

Language Learning for Language Teachers

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On arrival in Japan many years ago, I enrolled in a small Japanese language school in Takadanobaba in Tokyo. Notwithstanding the fact that the class was for complete beginners, the medium of instruction from Day 1 was Japanese. One reason for use of the direct method in this case, I suppose, was that the class was comprised predominantly of Asians, with no common mother tongue and even if English may have been the common language for many members of the class, abilities would have inevitably been very mixed. Given, then, the fact that (a) even a complete beginners' class may be conducted entirely in the target language and (b) Japanese first year university students have already studied English for at least six years in preparation for the English paper which most of them have to take as an entrance requirement for university, why would it be of any use for a native speaker English teacher at a Japanese college to learn any Japanese for her / his role inside the classroom? In what follows I will neither be addressing the question of the value of Japanese proficiency for the performance of administrative tasks, committee work etc. in a Japanese university nor its value for living in Japan. I don't think its value could be seriously disputed in these cases. To reiterate, then, I will be confining myself to the question of whether there are advantages or indeed disadvantages for a native speaker English teacher at a Japanese college to learn her / his students' mother tongue vis-a-vis her / his role as an English teacher. Finally I wish to narrow my scope even further to discuss only the kinds of students who I teach i.e. those taking English as a subject within the general

education syllabus, not those who major in English language and English literature, although some of what I have to say may apply to the latter group as well.

At the outset, I should emphasize my strong conviction that use of Japanese in the classroom by native speaker teachers of English at Japanese colleges should be kept to an absolute minimum. At the risk of stating the obvious, the reason for this is that the typical student will listen to little enough English in her / his other classes and daily life so it is important for the native speaker English teacher to try to maximize the English input in the classroom. The native speaker teacher of English, after all, unlike her / his Japanese counterpart, can feel completely at home speaking her / his own language whereas, at least in some situations inside the classroom, the Japanese teacher would likely feel most comfortable speaking with students in the mother tongue which they have in common. Having said that native speakers should limit their use of Japanese to a bare minimum, which will necessarily require self-monitoring, the question arises of when the use of Japanese is useful or appropriate? Particularly when one's students are first year non-English majors, in the first class, I don't think it is reasonable to explain about the course and particularly the method of assessment, rules about absences, lateness etc. only in the foreign language, English. (Even if much of this information can also be found in the general education course handbook, I don't think that one can assume that all students will have read the entry about one's course there.) I think that such information is sufficiently important to the students, some of whom may have never had a foreign teacher before and very few of whom will have studied English since taking the entrance examination more than two months previously, (which in any case does not include a listening section), that it should be conveyed to them in their mother tongue as well as in English. Apart

from this one-time occasion of the first class, when one would normally wish to explain about the course and its requirements, as well as perhaps a class at the end of the course in which one might wish to give some information about the final examination both in English and Japanese, in any class, including both of the aforementioned classes themselves, there is a likelihood of encountering new vocabulary items. In such cases, it is not always easy to give a clear definition in simple English or to find a synonym which the students would know, especially if the word refers to something abstract. Explanation can be time-consuming with no guarantee that all of the class have understood. Non-English majors are unlikely to bring dictionaries to class on a regular basis even when reminded to do so and the rationale for doing so is explained. In some cases, then, it is much more efficient to simply translate. In the first or second class I make sure that students are able to ask me how to express something in English by teaching "Could you tell me how to say in English, please?" At the same time I teach other important expressions for use in the classroom, such as "Could you repeat that, please?" In my classes, I sometimes distribute a short list of simple questions, which students practice asking and answering with their partner. While students are practicing the questions, I circulate around the room answering students' queries, if they have any. Finally, after students have finished their pair practice, at random, I ask students to ask and answer these questions. If, at this time, students are still unsure about the meaning of the question or the way to answer, I may give them a prompt in English or Japanese. Again I think that this is the most efficient use of everyone's time. Sometimes I use games in my classes. Some involve handouts, others do not. The language involved in setting up the games, whether it is written on the handouts or conveyed orally, is often rather difficult to understand, frequently more so than the language used in

the game itself. With lower level classes, partly in order to pre-empt less motivated students, who might otherwise make little or no attempt to try to understand directions in English, from being able to give the excuse that they cannot play the game because they cannot understand the directions, I find it more practical to give the directions to students in their own language as well. In order to try to motivate these less enthusiastic students, I may explain the rationale for using a particular activity. In such cases, I may explain in Japanese as well as in English. Finally, regarding the end-of-semester school-administered evaluation of teachers by students, having a knowledge of written Japanese, when I receive the completed questionnaires back, I do not have to burden a Japanese native speaker with a request for a translation of comments by 100 or so students. In addition to these evaluations, I sometimes request anonymous written feedback from students about certain aspects of a class. In such cases, if students felt constrained to write in English, the resultant feedback would be less clear and complete than if they felt free to comment in their own language.

The question of motivation, raised in the preceding paragraph, brings me back to the story of my experience in the Japanese language school in Takadanobaba. If you recall, I mentioned one reason for the medium of instruction for the beginners class being Japanese was that the class members did not share a common mother tongue. We are now in a position to identify a further reason. Presumably it was assumed that students were self-motivated and, for example, if they failed to understand the teacher's explanation of a particular grammar point, they would ask questions or go and consult a reference book or find out in some other way. This assumption of self-motivation on the students' part was also reflected in things like the fact that (a) there was constant testing (b) the syllabus was packed (c) students were expected to arrive at the first class having already memorized

hiragana and *katakana*. Notwithstanding this, inevitably some students were more self-motivated than others. However, even taking into account the fact that many or perhaps most foreign students are going to be busy earning money in their part-time jobs in order to be able to survive in Japan, I think, in general, the motivation of a foreign student living in Japan to learn Japanese will inevitably be higher than a Japanese student studying a foreign language at a university in Japan. In spite of this, I certainly do not believe in spoon-feeding my students. For example, in the weekly mini test I give to all of my classes, in the preamble to a question, I will often deliberately use language, slightly above the students' level, knowing that even though they will be unable to understand every word, most will be concentrating on listening, as it is a test. In this way I am able to give them practice in listening for gist.

When learning one of the romance languages, a native English speaker will encounter far fewer differences between the target language and mother tongue than if she / he were studying a language unrelated to English such as Japanese. If, then, the native speaker English teacher in Japan has a knowledge of Japanese, she / he will be aware of facts such as (a) word order in sentences is different in Japanese and English, so that for example, in Japanese, noun modifiers, whether they are single words or clauses always precede the noun / pronoun being modified, whereas in English, relative clauses follow the noun being modified and require a relative pronoun which does not exist in Japanese (b) unlike in English, plural nouns are often unmarked in Japanese (c) unlike in English, there are neither definite nor indefinite articles in Japanese (d) unlike in Japanese, the subject and verb in English must agree in person and number e.g. an 's' is attached to the third-person singular present tense verb. Whilst one may discover such information without learning Japanese, for example by read-

ing a comparative analysis of the two languages as may be found in Thompson (1987), by learning the language and for example trying to correctly pronounce the 'r' sound, or more correctly the 'ra' mora, as it is found in the Japanese word 'raku' but which is different from either 'r' or 'l' sounds in English, or trying oneself to construct sentences which contain complex noun modifiers, one will understand at a deeper level (1) the differences between the two languages, which is likely to become a part of one's long-term memory (2) the difficulties one's students have in for example pronouncing 'r' and 'l' and in constructing sentences containing relative clauses. As a rider, one may also be in a better position to understand some ungrammatical English which a student produces. Information gleaned from simply reading a comparative analysis without learning the language may simply be stored in short-term memory. If, then, the native speaker teacher of English has an understanding both of her / his own language and of the language of her / his students, she / he will be in a better position to help students when for example they subconsciously use a grammatical rule from their language which doesn't apply in English. Not only this but the teacher will be able to confidently explain how English and Japanese do not dovetail perfectly together so that (a) some words in Japanese have no direct equivalent in English and vice versa e.g. 'tatemaie' and 'a roundabout' and (b) some expressions in English cannot be translated word-for-word into Japanese and vice versa e.g. 'easy as pie' and 'oki no doku desu'.

There seems to me to be a peculiarity for a native English speaker in Japan to accept a position as a language teacher if she / he has neither knowledge of nor the intention to attempt to learn the sole official language of the country she / he has chosen to reside in. The longer the teacher stays, the more peculiar, even paradoxical, her / his position becomes. (If

the teacher only stays in Japan for a short period, then the decision not to invest time and effort in learning the language becomes more understandable.) To spell out the nature of this peculiarity, which may or may not reflect an underlying colonial mindset (the attitude that my language and culture is superior to yours so you should learn my language and not vice versa), it is simply that we normally think that without having been in the position of her / his students, a teacher will be (a) lacking in the required practical knowledge to impart to her / his students (b) unable to inspire students by her / his own example of having accomplished that which she / he is now claiming to be able to teach i.e. be a good role model (c) unable to fully empathize with her / his students and the difficulties which they are encountering. Put another way, a language teacher's job is not only to teach the foreign language itself but also how to learn it and, for example, how to tackle the various stumbling blocks along the way e.g. those outlined in the preceding paragraph. Necessarily the native English speaker will not be able to give experiential advice gained from having learned English as a foreign language but the next best language for a language teacher to know is, in the case of monolingual classes, which is the norm in Japan, the language of her / his students. The reasons for this, as I have mentioned above, are that the teacher will (a) be able to use it in the classroom when the need arises and (b) come to be aware of important differences between the two languages and hence where mistakes are likely to arise in L2 because of interference from L1. I accept that some language teachers with neither professional training nor knowledge of their students' mother tongue may nevertheless make good teachers of their own language. However if a language teacher has both an understanding of language learning theories and methods as well as a knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of her / his native language as well as her / his

students' mother tongue, the teacher will be in a better position to assist her / his students. It may be objected that the majority, if not all, native speaker English teachers have attempted to learn a foreign language at some point in their life, typically in their adolescent years. Any foreign language learning, of course, is valuable experience for a language teacher, but given the generally abysmal results, at least in England, of foreign language education at the secondary school level, particularly in comparison to our continental neighbours, it might be thought that this is not the ideal experience of language learning for a future language teacher. Apart from this, the teenage language learner, whilst no doubt picking up learning strategies along the way is hardly the paradigm reflective language learner. A further point is that, as a person in his mid-forties, my undergraduate years, let alone my high school days, now seem a lifetime away and consequently it is difficult to draw principles gained as a learner at that time to serve me in my present job as a language teacher.

A few years ago, I was very kindly given the opportunity by Hiroshima Shudo University to once again have the experience of being a full-time student in my home country. My study involved both modern Japanese society as well as the Japanese language itself. Apart from the course content, the change in viewpoint from that of a language teacher to that of a language student was in itself instructional for me in my role as teacher which I returned to after a year. Over the course of the year, one thing I came to feel was that some of the classes were more useful **to me** than other classes. For instance, I found a grammar review class more satisfying than one in which students discussed their translations of a passage in groups to identify shortcomings and arrive at a polished version. Some of these preferences regarding teaching style, content etc., I felt, depended on the individual and her / his own preferred learning style. The fact is that in one's

own teaching too, in spite of the fact that one believes in the usefulness of a given activity oneself, there may be some students to whom the activity does not appeal. I suppose one answer to this is to ensure that one seeks constant feedback about class activities from one's students and modifies / shortens / gives up activities when necessary. Sometimes it is also feasible to give students a choice between activities and to have different groups of students working on different activities simultaneously in the same class. Another thing I learned on my sabbatical was the central importance of translation in mastering a language. In the EFL world, there has long been criticism of the grammar-translation method, which is still used in English education here. Whilst it is fair to say that speaking and listening skills have not been sufficiently emphasized in English language education in this country heretofore, I think it also needs to be said that knowing greetings and simple conversation is one thing, but in order to really get to know a language, there is no substitute for actually attempting to render a passage faithfully from the target language into one's own, or, more challengingly, vice versa without adding anything or leaving anything out. As far as the grammar element of the grammar-translation method is concerned, all I would say is that if Japanese students don't have a solid grounding in grammar, they will be unable to pass national or international English language proficiency tests, which might be pivotal in enabling them to study abroad or to secure suitable employment. My Japanese language study both in England and Japan has also made me fully realize the centrality of dictionaries to any language learning. However, I feel that whilst I can emphasize this to my students, perhaps most will only fully appreciate this point if they attempt to seriously study a language by themselves. My experience of being a language student in England has made me feel the frustrations inherent in trying to contribute to conversations in a target lan-

guage when one has an opinion on a subject but lacks the requisite linguistic skills, in particular, vocabulary. In our classes on spoken Japanese, we were attempting to discuss current events such as the then Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davis, being robbed by a man who he had met late at night on Clapham Common, a well-known haunt of homosexuals and Clinton's possible impeachment and suitability to continue as president. I think it is very important to keep in mind that, as young adults, one's students also have opinions on a wide variety of topics even though they may be unable to express them in English. In other words, one should be mindful not to think of, nor to treat one's students as stupid. Finally by studying Japanese, I feel that I have not only learned the language but also learnt about differences in values and ways of thinking and acting between British people and Japanese people. This has been useful in understanding my students. Over the course of the year, then, learning a language in a classroom with other students, I feel that I gained so many insights into language teaching, which I believe have served me since in my own teaching. For this reason and in order to keep the feeling of what it is like to be a language student fresh in one's mind in order that one may empathize with one's students, I think, ideally, language teachers should themselves study a language in a class with a teacher and other students on an ongoing basis, moving on to a different language once proficiency is attained.

Both prior to and during my sabbatical in England, as well as on my return to Japan, I have taken Japanese language tests. I have long been aware of the limitations of exams, for example in my undergraduate days, one of my classmates ended up with a worse degree than me, in spite of having read more widely in the subject and therefore having a broader and deeper understanding than me, simply because he had failed to look at past

final exam papers and to plan an exam strategy. I am also aware that not only in Japan but also in the West, there is a great danger of thinking that a human being can or should be measured or assigned a value through achievement in exams. This is not only nonsense but also pernicious as people who for one reason or another do not pass exams are sometimes made to feel they have little or no value and have been consigned to the scrap heap by society. Having said that and also bearing in mind that any test will be flawed, I still think that exams have some value, as a goal for students to aim at, to make them review and consolidate what they have previously studied and to give them an edge in the present tight employment market. I feel, then, that my recent experience of taking language tests enables me to give practical tips to students considering taking such exams.

Needless to say, there are good arguments for a native speaker English teacher not to use Japanese in a class. For example, as far as students wishing to go abroad are concerned, it is important to wean them away from an environment where they can revert to their mother tongue when they get into difficulties, as most will be unable to do this when they are abroad. For instance a student asking a question of a teacher, who is known to speak Japanese, might too readily resort to Japanese without trying to make her / himself understood in English first. On the other hand if the teacher is known to only speak English, the student has no choice but to try to get his meaning across in the target language. I would concur with this criticism up to a point but would point out that in the second scenario, the student does have another choice, namely to keep silent and give up the idea of seeking an answer to her / his question from that teacher. It is, of course, also open to the native speaker English teacher, who speaks Japanese, to reply in English to a question from a student in

Japanese. Or, even if the teacher replies in Japanese, if her / his Japanese is, like mine, far from fluent and peppered with mistakes, the student might well feel that if the teacher is not self-conscious about making mistakes, then she / he, the student might as well try to use the English she / he has struggled so hard to master during the past six years.

To sum up, then, I have proposed that it is useful for a native speaker English teacher at a Japanese college to know Japanese for her / his role inside the classroom in order to be able to (a) communicate important information about the course to the students (b) translate abstract words (c) explain how to do an activity which students are unfamiliar with. I have also suggested that, by studying the mother tongue of her / his students, as well as her / his own, a teacher will gain an understanding of the differences between the two languages, which will help in her / his teaching. Finally I have suggested that learning a language in a class with a teacher and other students can provide a language teacher with many valuable insights which can be applied to her / his own teaching.

Bibliography

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