

[研究ノート]

The teaching of Japanese University Students: A foreigner's perspective

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The teaching of Japanese University students encompasses a variety of techniques and methods to procure any degree of learning. Teaching them the necessary skills to master a foreign language requires specialized applications of these techniques and methods. To begin to apply any of these strategies it is important to have a solid understanding of the student's background. For example, why they want to learn that particular language, the Japanese educational system, student's personality type, and many other vital factors necessary to help student's to gain improvement in the target language output. This paper examines a "gaikokujin's" perspective of some of the challenges and solutions of successfully assisting Japanese student's attainment of second language proficiency (English).

The importance of English related to student's background

The importance of English to Japan is highly recognized both within and outside of the country. LoCastro notes that English has been regarded as the most important foreign language for Japan to keep pace with the modern world, largely because English provides access to the latest scientific, medical, and technological advances in developed countries

(LoCastro, 1996). Even the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Mombusho) published the following guidelines for English Language Teaching for Senior High Schools: "to develop student's ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language, to foster students positive attitude towards communicating in a foreign language, and to heighten their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding" (Wada 1994, P1). With this somewhat pre-knowledge before entering a classroom, foreign teachers realize the importance of administering realistic, communicative, useful English. Language that will be useful during daily endeavors in any English speaking country. For example functions such as directions (giving/asking), opinions (agreeing/disagreeing), expressing appreciation, making a complaint and so on. Next, knowledge of the student's educational background is important for connecting the learning process. The Japanese Educational system is usually a lecture type of situation where the students listen as the teacher speaks. It does not give students a chance to express themselves or take the lead. This system is almost the polar opposite of English learning systems where students are encouraged to be individuals and give opinions. The Japanese system

is also thought to create apprehension and shyness in student's willingness to answer in the target language. Williams (1994) attributes student shyness to Japan's educational system. He feels the traditional Japanese classroom is more lecture style where the teacher talks and the students listen and that there is little solicitation if any from the students. I feel teachers must understand this reluctance of the students to use the language. They should create an atmosphere where students' are relaxed and feel free to explore the use of the target language. There are countless ways to establish this. One is by using first names between students and teacher. If the teacher prefers to be addressed formally, they could still call the students by first names. Another technique I use is to encourage students to feel free to make mistakes (as opposed to being wrong). I usually preface this by explaining that a mistake is neither good nor bad but something everyone occasionally makes because of our imperfections. Interaction with students outside of the classroom is also highly effective in establishing in classroom rapport. After good classroom atmosphere is established, teachers can use error correction more freely, create more independent opportunities for the students to use the target language, and encourage more student-centered activities. This helps to build student confidence as well as giving the students a sense of empowerment. Students must also be given many opportunities in class to use the information being taught. This not only gives the students a feeling of accomplishment, but also gives the teacher a chance to monitor student output. Depending on the level of the students, peer correction can then be incorporated to facilitate active participation.

Interesting Relevant Topics

Invariably the classes should consist of interesting and useful topics for the students. If students are not interested in the subject matter or unable to connect it to something in their own lives, the learning process is significantly impeded. I find that current events, global issues, entertainment, and music are a few of the topics that Japanese University students usually respond well to. These topics are also very adaptable to a variety of other media such as pictures, computers, video, TV, and audiovisuals. This further enhances student interest and stimulates active participation. Furthermore, students who are studying English or using English as a medium for study are often interested in English speaking cultures and countries. Many students have a desire or "dream" to visit one of these countries and thereby harbor a keen interest in learning anything about that country. Students in a 'study abroad' program especially harbor strong desires towards this end. Consequently, we should try to teach topics that will be practical as well as interesting to our students. Livine and Adelman (1993) emphasize teaching the hidden aspects of the culture in language learning because the part of cultures that are taught is sometimes not the part that causes cross-cultural difficulties or misunderstandings. I think these aspects include the people, music, fashion, slang, prices, manners (acceptable/unacceptable behaviors), dangers, foods, and virtually any aspect of the country that would help the students feel comfortable there. Again, these topics also can be incorporated through the other media to help maintain high student interest and participation.

Teacher as Catalyst

Finally, I think the key to teaching Japanese University students are the teachers themselves. More often than not, the teacher will experience a classroom of students that are unmotivated and not receptive to learning in any form. It does not matter whether the class is in the morning or afternoon, some of the students appear to be tired and apathetic. Of course, every one has good and bad days but sometimes Japanese students can be simply 'flat'. By the time the teacher steps into the classroom, extends her/his greeting, and takes attendance, they know if students are 'genki', 'flat', or somewhere in between. It is at this point that the teacher has to establish a congenial classroom atmosphere to entice the students to learn. This is where teacher technique, experience, and positive energy all interplay to achieve the goal of the successful teaching of the lesson plan. Upon recognition of a 'flat' classroom atmosphere, the teacher has to be the catalyst in getting the students started, interested, and actively participating in the class. I feel that teachers have to be willing to give this kind of effort to make all the other essentials of teaching Japanese University students effective.

Overview

My view of teaching Japanese University students centers around knowledge of the students, the curriculum, and the teacher as a facilitator of learning. However, as an educator, I feel in order to effectively assist Japanese students in the learning process, teachers must continue to learn, study, and use pedagogy consistent with achieving this objective.

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