

[Article]

The 'Returnee' student in the Japanese EFL classroom-a "hidden" resource

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Abstract

Some Japanese teachers of English periodically find themselves in charge of students who have spent a considerable amount of time in an English speaking country. These "returnee" students, as they are called in English, often have intermediate to high level fluency in spoken English. How should a teacher deal with such a student? One common course of action is to just pretend the student is no different to the others in the class. This paper argues that to basically ignore the skills of a returnee student is a waste of talent and that, in fact, a returnee student represents a wonderful opportunity for teacher-student cooperation that can help enhance the learning experience of not only the returnee, but an entire student group. A returnee student is a potential asset, particularly in a situation like a Communicative English lesson.

Key words : returnee, spoken fluency, internal motivation, collaboration

Some statistical background

According to MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) statistics for the year 2005, a total of 55, 566 children of compulsory education age were residing abroad. Of these, 42,138 were of elementary school age, i.e. of the age when foreign language acquisition can happen rapidly, and even result in native-level fluency. These figures represent the numbers of children in English and non-English speaking countries. This paper is focused particularly on English education, so let us look at some statistics concerning students specifically located in some English speaking regions. On May 1, 2005, an official total of 15635 Japanese students of elementary school

age were residing in North America and Oceania. Let us consider this figure in conjunction with another statistic. In the year 2007, about 34000 Japanese students were studying at educational institutions just in the United States alone. (Sugiyama, J. 2009) What is the significance of these figures? The fact is that year in year out there is a flow of students not only out of Japan, but also back to Japan, and some of these students enter or re-enter Japanese classrooms, Japanese EFL teaching contexts. These students have the potential to make significant contributions to the conduct of English language lessons.

Culture, Language and the Language Student

As a student first encounters a new cultural context at the beginning of an overseas study and life experience, he or she comes face to face with a host of social customs sometimes differing widely from those in Japan. (McAdams, 1972) In the process of making the mental adjustments necessary to function effectively in the new situation, the student unconsciously imbibes an assortment of new values and behaviour patterns, many of which are reflected in the L2, the target language. (Brown, 1987) Moreover, as a student makes progress increasing his or her fluency in the target language, culture-specific worldviews (ibid) come with the target language as a "package deal". Language and culture are not separable. Japanese returnees may clearly display evidence of new-found confidence, even brashness (White, 1988) that can be attributed to the "acculturation" that has occurred while they were living and studying abroad. (Tobin, n.d.) Some returnees, after spending lengthy periods in western educational contexts, return to Japan with significantly developed skills in critical thinking. (McAdam, 1972)

A 'changed' student can be a source of apprehension for a teacher, especially if he or she feels poorly equipped to deal with such an individual. (Goodman, 1990) It might serve a teacher well, in spite of any misgivings, to view a returnee student (who shows evidence of some not-typically-Japanese attitude and behaviour patterns) as an asset rather than a problem, or just someone to be tolerated. A student with self-confidence and boldness in speaking English, and perhaps even a basic understanding of critical thinking, rather than being ignored, could be asked to assist with, for example, a lesson involving debate. How about a teacher demonstrating a debate with a returnee student? Then in a

subsequent stage of the lesson, when the class is divided into debate groups, the returnee could act as a judge, giving points and comments. The possibilities for significant teacher-returnee collaboration are enormous.

Motivation

It can be very disheartening for a teacher when students show a marked lack of interest in studying English. One of the reasons for this lack of motivation can be the teaching methodologies frequently used by some language teachers. (Howey, 2001) The problem, Howey argues, is the imbalance between “passive” (reading and listening) and “active” (authentic writing and speaking) lessons - an imbalance that leads to boredom. The issue here is a lack of opportunities for language output. Using the target language gives students a sense of achievement which can lead to greater and/or renewed efforts.

Sometimes, even though a teacher may want to have *student-focused*, as opposed to *teacher-focused*, lessons incorporating activities which “...engender...intellectual curiosity...” and encourage student initiative, time and other constraints, such as parental expectations, can force the instructor to simply prepare students for “examination hell” papers. (Goodman, 1990, p.87) Preparing students for entrance examinations typically involves a teacher spending vast amounts of lesson time on grammatical explanations at the expense of student involvement, specifically in terms of learner language output. While on the point of entrance exams, we should note that the hope of passing an exam provides little incentive for a wholehearted effort. In other words, students need better, additional reasons to study English.

Lessons that contain well-known routines and patterns can lead to “inattention and an increase in boredom.” (Lightbown, Spada, 1999, p. 57) This claim is perhaps stating the obvious, but should nevertheless be viewed as a challenge to teachers, Japanese and 'native speakers', to make efforts to look for variety and innovation in lesson delivery modes. (Goodman, 1990) A returnee can help bring the spark of variety and innovation to a classroom when enlisted to help with lesson activities. A returnee often has first-hand

experiences to share, for example about the festivals, sports and foods of another country. Instead of just having students learn points of grammar and read about various topics in English in a textbook (i.e. intensive reading and translation lessons), a returnee could sometimes be asked to share about life and times in an English speaking country. We are discussing supplements to add variety to regular teaching programmes here, not the replacement of required course content.

Turning now to some *student-focused* factors in motivation; it might be useful to comment on the important area of attitude and the significance of this to language learning performance. Ikeguchi argues that "attitudinal factors outweigh aptitudinal factors" with regard to learning performance. (Ikeguchi, 1996, p.13) If Ikeguchi is correct the "mental block" allegedly common amongst Japanese learners of English is something that needs to be addressed, because it is a severe hindrance to the English learning process. Often people who lament the so-called "mental block" problem offer little in the way of possible solutions. This paper proposes that the returnee student can provide help with regards this learning hurdle.

As long as a Japanese English language learner truly believes that becoming fluent in English is an unattainable dream, progress may be very slow. A negative almost defeatist attitude leading to low motivation and subsequent poor results can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. When a returnee is given a chance to demonstrate his or her impressive level of English fluency, in say an interview with a teacher or other returnee, the "mental block" idea, that an ordinary Japanese student cannot master English, loses its powerful mental grip. As a returnee demonstrates fluency in spoken English, other students can be amazed, feel envy and, most importantly, experience the birth of the attitude that 'if (s)he can do it, so can I', which is a huge step in the right direction from a language learning perspective. An increase in expectations can lead to an increase in motivation and a subsequent improvement in performance.

Lightbown and Spada divide language learning motivation into two sub-categories, external pressure and internal motivation. (Lightbown, Spada, 1999) External pressure comes in many forms. An example is the pressure to score a passing grade in the English section of a university entrance examination. An exam is a one-off event and, as

mentioned above, provides a poor reason to study English diligently for six long years, the length of secondary English education in Japan. A teacher's 'pep talk' concerning English as a prerequisite to global citizenry can also be a poor factor in motivating a student to study English, because becoming a global citizen may not be the priority for a student worried about job prospects after graduation. A parent applying pressure to study, needless to say, often does little to motivate many a student.

One proposal of this paper is that the JTE focus on the area of internal motivation. The significance of a positive attitude has been discussed above. This paper will now examine some other positive factors connected with internal motivation.

A fun lesson can be, if well planned, an excellent context for language learning. How does a teacher make a lesson fun? One way is to use authentic materials. Another way is to incorporate personal experiences. If a teacher covering the topic of Christmas were to allow a returnee to relate interesting personal experiences about Christmas in New Zealand and to introduce a class to Christmas Carols, via a CD/DVD presentation, for example, students could learn new vocabulary, be exposed to grammar in context, and gain insights into another culture, all in an enjoyable, almost party-like atmosphere.

Another way for a teacher to increase internal motivation is to organise "cooperative learning activities". (Lightbown, Spada, 1999, p.57) The argument goes that as a member of a team, even a weak student feels responsible for completing an assigned task. "Knowing that their team-mates are counting on them can increase...motivation." (Lightbown, Spada, 1999. p.57, 8) Nobody wants to be seen as the incapable one. This speaks to basic human pride, with pride viewed here in a positive light.

What if we were to add the extra dimension of returnee input into a cooperative project? A returnee could demonstrate (and explain step-by-step in English) the cooking of say American pancakes, and an entire class could learn not only how to cook pancakes, but also the ingredients and recipe instructions in English, too. An English lesson like this is one which connects classroom work with the real world, giving students a powerful reason to keep studying English.

If a class is fortunate enough to have a JTE (Japanese English teacher), an ALT

(assistant language teacher) and one or more returnee students, there are even more exciting possibilities for lesson plans and increased student motivation. When say a Canadian ALT interviews a returnee about life in Canada, the other students have a wonderful opportunity to witness cross-cultural communication in action. The other students see the "cool" rewards brought by learning to speak English, like the ability to communicate face to face with people from other countries, and to even live happily in another culture. In this kind of lesson the JTE could join in with questions for the ALT and/or returnee, and even follow up with comprehension questions, to check the understanding of the other students.

Tricky dynamics

Japanese teachers who have limited communicative ability in English may feel threatened by the presence of one or more returnees in the classroom. (Goodman, 1990) The situation may be especially difficult if the spoken fluency of the returnee students is noticeably superior to the teacher's (Refer to L'Estrange's comment in Note 1.) Moreover, if the student's knowledge of "current language (usage) and cultural trends" is equal to, or even more up-to-date the teacher may feel his or her "influence is diminished". (Tobin, p. 3) This situation need not be a cause for feelings of inadequacy or fear. It is only natural that a person fresh from an extended period of exposure to an all-English life and study situation be up-to-date with the current state of English in a particular context and even have an admirable level of spoken fluency. The teaching professional needs to keep in mind that a high level of spoken fluency does not automatically correlate with a high level of reading ability, writing ability or even a high level of skill in manipulating grammatical structures. The JTE may still have superior skills and knowledge in these and other areas, and consequently have much to offer the returnee student.

In this paper we have looked at a number of possibilities for collaboration between teachers and returnee students. Collaboration is possible, and should only happen, if the returnee is willing. Some returnees feel embarrassed about their language skills, and so have no desire to display their fluency in front of their peers. Some do not want to stand out, an idea perhaps connected with the old Japanese expression about the 'nail that

stands out being pounded down'. Students, especially in their adolescent years, are sometimes very anxious to 'be like everyone else'. Feelings like these are valid and should be treated seriously. In other words, a certain level of diplomacy is needed with regards any planned collaboration. If a student is not really willing, he or she should never be pressured.

Concluding Remarks

Returnee students present challenges to Japanese teachers of English. These challenges are mostly positive in nature. The returnee can be a valuable resource person for cultural information. Who better to help with a lesson about Australian culture than a student with first-hand knowledge, a student who has lived "down under"? The returnee can provide a fresh spark to English language courses by showing that the English learning "mental block" is a myth; that ordinary Japanese students can learn to speak fluent English. The returnee can be a model of pronunciation. A teacher who is blessed with a returnee does not need to play CD recordings during every pronunciation drill. It is time for teachers to stop behaving as if returnees did not exist. It is time to stop neglecting the "hidden" resource in the Japanese EFL classroom.

Note

1. L'Estrange asserts on page 2 of his article that, "Few Japanese English teachers are fluent in English..." In fairness he goes on to say that few Australian teachers of LOTE (Languages Other Than English) are fluent in the foreign languages they teach. The significant point is that a JTE, faced with a pupil who has a far greater level of fluency in spoken English, may understandably experience apprehension and begin to question what he or she has to offer such a student.

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