

## **Competence or performance: An assessment of the Japanese EFL Classroom**

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### **Introduction**

It has been said that “the best kept secret in foreign language education is that communication is a social interaction much more than it is a linguistic exchange” (Seelye, 1997, p. xiii). Perhaps this is most evident in the Japanese EFL classrooms, where the majority of students are not capable of interacting socially in the target language.

According to Savignon (1983) “performance is what one *does*; competence is what one *knows*” (p. 9). In the EFL classroom in Japan, many students can be observed performing a linguistic exchange of repetition drills and choral reading exercises. But they can not be classified as competent in a social interactive English conversation.

### **Language acquisition in the EFL Classroom**

It has been established that the classroom promotes the process of learning rehearsal language over actual language acquisition (Byram, 1989, and Damen, 1987). Palmer (1921) examined this relationship and through his Principles of Language Study tried to outline an approach where the spontaneous capacities used in acquiring one’s native language would take precedence over the studial capacities of the classroom.

Competence in one’s native language develops from an overlapping of a paralinguistic component, extralinguistic component and sociolinguistic component in addition to the linguistic component (Fantini, 1997). To gain communicative competence in a second language one must understand this interrelationship. “In practice, however, linguistic considerations often continue to preempt the major portion of time in classroom teaching” (Fantini, 1997, p. 10). This can definitely be said of the Japanese EFL classroom.

By including a paralinguistic component, extralinguistic component and sociolinguistic component in addition to a linguistic component in the EFL classroom, considerable depth to the linguistic experience would result as well as providing motivation in the learner. There is no longer a mere recital of linguistic drillwork but instead learning is taking place in a social interactive format. By following such a framework, teachers could provide their students with the ability to communicate competently in English within the structure of a Japanese EFL classroom.

### The introduction of a sociolinguistic component in the EFL classroom

In creating the sociolinguistic component, special attention should be given to the two main extrinsic factors of motivational success as defined by Byram (1989). They are relevance to the students needs and appropriateness to learners (p. 19). For a Japanese student the main need in studying English is to do well on the entrance exams. It is only after admission to a University that students may study English for other purposes. Therefore, the government approved textbooks must be the linguistic base component of the lesson. By introducing a sociolinguistic component, this mandatory course material becomes more appropriate to the learner and thus creates motivation to succeed in the study of English.

I would like to give a specific example of how a sociolinguistic component was introduced into a third year junior high school lesson plan. The text selected comes from a reading comprehension piece (New Horizon English Course II Book 3 pp. 77-79). Without the introduction of a sociolinguistic component, this lesson in particular would be most confusing to a beginning level English student.

First, the text was converted into a letter format with careful attention given to subject and object clarification. The letter was introduced between two model conversations performed by the Japanese English teacher and Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). This gave overall context to the student.

Following the oral introduction, students were asked to work in *hans* to form questions based on the information they had heard orally. These questions were then

#### CONVERSATION ONE

A: Mrs. Sakamoto, you look happy today. Do you have some good news for us?

B: Yes, I do. I got a letter from my sister today. She lives in Bangladesh.

A: Bangladesh? Where is that? Is it near India?

B: Yes, it is. Look she sent me a map. This is Bangladesh and this is India.

A: Oh, I see. Why is she in Bangladesh?

B: She studied farming at Iwate University. Now she is teaching farming to many people in Bangladesh. May I read you her letter?

## LETTER

Dear Robin,

This is a picture of my village in Bangladesh. I am working here. I help farmers learn how to grow new kinds of rice. I can give them good advice because I studied farming when I was in college. The farmers hope to increase food production with these new kinds of rice. I still don't speak the language well, but I enjoy working with my new friends here.

Your sister,  
Nancy

## CONVERSATION TWO

A: What a wonderful letter. Your sister is working very hard to help the farmers in Bangladesh, isn't she?

B: Yes, she is. She went there with the JOCV. She is one of many overseas volunteers from Japan.

A: These days many young people join the JOCV or NGO's to share what they know and their skills with people around the world.

B: Yes, sometimes I ask myself "What can I do to help the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?"

A: You can help teach us to speak English! We will have a bright future if we all share our skills and knowledge.

B: What a good idea! I will write my sister and tell her my good news too!

After hearing the dialogue twice, students will form groups (hans) and prepare questions to ask the ALT based on the dialogues. Sample questions would be:

1. Where is Nancy/her sister working?
2. What does Nancy/she do there?
3. What did Nancy/she study in college/university?

Students will ask the ALT the questions they have prepared. The ALT will answer the questions using the sentence patterns on pages 78 and 79. For example:

1. Where is Nancy/your sister working?  
My sister is working in a village in Bangladesh.
2. What does Nancy/she do there?  
She helps farmers there.
3. What did Nancy/she study in university?  
She studied farming when she was in college, so she can give them useful advice.

answered by the ALT in the format in which they appeared in the text. It was not until after this question and answer session that students opened their books for the first time.

This lesson in particular illustrates the benefit of overlapping the linguistic and sociolinguistic component to develop competence. After seeing the text in print, the students needed very little grammar translation work since they already understood the lesson in context.

### **Additional components in the EFL classroom**

Both a paralinguistic component as well as an extralinguistic component may be introduced through the aid of the ALT. The paralinguistic component occurs when students mimic the native English teacher's tone and intonation in choral reading exercises. If a native English speaker is not available, the paralinguistic component could be introduced through recordings supplied with the textbook.

The extralinguistic component occurs when students observe the physical behavior of a native speaker when using the target language. This would include both verbal and nonverbal communication behavior. This extralinguistic component may be introduced through video or contemporary film if an ALT is not in residence. It is essential for communicative competence that language be studied in tandem with overt behavior expressed through the communication style of a native speaker.

### **The grammar-translation method and communicative competence**

Critics may question the effectiveness of introducing any additional methodology into the already overloaded EFL classroom curriculum. But by not taking such an approach, students will continue to only perform the English language and not become competent in it. Rather, a critical look at the grammar-translation method currently in use is in order.

As Byram (1989) points out the grammar-translation method was never intended "to produce speakers of the language on the model of and assessed against the ideal of a native speaker"(p. 10). It can not be criticized for not producing communicatively competent students. This has never been the goal of the grammar-translation method. The idea of communicative competence came with the impetus for communicative language teaching.

Communicative language teaching with its use of games and hands-on activities provides a better means of motivating students. But it also has the goal of providing

relevance to the learner. Is the Japanese student of English truly in need of establishing communicative language ability? As long as the current entrance exams exist the answer would seem to be no.

But can we be certain that by taking only a linguistic approach to English education that our students needs will be met? The answer here would also seem to be no. As Byram (1989) states “learners need both the skills of fluency and accuracy in the language and the awareness of the cultural significance of their utterances” (p. 145). A given word in the student’s L1 can be associated with a word in the target language but this involves a cultural transfer. The word in the target language is being used to refer to a cultural phenomenon in the L1. This can be seen in European languages separation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular and plural forms. Who and when one addresses another with the *tu/vous* of the French or the *du/Sie* of the German is indeed deeply rooted in a cultural framework. Without this reference, students will never reach a true understanding of the target language.

For the student to develop communicative competence it is necessary “to involve the affective and cognitive processes of the learner” (Kramsch, 1997, p. 462). Students must be taught not only the linguistic component of the language but indeed at the very least a sociolinguistic component if not a paralinguistic and extralinguistic one as well. But where will the teacher find the time to devote to this endeavor? The answer lies in reframing the students needs.

While it is commendable to seek performance of students at the native speaker level this is a paradox of terminology. By definition a native speaker is one who has acquired the language through birth and a process of socialization in that language. Therefore, it would be impossible for one to reach native speaker fluency in the target language. If students were no longer expected to perform at near native speaker levels of fluency, a large portion of time would become available to pursue a more well-rounded approach to EFL education.

## **Conclusion**

While there must be standards for fluency and accuracy in the acquisition of a second language, one must question the current emphasis the Japanese EFL classroom places on performance at near native level proficiency. The majority of students in the EFL classroom are unable to meet these standards and experience nothing more than frustration at their inability to learn a second language.

The year 2002 will see major revisions in the educational system of Japan. This should include incorporating a more holistic approach to EFL education. Through an understanding of the interrelationship between the sociolinguistic, paralinguistic, extralinguistic and linguistic components of language acquisition, Japanese students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will become competent socially interactive users of the English language and not mere performers of its linguistic functions.

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