

Learning by Teaching: Japanese-English Bilingual University Students Tutoring High School Learners of Japanese On-line

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Abstract

This paper reports on a project involving students at The University of Queensland, Australia, in teaching practice in Japanese language education via an on-line distance environment. The students are bilingual in Japanese and English, and their mentees are introductory level learners in high schools in remote areas. The aim of the project is not only to teach the Japanese language to the students who are from areas with low proportions of students continuing to university, but also, through their interaction with university students, get to know something about university life and make aiming for university entrance a future possibility. Further, for the university students who are studying the teaching and learning of languages, the goal is to raise their consciousness regarding the languages they use and the content of their course by engaging them in work close to that of a teacher.

本稿は、オーストラリアのクイーンズランド大学の学生によるインターネットを使った遠隔日本語教育実習プロジェクトについて報告する。実習生は、日英両言語ができ、教える対象は、遠隔地のハイスクールで学ぶ初級レベル学習者である。このプロジェクトの目的は、大学進出率が低い遠隔地の学生に単に日本語を教えるだけではなく、大学生とのコミュニケーションを通じて大学生活の一端に触れることができ、将来に大学入学を可能にする考えを育てることだ。また、この実習プロジェクトに参加する大学生は、皆外国語教授法を勉強しているので、実際に近い経験を得られるコースの内容と言語について意識を高めることを目標にしている。

Introduction

On-line learning environments have vastly increased the opportunities for language learners to engage in self-directed study, to gain exposure to language-in-use and to interact with others for learning and social pursuits. This paper reports on a project of near-peer tutoring by university students, bilingual in Japanese and English who are studying in the applied linguistics course, Introduction to Second Language Learning and Teaching (SLAT2001), at the University of Queensland (UQ) in the city of Brisbane. The mentees are high school learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) who are situated in rural areas in south-east Queensland, Australia. The tutoring takes place through the platform of Adobe Connect which enables interaction through audio, webcam, text, document sharing and drawing tools. The aims of the project for participating students are multiple. The project offers the opportunity for language learning and consciousness-raising about the Japanese language and Japanese culture, and also provides participants with the opportunity to increase their competence in using Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). For the high school learners, the mentees, who are based in schools from which a low proportion of students continue to tertiary education, it also offers the opportunity to learn about tertiary education and cultural aspects of Japanese and, in so doing, makes tertiary study and continued Japanese language study an aspiration for the future.

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For the university students, the tutors, participation also offers the opportunity to engage in a real life application of the second language theories that they are introduced to in their coursework. The university student tutors plan, implement and reflect on the tutorial sessions in relation to their own experience as language learners and reflect on the second language acquisition (SLA) theories that they are learning about in their applied linguistics coursework. Participation enhances students' awareness of language and language learning in highly individualised ways depending on participants' own learning backgrounds and the unique relationship between the student and tutor. Following a paradigm similar to the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) concept, the tutors are participating in unpaid work in which they have to use their language and communication skills and problem solve in order to make a success of the tutoring.

Context

The teaching and learning of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) in Australian schools has a 100 year history. Currently, in the state of Queensland, the number of students studying Japanese in elementary and high schools significantly outnumbers those studying the next most popular languages French, German and Chinese. Numbers of Japanese learners grew steadily following the widespread introduction of Japanese in schools and at the University of Queensland during the 1960's (Nagata & Nagatomo, 2007). In Queensland, as in Australia in general, the majority of students discontinue Japanese study once the mandatory years are completed and language study becomes an elective, which is usually around Year 10 of the 12 year education system (de Krestler & Spence-Brown, 2010). Chilcott (2014) reported that only 6.84 per cent of Queensland final year (Year 12) students study a language other than English. Reasons for the high attrition in Japanese and languages in general are well understood (see for example, Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). However, in recognition of the high quality of students who enter university having chosen to pursue language study to high school graduation, the University of Queensland and a number of other universities, offer bonus rank points to students' high school exit scores. This improves their chances of acceptance into a university, and as an incentive, has anecdotally encouraged more high school students to continue foreign language study to graduation from high school and into tertiary study.

Against a background of compulsory language learning in the lower secondary school, some rural schools have found it difficult to provide face-to-face teaching in languages due to their small size and the difficulty of attracting suitably qualified teachers to regional areas. Also, languages tend to be considered a low priority discipline in many schools. However, because of the mandatory nature of languages, the Brisbane School of Distance Education (BSDE), a school under the auspices of the state government's Department of Education and Training (DET), steps in to provide these students with an on-line learning environment for Japanese and other languages and subjects where teachers are unavailable. The BSDE is also a main education provider for students who are unable to, or choose not to, attend traditional schools. A class of students in a rural school will spend up to one hour each week on-line with their BSDE Japanese language teacher and, in addition, engage in self-study of the Japanese curriculum materials, supervised by a local teacher at their school who does not have Japanese language skills. This environment has obvious limitations in terms of the time spent with the specialist Japanese teacher and the teacher's ability to meet individual needs of the student learners. Partners in the Widening Horizons (WH) project, lecturers in Japanese and French at UQ and teachers at the BSDE, saw the potential for using available technologies to extend the quality of the language learning experience for novice language students at high school through a tutoring relationship with a more experienced language learner attending university. The tutoring would add a further hour per week to the student's exposure to Japanese and could be individualised to suit their needs and interests.

Further to this, the program aimed to, as the title indicates, widen the horizons of the students in schools known as low socio-economic status (SES) schools from which less than average proportions of students continue to tertiary education. Tutors who are learners of Japanese can offer the high school mentees a window into the experience of tertiary education including their personal experiences of Study Abroad spent in Japan. Other tutors, who are exchange students from Japan, can give the mentees their first interaction with a native speaker of Japanese and are able to share their experiences of learning English in the classroom and experiencing life in Australia. The period of tutoring has culminated in a two day visit to UQ during which the mentees stay in a student residential college, tour the extensive campus and meet with their tutors and BSDE teachers in real life. As part of the program they do a short presentation in Japanese that they have worked on with their tutor, learn about tertiary education options and, finally, are treated to dinner at a Japanese restaurant. Through these experiences it was expected that the mentees would be more open to the possibility of university study through improved knowledge of the realities of university life, and this has the potential to motivate their subsequent studies and continuation of Japanese studies. Funding for the project was acquired through a Strategic Teaching and Learning Grant from the University of Queensland.

Organisation

Tutors for this program have been recruited each year through advanced level Japanese courses and through the student club 'Wasabi' whose membership is made up of students of the Japanese language and Japanese students studying on exchange at UQ. The tutors attend an information session about the WH program prior to the start of semester in addition to taking part in a one hour workshop on mentoring students and an introduction to the BSDE and the protocols of on-line teaching. It is a Queensland government child safety requirement that everyone working with children holds a *Blue Card* (Queensland Government, 2015) and so tutors must apply for one of these. Tutors are also introduced to the Japanese syllabus being studied at the high school and, during the first weeks of semester, visit the BSDE to observe a Japanese class being taught on-line. In the first week of semester the tutors contact the parents of the mentees to arrange a time for the weekly tutoring sessions and tutoring begins in the second week. Both the tutor and the mentee log in to a dedicated WH site on the UQ learning management system, Blackboard, through which they can access the Adobe Connect virtual classroom.

Over three years of the program, the bilingual university student tutors have included L1 English speakers continuing their study of Japanese and L1 Japanese speakers on exchange programs to UQ from their Japanese universities. In addition several 'background speakers', students of Japanese heritage, and students with one L1 Japanese speaking parent, have taken part. These have included a Japanese student who had relocated to Australia with his family when he started high school and another student of Australian and Japanese parentage who had initially been raised in a Japanese speaking environment in Japan and subsequently become immersed in English following relocation to Australia. The tutors, over the three years of the project, have therefore represented a broad range of cultural experience, varying proficiencies in Japanese and English, and have had very different formal and informal language learning backgrounds. Accordingly, they interpreted the theoretical material in the Introduction to Second Language Learning and Teaching course variously through the lenses of their own education, linguistic and cultural backgrounds and took quite different approaches to their tutoring.

Work Integrated Learning

For the university students the WH program fits with the category of learning activity which is often referred to as Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in the literature, and is also known as project-based learning, internship, and fieldwork education (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Preto, 2008). Universities are endeavouring to increase opportunities to integrate real world learning experiences such as internships into their curricula. For Japanese language students a period of time spent in Japan is the obvious way to enhance their language learning. However, tutoring in the WH program offers the university students the opportunity to not only use their language skills, but also to reflect on their own learning through teaching Japanese. While some of the tutors have been heading toward teaching careers, most of the students have been enrolled in humanities and science degrees with no particular interest in teaching as a profession. So while extra benefits may accrue to students involved in education, this program was concerned more with learning by teaching rather than learning to teach.

A 'National Scoping Study' on WIL (Patrick et al., 2008) emphasised the need to integrate working experiences into the curriculum, rather than to tack them on to courses in an unconnected way. Linking the WH program to the applied linguistics course has facilitated that integration. The students who tutored Japanese participated in a separate tutorial. This tutorial functioned as a forum to discuss the discoveries made about Japanese and learning Japanese that had emerged from the tutoring experience in the light of the theories introduced in the applied linguistics course. The tutorial was also an opportunity to discuss the successes and failures of the week-to-week tutoring, and to support the tutors in planning for their next tutoring session.

A point emphasised in the scoping study on WIL was that assessment for students involved in work-like placements must also be tailored to the experiences of students and should reflect the aims of the course. In the case of the tutoring, sixty per cent of the courses' assessment was designed to maximise reflection on the tutoring experience in relation to language learning theory. One assessment item is a reflective essay in which the tutors are required to give an account of their personal experience of tutoring by describing the Japanese learning contexts for the students provided through the BSDE and their own tutoring sessions, and to evaluate these learning environments in comparison to their own experience of learning Japanese. They were asked to select several areas of focus for their discussion such as the context (online environment, time-on-task), the learner (age, interests, experience), an aspect of affect (motivation, anxiety), learning strategies and the nature of the Japanese language. Tutors were also required to relate this to language learning theory and note instances of mismatch between theory and practice.

A second assessment item was a portfolio of their tutoring activities beginning with a profile of their mentee, including their language learning background and level of achievement in Japanese. They were also required to submit a set of their tutorial session plans. These plans detailed learning objectives, a description of planned activities and unplanned activities. The tutors appended resources, such as PowerPoint slides, that they had custom made for each session. Tutors evaluated the session in terms of planned and incidental outcomes, the level of student engagement, and recommendations for subsequent tutorial sessions. The Adobe Connect platform allows for the recording of the on-line sessions and so tutors can review their sessions and evaluate them.

These assessment items were designed to maximise reflection on tutors' practical experience, learning theory and their own experiences as learners of Japanese, or in the case of the Japanese native speaker tutors, their own language learning and their understanding of their own language and what it might be like to learn it in a formal environment.

Evaluation

The small scale of the WH program (3 to 5 tutors and 3 to 10 mentees per semester) and the diverse nature of the learning goals for participants – linguistic, pedagogical, cultural and social – means that the outcomes have been diverse. As a result of the unique relationships and backgrounds of each tutor/mentee pair and the leeway that they have for individualising the tutorials, the content and styles of the tutoring sessions have been wide-ranging. The outcomes seen as important to each student have been varied as reported in the written assignments prepared by the tutors as part of their assessment for SLAT2001. Ethical Clearance for Research Involving Human Participants was sought and received from the Human Ethics Unit of the University of Queensland to report on the content of these assignments, replacing participants' names with pseudonyms. The following is a window into the very individual experiences and concerns of three student tutors in relation to specific issues, such as

- their own learning of Japanese, their initial beliefs on language teaching /learning, and how these developed over the semester
- their tutoring styles, and
- their ability to adapt their tutoring style to the mentee.

Robyn

Robyn had studied Japanese at high school and was nearing the end of an extended major in Japanese for which she had an excellent academic record when she enrolled in the SLAT2001 course and took on tutoring. She tutored, in a joint weekly session, two 13-year-old Year 8 students who had been studying Japanese for one and a half years. The mentees (here referred to as Student A and Student B) had slightly above average achievement in Japanese (between B and C grade) and had been motivated by general interest in Japanese and, in A's case, a fascination with the Japanese scripts.

Robyn had in the past tutored tertiary students in biology but reported the first couple of weeks of tutoring Japanese as being, "...quite daunting, as I was still unsure of how to approach the tutoring sessions or how to interact with the students." However, following that, she wrote that the third session of tutoring went really well and at the end of the semester expressed confidently that her tutoring abilities and the quality of her interactions with the tutees had improved markedly. The written reflections on her lesson plans reported a significant amount of trial and error, and changes of approach due to either under-estimation or over-estimation of the language ability of the students, or to technological failures. During the first session Robyn had planned to get the students to do a brief self-introduction but found they could communicate other personal information, such as information about their families, and so she extended the activity. In Session 4 she had planned an activity based on talking about their pets but discovered the students didn't know certain grammar forms and relevant vocabulary in Japanese, so she skipped that activity.

Problems with the functionality of the technology caused many last minute changes to the tutorials. iConnect, an older platform, had to be substituted for Adobe Connect at one stage and Robyn felt the pressure of having to learn how to use it in a short space of time. Over the period of the tutorials she noted various other technological malfunctions that would occur suddenly such as receiving audio feedback and audio delays, which made natural conversation difficult. The quality of the internet connection also caused problems such as a sudden loss of connection, insufficient speed to share screens in order to show videos and share files, and webcam or audio failure on one side or the other. However, Robyn learned to work with these problem and developed alternative activities in case of failures as indicated in her report on Session 4, "*I had planned for the video not to work, and so had other things to move on to.*"

Robyn's reflective essay detailed her beliefs about language learning and decision-making that determined the shape of her tutoring sessions. She concluded that interactionist and cognitivist communicative approaches to teaching would not work in this situation given the very limited classroom-based exposure to Japanese that the students had and the fact that "*they are not yet at a level where they can participate in conversation found in a natural acquisition setting, even if it were modified input*". She drew on her own learning of Japanese to justify the use of structured vocabulary and grammar transmission activities at this level, writing that,

"While I believe that a communicative approach is almost essential in gaining full proficiency in a second language, most of my early Japanese acquisition was accomplished through grammar/vocabulary focused teachings, which set a firm foundation for me to then extend those grammar forms and move into higher level communicative based approaches."

Despite this, the tutorial plans showed that she had prepared a variety of activities for each tutorial which she saw as being enjoyable and which would retain the attention of the students. She sought to promote cooperation rather than competition between Students A and B whose strengths were complimentary. Student A was extroverted, focussed on visual and aural stimuli and enjoyed interaction but not repetition. Student B on the other hand was more proficient with reading and writing, less outgoing and often avoided oral production. Each tutorial involved a language introduction/practise element on a theme (e.g. personal information, numbers, script), a variety of media (e.g. PowerPoint slides, songs, anime) and a chat about something cultural which frequently turned to a discussion on the content of a Japanese animation.

Robyn's assignments showed a considered approach to her tutoring, and synthesis of the theories studied in the SLAT course through the reflection on the tutoring experience. For her, the complexity of the tutoring situation – the Japanese language, the context, the people, the content and the medium – put theory into a complex web of practical features that needed to be considered in approaching the tutoring task. She learned to expect that plans had to be put in place, but to be flexible in the delivery of them.

Geoff

The least productive tutoring relationship has been that between Geoff, a mature aged student of Japanese in his final semester of university study, and his mentee, Sam. Sam's family had hosted students from Japan for many years, however his grades were low, and his teacher reported his motivation as highly variable. Rapport did not develop over the course of the tutoring sessions. Sessions were missed and there was a lack of continuity. Geoff attributed the lack of success of the tutoring to Sam's lack of motivation. In his reflective essay and portfolio he reported a number of observations that led him to this conclusion. These included the student being '*tired and disinterested*', being late to log in, choosing not to reschedule a missed session and having consistently low retention of the language material presented and practised in previous sessions. Geoff also reported that the student

... consistently has no questions or requests for information pertaining to the week's subject matter. He has no clear answers to questions such as "What do you like about Japanese?", "What is your favourite thing?", "What is the hardest thing for you?", "What would you like to know?"

In contrast to the view of Sam reported by Geoff, I observed Geoff himself to be highly motivated to learn Japanese. He had developed many language learning strategies and pursued his own learning in areas outside of the content of his university Japanese courses. In university classes he often enthusiastically shared these strategies and his insights into learning Japanese

with his classmates, most of them two decades his junior, who were drawn to him, appreciative of his help. Geoff was therefore perplexed by and, perhaps unrealistically, disappointed at Sam's apparent lack of interest or effort. His lesson plans indicate that he had designed a range of activities to attempt to capture the interest of his mentee but that overall he had not managed to do so. He concluded that the student had been encouraged to participate in the program by well-meaning others, rather than being of his own initiative, and that Sam had seen the sessions more as a burden than an opportunity.

Geoff learned about the teaching/learning process through his failures. He, like most of the tutors, discovered at some stage that they had embarked on a grammar explanation that they either clumsily executed or that turned out to be too complex for the stage that the learner was at. Having only ever been the recipients of such explanations, tutors frequently recognised their incomplete knowledge of the structures or their lack of efficacy in communicating them to the mentees. Geoff related the following.

My intended introduction to the tai/takunai forms didn't work at all. I had chosen the form because I thought it was useful and simple, but I quickly found myself bogged down in 'u verbs', 'ru verbs', and 'verb stems' – terms that were too far beyond the level of the student to be of any benefit to him.

The tutoring relationship between Geoff and Sam was itself a point for reflection on the part of the program in terms of recruitment of mentees and early intervention. Geoff's portfolio and essay, however, both evidenced considerable understanding of SLA theories in relation to his tutoring experience, and so from the SLAT2001 course perspective, objectives of the program were fulfilled. For the mentee though, Geoff expressed his opinion that there had been scant benefit for Sam from his participation.

Yoshiaki

Yoshiaki and Michael's pairing, in contrast, was very positive. Yoshiaki was born into a Japanese family and initially raised in Japan. At the age of his entering high school his father decided to relocate the family to Australia. Yoshiaki, therefore, was a competent L1 speaker of Japanese when he arrived in Australia and he subsequently acquired English as a second language over five years of secondary education. He achieved university entrance through his studies conducted via the medium of English. He speaks fluent English with a slight accent and his writing is on a par with university peers. Yoshiaki volunteered for the WH tutoring while studying in a course entitled '*Japanese Language Teaching*' which is an advanced Japanese language course focusing on the content reflected in the title. He is interested in the teaching and learning of languages but does not wish to teach as a career.

From the start of tutoring, Yoshiaki took a confident approach to his role. His lesson plans were highly structured and behaviourist in approach, with clear objectives, the outcomes of which were measured formally at the end of each session. In his reflective essay he justified this with motivation and goal-setting theories and he judged his approach to be effective. His student, Michael, a 13-year old boy, was characterised by a BSDE teacher as being inconsistently motivated in learning Japanese and showing a modest level of achievement in the language. In contrast to this, Yoshiaki repeatedly commented on Michael's high level of enthusiasm and wrote that he was, '*...a very astute, positive student who had a very high aptitude for learning Japanese.*' He was impressed by Michael's ability to learn quickly and with ease and speed, judged by his ability to recall language introduced in earlier lessons. As part of each lesson Yoshiaki had aimed to teach five katakana characters in each session and did this by mnemonic methods and repetition which Michael had learned and retained.

Yoshiaki's reflections were frequently focused on motivation. He spent considerable time each week searching for visual images for his PowerPoint slides to not only connect language and meaning for Michael, but also to expose him to Japanese objects and events outside the student's experience that he thought would interest him. He discovered that Michael liked art and drawing. As project work that Michael could present during the culminating visit to UQ, Yoshiaki got Michael to post scanned copies of some of his drawings and Yoshiaki taught him to describe the content of them in Japanese. For other lessons he made slides of various styles of modern and traditional Japanese art forms, which he talked about with Michael. Yoshiaki commented that initially Michael had claimed that his motivation for learning Japanese was extrinsic; that he was looking to improve his university entrance score through continued language study. However, Yoshiaki wrote that he believed that he was also intrinsically motivated by the language and the content of the lessons. Yoshiaki was himself committed and enthusiastic. He stated that he regularly spent four to five hours planning the tutorials and finding material for the sessions.

Conclusion

Tutoring in the WH program was an authentic, highly contextualised learning experience for the university students. Tutors had to first, intimately understand the situation – the mentee and his/her qualities and abilities, the curriculum, the technological medium. They then had to plan, resource and implement tutoring sessions with multiple objectives of guiding the mentee in learning Japanese, becoming familiar with Japanese culture and in motivating them to continue their studies. They then had to reflect on this implementation in terms of practical outcomes and as an application of second language theories. Along the way they were engaged in interaction, creative pursuits and problem solving. For the exchange student tutors from Japanese universities and the urban local tutors it was an opportunity to broaden their cultural experience of Australia by learning about the rural locations and the communities in which the mentees live.

This kind of learning experience encompasses the attributes that universities identify as desirable in their graduates. The major categories of such attributes at UQ, for example are, In Depth Knowledge of the Field of Study, Effective Communication, Independence and Creativity, Critical Judgement, Ethical and Social Understanding. Involvement in WH for the tutors nurtures these attributes in a different way to the classroom experiences of Japanese learning. As Patrick et al. (2007) indicate, the planning of programs such as WH, require considerable resources in terms of workload, in this case that of BSDE and UQ staff, and can therefore be only offered to a small number of students. However the project synthesises the skills, knowledge and creativity of the bilingual and bicultural tutors and adds new challenges in the learning activity for these undergraduate students.

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