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Kazuki Morimoto and Yuka Oeda

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Kazuki Morimoto and Yuka Oeda

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds

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This paper discusses two peer learning projects, namely the Joint Presentation Project and YouTube Video Project, involving post-beginner students of Japanese and Japanese year abroad students at the University of Leeds. The discussion will focus particularly on the merits of the projects and some problems arisen. The results of a pilot study in 2015-16 suggested the need to reconsider the role of the teachers, as some students did not contribute to the projects as much as we expected them to do. Thus, the structure and assessment of the projects were revised and the teachers were given more active roles as supporters and facilitators in order to promote the students' peer learning activities beyond the classroom. Student online feedback at the end of each semester showed that the projects not only increased student opportunities for in-depth communications using the target languages, but also enhanced their cultural and linguistic awareness, as well as their motivation and personal development through the sense of achievement and collaboration. In addition, the issue of unequal contributions to the project observed in 2015-16 seemed to have been resolved to some degree, due to changes in the structure and assessment of the project. However, it was also noted that the timing of the project should be more carefully planned so as not to conflict with other academic commitments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Joining a degree programme and settling into student life can be stressful. Some students adapt well on their own, while others struggle to settle in. For international students, studying in the UK can be an overwhelming experience as they adjust to life in an English-speaking environment. It requires a major transition both in their personal lives as well as in University life.

At the University of Leeds first year students who are placed on the Japanese language course for post-beginner level particularly take time to become accustomed to the teaching methods used at the University. They are often uncomfortable practicing Japanese in conversation. Apart from practicing the language with their fellow students or teachers, other opportunities to use and practice the language are limited, and this sometimes causes them to lose motivation (Morimoto, 2014). At the same time, some students from Japan who come to learn English at Leeds feel isolated and lonely because they have insufficient confidence in their ability to communicate in English outside the classroom.

Peer learning, where both Japanese and Leeds students can meet and learn together, was introduced into the Japanese language curriculum for post-beginner level students as a pilot study in the 2015-16 academic year. The aim of this was to develop the students' learning in a more comprehensive manner including enhancing cultural awareness and communication skills. The benefits of this innovation were presented at the 20th Symposium on Japanese Language Education in Europe, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, July 2016 and published as "A Showcase of Peer Learning for Post-beginner Students with Japanese students". This new paper is the second report of the study and examine the effectiveness of peer learning.

2. PEER LEARNING

Topping (2005: 631) defines peer learning as ‘the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions’. It is a ‘learning process in which learners learn from their peers’ (Lincoln and McAllister, 1993: 18). Boud *et al.* (1999: 413) describes peer learning as ‘teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher’.

Peer learning encourages students to work with others and interacting helps them to develop essential skills and professional abilities in their life (Boud *et al.*, 1999; Falchikov, 2001). Piaget (1971: 180) claims that cooperation ‘is most apt to encourage real exchange of thought and discussion’. Vygotsky (1978) also emphasises the importance of peer learning. He says in his theory of the ‘Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)’ that learning occurs when learners are interacting and cooperating with their peers. Although the subjects of Piaget and Vygotsky were children, the same concept might apply to university students. All these studies suggest that peer learning is significant and can be applied to language learning in higher education.

3. PEER LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN THE JAPANESE CLASS

Before 2015-16, we also used to invite Japanese students to attend our Japanese language classes occasionally for various activities. However, the Japanese students were mostly treated merely as ‘guests’ and their role was often limited to that of passive assistants rather than peer-learners. Therefore, we piloted peer learning as part of the curriculum in 2015-16 with a view to enhancing cultural awareness and developing the communication skills of both the students of Japanese and Japanese year abroad students, as well as improving their target language skills. Although the two projects (see the Section 3.2) were mostly well received and the participants gave positive feedback, we recognised the necessity of

reviewing the role of the teachers¹, as some of the participants felt that not all of their group members were participating actively in their projects, particularly outside class. Therefore, although students' autonomy should be respected to develop their intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000), it was noted that the teachers also need to play a more active role as supporters and facilitators. That is, the teachers must provide the students with clear guidance, monitor their progress and encourage them to collaborate with one another and work hard (Oeda and Morimoto, 2016). With these reflections in mind, we conducted the same peer learning activities again in 2016-17 with some necessary amendments to the structure and assessment.

3.1 Participants

Both Leeds students on Japanese degree programmes (LSJ) and Japanese year abroad students (JYA) participated in the peer learning activities as part of the curriculum for the first-year Japanese language module called 'Intermediate Japanese (IJ)'. This module was designed primarily for post A-level students. We find these students, in particular, need encouragement to study autonomously and collaboratively in order to enhance their motivation for studying Japanese and prepare themselves for the year abroad in Japan in their second year. This means that they must progress rapidly in their language study, and at the same time, they are also expected to gain a substantial understanding of Japanese culture and develop confidence and personal skills through effective communications. In 2016-17, seven students² took the module over two semesters and all were required to

¹ The authors of this paper were involved in the peer learning activities as teachers of the Japanese language modules.

² Out of the seven students, six were students on Japanese degrees and participated in the activities in both semesters, while two students on other degree programmes took part for one semester only. The latter two students did not plan to study abroad in Japan in the following year.

participate in the peer learning activities as part of the curriculum and assessment³. As for JYA, two different cohort of students participated in the peer learning activities in the first and second semester ('Semester 1' and 'Semester 2' hereafter). 12 Japanese students from the same Japanese university participated in the peer learning project on a voluntary basis in Semester 1, all of whom were enrolled on a six-month intensive course in academic English in the University's Language Centre (LC)⁴. In Semester 2, a second group of seven Japanese exchange students, who were taking courses in their specialised subjects at Leeds, volunteered to be peer learners.

3.2 Activities

3.2.1. Presentation project

In each semester the students were given a different main task to promote peer learning. The task in Semester 1 was to give a group presentation in the students' target language (i.e. LSJ spoke in Japanese, while JYA resented in English). The students were asked to form a group of 4-5 people and choose a topic freely which would appeal both to LSJ and JYA. Three in-class sessions of 50 minutes each were allocated for the peer learning activities⁵. The first half of each session was spent on ice-breaking activities, such as discussing the students' hometowns and recommending interesting places in Leeds. Both LSJ and JYA were allowed to speak in both languages freely to encourage effective communication. Although the main purpose was to give both LSJ and JYA an equal opportunity to use their target languages, recent studies have demonstrated that the use of

³ In response to the lack of participation by a few students in 2015-16, the project accounted for 10% of the overall assessment of the module.

⁴ Our special thanks both to Mr. Michael Parkin and Ms. Jessica Poole for helping us to recruit volunteers and liaise with their students.

⁵ In 2015-16, only two in-class sessions were arranged. However, in response to the students' feedback requesting more frequent class-time meetings, we added another in-class sessions for the interim report.

L1 in the language class has some merits in its own right (Nation, 2003). There was a two-week interval between session, and the whole of the final session was spent on the group presentations followed by questions and answers. The chosen topics of the four groups were “Tea culture in the UK and Japan”, “Regional specialities in the UK and Japan”, “Japanese and English proverbs” and “Slang in Japan and the UK”. The styles of the presentations were varied and included relatively formal Power Point presentations, a TV game show and a series of skits.

3.2.2. YouTube video project

Three class sessions were arranged for the peer learning activities in Semester 2 as well. The main task was for a group of 3-4 students to use their target languages to create a joint YouTube video featuring drama, skits, documentaries or game shows. Each group was also asked to provide the subtitles in the other language to make the video bilingual. The purpose of these tasks were not only to engage the students in creative and authentic linguistic activities, but also to provide them with an opportunity for in-depth communication among their group members through discussion and negotiation. Part of each session was devoted to discussion of more linguistically advanced matters, such as jokes and aspects of the target culture and people’s behaviour of which they were curious. This, it was hoped, would increase the students’ cultural awareness and arouse further curiosity about the target culture and society. Each class session in Semester 2 met approximately one month after the previous session so that the students could use their time for more effective planning. The out-of-class activities were monitored more closely by the teachers by making it compulsory for LSJ to submit weekly blogs about their activities with JYA and which were included in the module assessment. Although the importance of autonomous learning has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Little, 2003; Benson, 2007; Aoki, 2009), our pilot study

showed the need for the right balance between student autonomy and teacher support and monitoring (Oeda and Morimoto, 2016). The final in-class session was spent on viewing the three group videos. One video featured an imaginary TV show entitled “*totsugeki intabyu* (Surprise Interview)” where the group members conducted interviews using comical questions. Another compared student life in Japan and the UK and the third was a series of skits on common stereotypes as observed in Japan and the UK. All focused mainly on informal settings and used a wide range of colloquial expressions which were not covered in the usual class. They were also edited with effective subtitles and sounds which made the videos not only easy to follow but also entertaining both for LSJ and JYA.

4. EVALUATION

In order to evaluate the benefit and effectiveness of the peer learning activities, a set of online questionnaires – in English for LSJ and Japanese for JYA - was completed at the end of each semester. The questionnaires for LSJ and JYA were virtually identical apart from the omission of the question on preparation for the Year Abroad. The questions covered: student satisfaction; contribution; language and cultural learning; preparation for the Year Abroad; motivation for studying the target language; and personal development.

4.1. Feedback from Leeds students of Japanese

Five out of the seven students completed the questionnaire on the Joint Presentation project at the end of Semester 1. Their feedback was mostly positive, particularly in terms of learning ‘real-world’ Japanese and awareness of Japan’s culture and society. One student commented on the benefit of the informal settings saying it was ‘less daunting’ to have conversations in Japanese, while another said that ‘speaking to actual Japanese people in real situations was the best thing to learn from’. Also, most students seem to have felt that

the peer learning activities helped them, to some degree, to prepare for their year abroad in Japan. One, in particular, appreciated 'a lot of advice on Japanese etiquette'. Furthermore, they all thought that they had contributed to the activities, and most agreed that they had made some personal development, such as acquiring inter-personal skills and social skills through the activities.

Three of the seven students completed the questionnaire on the YouTube Project at the end of Semester 2. Although it is difficult to generalise from the feedback, a couple of things could be inferred from the comments received. Firstly, all three agreed that the project had helped them learn both the Japanese language and about the culture and society, just as the Joint Presentation project had done in Semester 1. This provides some evidence for our initial assumption that the peer learning activities with JYA would increase the opportunities for LSJ to learn the Japanese language and study the culture in a more practical way. We also discovered that the students generally felt the project had contributed to their personal development, although whether or not it had enhanced their motivation depended on the individual student. As the authors had anticipated, the students were strongly inclined to meet each other outside class more often and communicate intensively to achieve more complex tasks than those of Semester 1, such as deciding how best they could edit their videos and provide effective subtitles. Those tasks may have contributed to their sense of achievement.

4.2. Feedback from Japanese year abroad students

Nine out of 12 JYA students in Semester 1 completed the questionnaire and made mostly positive comments on the Joint Presentation project. All said that they enjoyed the project and agreed that it had helped them to make friends and socialise with other students. One commented that 'it was good to get close to the English students who are interested in Japan' and 'The members of my group have become and will continue to be my friends'. In addition, all but one thought that the project helped them learn English, and seven out of nine students even went as far as to say that they learned 'real-world' English more effectively through the peer learning activities than from their normal English class. One said it was very helpful to have his/her English script corrected by LSJ and to learn more natural English expressions, while another student said that s/he was able to communicate with LSJ in English without worrying too much about grammar as s/he did in formal classes. Furthermore, the vast majority agreed that the project was helpful both for learning about the British and other cultures and societies⁶ and increasing their motivation for learning English. One Japanese student expressed his/her pleasure at being able to communicate confidently with native speakers of English because s/he had often been criticised by his/her peer learners in LC for poor pronunciation. It is also worth noting that one student felt the need to study Japanese, as well as English, since it is not uncommon to realise how little one knows about the grammar of his/her own mother tongue when questioned by non-native learners.

Five out of 11 JYA students completed the questionnaire for the YouTube project in Semester 2, and their feedback, too, was fairly positive overall. All but one of the students strongly agreed that they had enjoyed the project. One commented that it was enjoyable to

⁶ In 2016-17 there was only one non-British student who came from the United States of America.

exchange ideas and discuss them with the British students while making the video. Another said that shooting the video together was great fun. In terms of language learning, while all of them thought the project was useful, as the authors hoped it would be, some seemed to find it particularly helpful to add the subtitles and to listen to themselves speaking in English in the video. There were particularly positive responses to the question on cultural learning such as 'I have come to understand English student life better through the interview [for the video]. I've found it particularly interesting to hear about part-time jobs [in the UK]'. All the respondents said what they thought was the best aspect of the project; these included the promotion of real communication, a sense of achievement, friendship, cultural learning and a sense of humour.

As discussed in Section 3, one of the drawbacks of the peer learning activities in our pilot study in 2015-16 was that some of the students did not collaborate with and contribute to their group as much as they were expected to, and some of the other students, particularly JYA, were annoyed and frustrated about this. However, the problem had resolved itself somewhat in 2016-17 according to two comments of JYA that they met in their group outside the class at least once a week for discussions, to shoot the video and provide subtitles. This improvement was attributed not least to the change in assessment and closer monitoring through the weekly blogs. As Aoki (2009) argues, teachers should monitor the progress of the learners and provide them with positive feedback and advice to sustain their motivation.

5. Conclusion

In this paper a case of peer learning between the post-beginner students of Japanese and Japanese year abroad students at the University of Leeds, focusing on the merits and some

problems of peer learning, was discussed. Based on the experience of our 2015-16 pilot study, in 2016-17 the structure and assessment of the projects were changed so that students met more frequently in the classroom and the teachers monitored and evaluated out-of-class activities more closely through student blogs. As a result, the problem of unequal contributions by students to the projects was resolved to some degree, and feedback both from JYA and LSJ was overwhelmingly positive. As previous studies, including our own pilot study, suggested, it was confirmed that peer learning activities do indeed enhance students' in-depth communication, cultural and linguistic awareness and personal development, such as self-confidence and motivation.

However, there were a few comments on the end-of-project questionnaire which indicated that equal contributions by all participants and student autonomy had still not been fully achieved. One student expressed strong frustration over the poor contribution of other members of the group when they created the video and s/he suggested that individual contributions, as well as those of the group as a whole, should be reflected in the module grade. Furthermore, as a couple of students pointed out, although it is important to promote autonomous and collaborative learning beyond the classroom, the timing of those activities should be more carefully planned so as not to conflict with other academic commitments. It is worth noting that this paper is based primarily on the online questionnaires at the end of each project and therefore does not show the students' developments in cultural understanding and motivation at different stages of the projects. Also, not all those who participated in the projects completed the questionnaire and those who did complete it did not provide detailed comments on their thoughts and feelings. We believe that the use of the triangulation method, such as interviews and students' diaries, may offer more insightful observations about the peer-learning activities in the future.

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