Expectations in English Language Education at University Level

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Introduction

This paper is divided into two parts: the first considers what expectations exist in the field of English education at university level in Japan, and in particular, what differences are likely to be predicted between those of the native English teacher and his or her Japanese students; the second part draws on self-regulated learning theories (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1984; Zimmerman, 1986, 1989; Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1986, 1990) and puts forward the notion of **learning how to learn** as an essential criteria if students are to accept responsibility for progress in their learning, and avoid many of the potential problems that such clashes in expectations can generate.

PART ONE

Expectations from a variety of sources

The criteria for judging the success or failure of any educational programme will depend largely on the viewpoint and expectations of the individual or group making the assessment. In the case of English language education in Japanese universities, expectations exist from society as a whole, from the educational establishment, from the educational institution, from parents, from teachers and from the students themselves. While many of these expectations will be shared, some conflicts of interest are inevitable.

It would be reasonable to argue that Japanese society as a whole regards the study of English as a worthwhile and important educational pursuit, and the system (headed by the Japanese Ministry of Education) structures itself to reflect this view of society. Considerable influence is subsequently exerted on the institution (the university) the most direct form of which comes in carefully worded guidelines to which university departments are expected to adhere. In practice, constraints on available resources combined with the need for universities to remain competitive, as well as differences in defining and achieving both short and long-term aims and objectives, means that priorities are sometimes difficult to define, and expectations inevitablly vary. Similarly, parents and students, whilst having many shared expectations regarding the university educational experience as a whole, will often have little, if any, common expectations regarding what is to take place in the English language classroom.

There is, then, within Japan, a whole conglomerate of competing views, ideas and sources of influence that interact with each other. Add to the equation the native English teacher with an alien background and a quite different cultural heritage, and the potential for misunderstandings, especially in the direct teacher-student interaction, dramatically increases.

Potential Differences in Student - Teacher Expectations.

Student - teacher expectations can differ in any educational setting. When the teacher is a native English speaker, sometimes with only a superficial understanding of Japan, its people, its culture, and its customs, and the students are all Japanese, many of whom have had virtually no direct contact with non-Japanese in any context whatever (educational or otherwise), initial differences in expectations are unavoidable.

Whilst there will, of course, be differences in the cultural and social backgrounds of individual native English teachers depending on nationality and upbringing, it is fair to assume that most will not have experienced an educational background nor an educational environment that conforms very closely to the system in which they now find themselves teaching, here in Japan. Any view or opinion that the teacher brings to the classroom is, by default, the product of that teacher's own Western perspective of the world and the culmination of prior Western experiences. Similarly, Japanese students have an outlook that is perculiar to their own experience and upbringing. Six years of English study at Japanese school, coupled with the pressure of high school and university entrance examinations (the infamous *examination hell*), leaves most students with a perspective and outlook on university life that is, in many instances, somewhat incongruous with that of their foreign teacher.

There is then, for many Japanese students, a feeling that having overcome the final hurdle to secure a place at university, they are entitled to something of a respite. Indeed, this may be their only opportunity in life to enjoy themselves, free of the pressures they have hitherto had to face, and the ones looming on the horizon once they have to enter the real world of employment. However, the realization that the foreign teacher may not always be fully aware of this entitlement, is often just the first in a series of misconceived expectations.

The role of the university and the status of English as an academic discipline within that institution, is another area where preconceived notions may be incompatible. The study of English literature and the finer points of grammar are, in Japan, generally readily received as serious academic pursuits worthy of any scholar. The standing of English *conversation*, on the other hand (or English *communication* - to use a more contemporary buzz word), is somewhat more dubious, lacking as it does the same academic prestige. In fact, the limited competence of so many Japanese English teachers in the past when it came to actual communication in the English language, was a clear reflection of the unimportance attached to this facet of English language study. With many native English teachers now regarding communication development as a primary goal, unrealistic expectations from both sides is a major cause of frustration, especially when many students still regard such classes as an easy option.

The role of the teacher in Japan is a further area where foreign teachers and Japanese students may initially hold fundamentally different preconceived notions. Many Western teachers perceive the teacher role as being primarily concerned with *facilitating* the learning process. A sharp contrast to many students' perception of the teacher as the main *provider* of information. This underlying philosophy will dictate much of the structure of classroom activities, and be reflected by the methodology employed by the teacher. Thus the *facilitator* allows greater freedom for students to work at their own pace with considerably less structure than is generally imposed by the *provider* of information.

Most of these differences in student - teacher expectations reflect a host of contributing sociocultural factors that are largely responsible for giving individuals their cultural identity. For some Japanese there seems to be an underlying concern that over-exposure to English (and hence, Western culture and attitudes) can threaten the very essence of what it is that makes them Japanese. Indeed, nowhere is this more clearly exemplified than in the treatment frequently handed out to returnees, who, after an extended period of stay abroad, find their *Japaneseness* in question, once they return to their home land. As Shibata (1983) points out (in Wordell 1985), it is not the English language ability itself that is frowned upon by Japanese society but:

> ... those social distracters of bilingualism ... such characteristics as independence rather than dependence; self-reliance rather than group-cooperativeness; innovativeness rather than conformity; rational-legal authority rather than accepting personal authority.
>
> (Page 13)

There are, then, a number of differences in expectations that might be predicted when the native English teacher confronts a class of Japanese students. Such differences are going to significantly influence subsequent classroom interaction and raise questions about the appropriateness of the course content and methodology.

It is important to remember that learning English, is not purely a linguistic matter. Language cannot be considered in isolation to the people who use that language. The very nature and form of English is inextricably bound up with the culture, the history, the geography, the art, the entertainment, the humour, and the ideals of the people who are responsible for its continued use, growth and development. Of course, one of the potential difficulties when two different cultures interact is that all too often, as (Valdes 1992) points out in the preface of her book *Culture Bound*:

> ... people, of whatever nation, see themselves and their compatriots not as a culture but as "standard," or "right," and the rest of the world as made up of cultures, which are conglomerates of strange behaviour.
>
> (Page vii)

Even if neither the native English teacher nor the Japanese students are guilty of such cultural chauvinism, the fact nevertheless remains that expectations in English language education at university level between teachers and students are quite likely to be some distance apart.

Of course, many native English teachers at Japanese universities are quite aware of these potential difficulties and prepare their classes accordingly. By adopting appropriate strategies they ensure that both they and their students have mtually compatable goals and expectations.

Reconciling differences, then, is essential if an appropriate level of learning is to be achieved. Self-regulated learning theory as a conception that takes responsibility for learning out of the teacher's hands and places it firmly in those of the student, may be one strategy that is particulerly effective in helping to achieve this goal. Encouraging Japanese students to become self-regulated learners reduces the significance of the teacher's role and thus helps to reduce some of the potential problems that differences in initial expectations might create. What, then, is a self-regulated learner, and how is a student encouraged to become one?

PART TWO

Self-Regulated Learning Theories

There is a vast quantity of research on learning, motivation and instruction, and much of the early experimental work from theorists such as Bandura (1977); Thoreson and Mahoney (1974); Kanfer (1979); and Meichenbaum (1977) on issues of self-control, has been influential in establishing the importance of self-regulated learning processes. There still is, however, as Corno and Mandinach (1983) highlight, a need for an integrated theory of learning and motivation in the classroom:

> *... studies often consider either learning or motivation variables, rather than learning, motivation* ***and*** *instructional variables in consonance with some encompassing theory.*
>
> (Page 88)

They see self-regulated learning as the central element in both the instigation and maintenance of student motivation in the classroom, and describe it as:

> *... one form of cognitive engagement, that elusive variable inferred from measures of motivated behaviour.*
>
> (Page 89)

More specifically, it is perceived to consist of:

> *... specific cognitive activities, such as deliberate planning and monitoring, which learners carry out as they encounter academic tasks. Learning is less self-regulated when some of the processes are overtaken by classroom teachers, other students, or features of written instruction.*
>
> (Page 89)

For Corno and Mandinach (1983), then, self-regulated learning becomes the *highest form of cognitive engagement*

> There is a growing body of applied research on the relationship between self-regulated learning processes and student academic achievement (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1984).
>
> (Zimmerman 1986)

The one thing that all self-regulated learning theories have in common is a belief that students' perceptions of themselves as learners and their utilization of processes to control and regulate their learning, are fundamental considerations in the analyses of academic achievement. Much of the educational reform and reorganisation in both the UK and the US during the 1960's and 1970's was based on an alternative view of learning which relied on the teacher to structure and adapt the learning environment to each student, based on either his or her mental ability, sociocultural background, or the achievement of some kind of educational standard. In contrast:

> *A self-regulated learning perspective shifts the focus of educational analyses from student learning abilities and environments at school or home as fixed entities to*

> *students' personally initiated strategies designed to improve learning outcomes and environments.*
>
> (Zimmerman, 1989. Page 2)

More specifically, such theories make the assumption that students:

> 1. *can personally improve their ability to learn through selective use of metacognitive and motivational strategies;*
> 2. *can proactively select, structure, and even create advantageous learning environments; and*
> 3. *can play a significant role in choosing the form and amount of instruction they need.*
>
> (Zimmerman, 1989. Page 5)

There is, then, a sharp contrast in previous learning theories which investigated student academic achievement in relation to what was perceived as the students' ability, the quality of the teaching, the educational surroundings, and the home environment, and self-regulated learning theories. The latter assumes that no environment can ensure learning — rather, there is always a degree of selectivity and structuring on the part of the learner. The question is thus not concerned with *what* kind of learning environment should be created, but rather *how* can students personally activate, alter, and sustain their learning practice? In other words, how best can students be taught to **learn how to learn**?

Corno and Mandinach (1983) suggest that while both able and less able learners will on occasion lack the "will" to work, the able learners will nevertheless still retain a "way" to accomplish a given task, using a strategy not available to the less able, who approach their work passively, or by seeking external assistance. They arrive at the conclusion that:

> *To call up a well-worn notion still mystifying educators, such students need to "learn how to learn."*
>
> (Page 90)

Learning is not something that happens *to* students; it is something that happens *by* students.

(Zimmerman 1989)

Self-regulated learning: What are the key subprocesses?

Theories of self-regulated learning require the learner to be actively involved in the process of learning, and even in settings that may be considered *advantageous* for learning, there is, nevertheless, a varying degree of selectivity and structuring initiated by the student for learning to take place. It is the *use* of students' quite specific subprocesses to achieve self-designated outcomes, to which such theorists focus their attention. Much current theorizing draws on Bandura's (1977,1986) earlier work on social cognitive theory:

> *Tripartite formulations such as his have the advantage of explaining not only student academic performance but competence—that is, the motivated and motoric dimensions of learning as well as knowledge ...*
>
> (Zimmerman 1986)

Zimmerman (1986) identifies three ways in which self-regulated theorists view students as being actively involved and participating in their own learning:

> ***Metacognitively***, *self-regulated learners are persons who plan, organise, self-instruct, self-monitor, and self-valuate at various stages during the learning process.*
>
> ***Motivationally***, *self-regulated learners perceive themselves as competent, self-efficacious, and autonomous.*
>
> ***Behaviorally***, *self-regulated learners select, structure, and create environments that optimize learning.*

Thus,

> *... effective learners become aware of functional relationships between their patterns of thought and action (often termed strategies) and social and environmental outcomes. The effective use of self-regulation strategies is theorized to enhance perceptions of self-control (i.e., autonomy, competence, or efficacy), and these positive self-perceptions are assumed to be the motivational basis for self-regulation during learning.*
>
> (Zimmerman ,1986. Page 308)

The key subprocess are thus those of:

i. self-evaluation
ii. goal-setting
iii. self-reinforcement
iv. self-efficacy perception

Theoretical and Practical Implications

When students are encouraged to develop their own strategies for regulating their learning, much of the responsibility that was previously the prerogative of the teacher is transferred to the student. The teacher is no longer required to continually adapt instruction to each student based on what is perceived as his or her mental ability, or sociocultural background, because mental abilities are no longer assumed to be relatively stable or predetermined. That is not to say, of course, that teachers are no longer required to take note of the students they are teaching in terms of their current levels of academic achievement or their ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds, but that such factors will not predetermine future potential achievement. That is to say, with appropriate strategies, all students should be able to improve their propensity to learn, create the advantageous learning environment they need despite the teacher, and become involved in selecting the kind and amount of instruction they require.

For an English language education programme in Japan, such a perspective may mean that the content of any course actually becomes secondary to encouraging students to learn how to learn English.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present more than just a brief introduction to the idea of self-regulated learning, and certainly, such theorizing, whilst having obvious practical implications, can not be expected to provide an all-encompassing framework from which teachers might organise and structure their classes. By focusing on those key subprocesses that are hypothesised to play such an crucial role in the development of learning strategies, however, activities can be initiated that have more profound long-term significance for learning, than simply the transfer of information from teacher to student to be stored for future reference.

Conclusion

Whatever differences there may be in expectations between native English teachers and their Japanese students, many potential problems can be avoided if the students have developed learning strategies that enable them to create their own effective learning environments. Becoming a self-regulated learner is synonymous with learning how to learn. For teachers of English, especially those who are attempting to move away from the more traditional translation-based form of instruction, to encompass all communicative aspects of the language, teaching English might more appropriately be redefined as teaching how to learn English. From this perspective the teacher's role is by no means undermined. Rather, by setting the limits which condition learning, the teacher prepares the students to ultimately accept individual responsibility for their own learning.

Some teachers may be born, but most of us are **MADE**:

Management skills:	Set realistic objectives for the course. Be practical with time and resources available.
Awareness:	Take into account cultural differences. Anticipate potential misunderstandings. Ensure both you as the teacher and the students understand the aims and the rational behind the course.
Determination:	Don't be discouraged by setbacks—learn from them. Maintain enthusiasm. Know that your students will succeed.
Encouragement:	Encourage students to become self-regulated learners.

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