisition of new language items. Stressing the need to notice during an activity is a step that should be taken, and the teacher should encourage this with note taking and group clarification post-listening or reading. The learner then needs to use the language item in a communicative task, set up by the teacher. Providing learners with a comfortable environment in which to learn is imperative for a language teacher. This can be accomplished in part by following the steps outlined in this paper, therefore engendering confidence in communication and facilitating the successful acquisition of the L2.

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