

Action research for the teaching and Learning of Japanese at Years 7 – 8 level in New Zealand: Does developing a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions in Japanese increase L2 output?

The following is a report prepared for the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education, on the paper I presented at the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers Conference, Wellington, July 2008.

Last year, our Intermediate School (Years 7 and 8 of schooling – students aged 11 and 12) introduced a languages programme, and I began teaching Japanese. Having spent a year and a half living in Japan and teaching English, I am certainly not a fluent speaker of the language, but was keen to share my knowledge and learn with my students. My class at Te Atatu Intermediate was a year 7/8 class, and I had a group of fifty-four students learning Japanese with me.

At the beginning of 2007, teachers at my school were invited to take part in a languages professional development. As part of this, each languages teacher completed an action research project.

As part of our research for these projects, we were introduced to ‘Instructed Second Language Acquisition’ by Professor Rod Ellis from the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

In addition to this, we learned about the steps involved in responsive action research:

1. Collecting data regarding current situation.
2. Analysing of data for ideas to action; identifying a line of inquiry.
3. Adopting a new practice to have a different, improved effect.
4. Checking the reaction to the change in practice.
5. Collecting data to evaluate results and effectiveness of the shift.

We then identified an area of focus for our own action research, identifying some personal goals for implementing change.

The question that I decided to address was ‘Does developing a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions in Japanese increase L2 output?’ I selected this question based on Professor R. Ellis’ 2005 research ‘Instructed Second Language Acquisition: A Literature review’. In this research, Ellis sought to answer the question ‘How can instruction best ensure successful language learning?’ Ellis identified 10 principles and I decided to focus on the first of these: ‘Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.’

Ellis found that native speakers use a very large range of formulaic expressions and language learners need a repertoire of such expressions for fluency. He identified that learners can rote-learn chunks or fixed sequences which they later break down for analysis. Based on this, Ellis suggests an initial focus on formulaic chunks.

My understanding of this principle led me to select my question because I wanted to enable my students to have greater opportunity for L2 output, and thereby achieve greater success. This was achieved by introducing them to a range of formulaic expressions which could be applied to various everyday situations and contexts. I felt that this would have a positive effect on student engagement and achievement as student confidence in using L2 would increase. By increasing the students' sense of self belief, they would experience a greater locus of control and become more self-motivated and self-monitoring.

Having identified this question I sought ways in which I could promote opportunities for students to use formulaic expressions.

A Team Solutions facilitator observed me at the start of my action research to collect baseline data. It was recorded that students were barely heard using formulaic chunks, and that these were somewhat limited and repetitive. My programme was very teacher directed. The large student numbers and limited resources meant that I gave students little opportunity for L2 output. There was little interaction between students. Much of my lesson was focused around listening and repeating drills, worksheets and listening comprehension tasks.

I had been unaware that my teaching style was so limited, and the baseline data collection was helpful in that it forced me to reflect closely and critically on my practice. It became apparent that as teaching Japanese was new to me I lacked the confidence to release control of the class.

To begin the process of my action research I introduced the concept of 'formulaic expressions' to my class, asking them what phrases they would like to know which could be applied to everyday situations in the classroom. Students responded well to being given this opportunity and were keen to know how to say simple phrases like 'can I borrow your ruler?', 'Excuse me', 'what is the time?' etc. I compiled a list of these expressions in a table format which students were able to paste into the inside cover of their Japanese books for quick reference. This proved to be extremely helpful for the students, as it enabled everybody - even the less able of my pupils - to participate in class discussions using the target language. These formulaic expressions were also made into posters which were displayed around the classroom. This allowed students to participate in classroom discussions in Japanese very easily - at a glance. As a group we were able to update this wall as new phrases became appropriate.

In addition to this, I developed a system for formally starting and ending Japanese lessons. I would greet the students in Japanese and bow to them, and they would return the greeting. Lessons were finished in the same manner. This allowed the students to change their 'mindset' to Japanese, and marked not only the beginning of the lesson, but also the focus of employing the L2 target language wherever possible.

Within the classroom I also increased my own usage of Japanese in the way of classroom instruction, social interaction and classroom management. I encouraged the students to

respond to questions from me or their peers in Japanese as much as possible. Phrases such as 'hurry up', 'sit down', 'well done', 'let's go' have become a part of our classroom culture, and are used throughout the day in different curriculum areas. For this reinforcement it was fortunate that I was teaching Japanese to my own core class.

One strategy that I employed for increasing student interaction, which proved to be very successful, was increasing student opportunities for interaction through the use of ICT, including our interactive whiteboard, computers and internet, and video cameras. This scaffolded students in their verbal interactions, and had a huge motivational effect, increasing student engagement, as visual/kinaesthetic learners - and boys - were hooked in! Through this intervention I found that students had more control over their learning, as they were using interactive tools and were therefore more involved (as opposed to my previous 'chalk and talk' style). Students experienced greater independence, and their language learning became more real and relevant to them, as it connected to their lives in our information/communication age.

At the end of the action research in Term 4, a Team Solutions facilitator observed me once again to collect end point data. There was a significant increase in student engagement and motivation. Students were motivated to learn more and enjoyed being able to respond appropriately in Japanese class as well as across other curriculum areas. Knowledge of certain expressions became spontaneous, demonstrating a greater understanding of the L2 target language. At my end point data collection students were recorded using formulaic chunks regularly, and these phrases varied greatly. It was noted that students were able to respond accurately in Japanese when requested to 'please come', and that they were also able to correct and encourage each other in Japanese.

I noticed that students were much more confident in trying out new Japanese that they had learnt, becoming greater 'risk takers'. Students were becoming adept at applying their knowledge of Japanese in authentic contexts in both their teacher and peer interactions. Students regularly referred to the phrase guides in their exercise books, asked questions and had the confidence to communicate with visiting Japanese students.

My findings clearly demonstrated that the changes to my teaching practice had had a positive effect on student learning of the target language. Students were highly engaged and actively sought opportunities to use the Japanese language in various contexts. Students interacted more, both with the teacher and with their peers, during Japanese class, which led to an improvement in their general understanding, fluency and attitude towards learning Japanese.

Through my action research, it became apparent to me that by making the learning authentic and relevant to the students, they had become more motivated and engaged. Once students could see the 'usefulness' of the expressions they were being taught, and were given opportunities where they could apply their knowledge, they were more motivated and 'switched on' to the learning. By encouraging the students to learn some useful formulaic expressions I was allowing them to experience success very early on in their language acquisition.

The course reinforced for me that it is valuable for us as facilitators of learning to regularly reflect on our teaching practice. In this way we continue as learners ourselves, who are committed to creating rich learning environments.

Throughout my experience I was given a range of different ideas for resources, including various websites, the activities available on TKI, the Hai kit, and reading books in Japanese, to name a few. I was also introduced to the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education, a group who are dedicated to assisting students and teachers of Japanese. They have provided me with some excellent resources, including the 'what a relief' kit, which I have found to be very 'user friendly' in supporting my classroom programme, not to mention a fantastic time-saver when it comes to preparing resources!

In addition to this the Sasakawa group provided me with the opportunity to take part in the 2008 NZALT Languages Conference, through the provision of a Conference Paper Presentation Award, for which I am extremely grateful. As a teacher of Japanese I would encourage anyone to look up their website, as there are all sorts of opportunities out there. The NZALT conference was a truly inspiring event - a wonderful opportunity to mix with other language teachers and share ideas. I especially enjoyed the various Japanese language electives that were available. A highlight for me was the workshop taken by Kosaku Kimura, who shared fantastic resources for ICT use in the classroom - I know my students will love it!

I have benefited greatly from the ideas and experiences of other Japanese teachers, and am keen to put some of these new ideas into practice on my return to my language classroom. I am looking forward to the next conference in 2010!

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July 2008