



# Gambaru: Japanese students' learning persistence

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In this paper, the Japanese concept of gambaru, or the belief that one can achieve high status through persistent effort, is examined through the best experiences writing of Japanese university students. It was remarkable how many students referred to very difficult situations that they had found themselves in—a best experience was often interpreted as one in which great effort or sacrifice had overcome adversity. An analysis of the texts reveals a number of salient themes that lend support to the pervasive nature of gambaru in Japan. Three ways are suggested in which language teachers can use this *cultural learning theory* of gambaru to their advantage when teaching Japanese students: to push students more, to use experiences of persistence as lesson content, and to use gambaru beliefs as a way to raise student self esteem.

本稿では日本の大学生が「一番良かった経験」について書いた文章に基づき、日本のコンセプトである「がんばる」について考察する。いかに多くの学生が過去に努力をしたり犠牲をはらったりしたために困難を乗り越えられたというエピソードを、「一番良かった経験」と解釈しているのは驚くべきことである。これらの文章の分析から浮かび上がったテーマが、日本における「がんばる」という概念をよくサポートしている。本論文では日本人の学生を教えるときに、この「がんばる」という文化に根ざした概念を活かす3つの方法を提示する。一点目は学生をもっと後押しすること、二点目はこのようながんばった経験を授業内容として取り上げること、三点目はがんばるという概念を使って学習者の自信をつけることである。

## Cultural learning theories

**C**ultural learning theories are a society's own beliefs and values concerning how something should be taught or learnt. Such theories are based on those of *situated learning* (Lave & Wegner, 1991), in which education is treated as an identity making process that takes place within communities of practitioners. This kind of learning can be summarized as learning by *doing* rather than by being taught. Examples of research on these kinds of learning communities in Japan have been mainly anthropological, including research on potters and shellfish divers (see Singleton, 1998).

My own interest in this area has focused on sports and language learning communities and I have claimed that there are common practices arising from cultural learning theories in Japan which cut across these different communities (Cowie, 2006). The types of practices which can be seen in language classrooms in Japan include isolated skills practice, transmission of deep knowledge about a language, and a focus on form and accuracy. These practices are not seen in all classrooms and are not used by all teachers but they are probably frequent enough. It is possible that underlying these practices are a number of cultural beliefs about how languages are learned (or should be taught): for example, that it is not necessary for a teacher to provide practice opportunities in a lesson but that the learner themselves should decide for themselves how to deal with any linguistic input they receive. A positive view of this belief is that it encourages learners to be more autonomous whereas a more negative interpretation is that teachers abdicate responsibility for learning.

A further key Japanese cultural belief is that learners need to be persistent in their efforts to master a language, or indeed any skill. This is not unique to Japan – almost every culture, to a degree, has a belief that it is important to try hard and be persistent if one is to achieve success in anything. However, I believe that the concept of persistence in Japan, *gambaru* (Singleton, 1989), is so pervasive that it has important ramifications for language learning. The term *gambaru* can be heard in many forms and in many contexts on a daily basis. A number of my own students in a writing class translated it as *work hard*, *do your best*, *fight*, or *guts*. This *hard* version was the most common, but interestingly,

a few students wrote that it can also mean *take it easy* or *good luck*, and that it is a form of phatic discourse to ease social relations. A slightly more formal definition from a Japanese sociologist is that *gambaru* is “the belief that one can achieve high status through persistent effort” (Sugimoto, 1997, p.256).

In this paper I will describe in what ways university students refer to the concept of *gambaru* and examine what implications this may have for teaching and learning.

### The study

I teach a number of general conversation classes to first-year university students. Each class has between 25 and 50 students, usually all from one faculty such as economics, science, or education. The classes meet once a week for 90 minutes during a 15 week semester. For homework each week the students write one page about the topic that they will discuss in the following lesson in a B5 notebook. There are two main forms of external motivation for students to do the homework: I check and grade the notebooks twice a term, and it helps the students to talk more in the lesson. There are a variety of homework topics including *Who do you admire?*, *What are your hopes for the future?*, and *Is Japan equal?*

One of these topics was *The best experiences you have had*. When I looked through the student responses I found that it was remarkable how many students referred to a *best* experience as one in which great effort or sacrifice had overcome adversity. I decided to investigate further and see if there was a link with *gambaru*.

I collected 300 papers written about best experiences in seven different classes in 2005 and 2006. From these I selected 66 examples that included reference to some kind of persistence (trying hard or overcoming a problem). These 66 examples were then divided into four clear areas: sports (23 entries), study (25), school festivals and arts or dance (14), and others (4). There were a few entries that referred to both sport and study. The length of the excerpts referring to persistence was from one line to several paragraphs. Here are some examples from sport, study and the school festival which give a flavour of the students' ideas.

*I ran every day with team mate and I could make best friends. Because practice was very hard I learned not to give up and enduring. The experience bring me up.*

*I have studied hard when I was a high school student. Thanks to studying hard I could pass OU. Studying for university was difficult but this effort is not in vain. I think an effort for something is necessary and it makes us better. Because of this effort my university life will become my best experience.*

*We used much time for dance. We must make dance costume, choreography. We stayed at school to make dance everyday. I worked very hard so these days make me grown up.*

## Results

Firstly, it is interesting to note just how many references there were to persistence of some kind - about 20% of the student responses involved descriptions of some kind of *gambaru* experiences. It is important to note that the students were not asked to write about how they had overcome difficulties or how they had worked hard. Instead they had been asked to write about their best experiences. Some of the topics that were mentioned did include more expected responses: travel, meeting new friends, getting a driver's license, and attending pop concerts. However, the fact that about 20% of the students decided to write about a difficult time in their life and were willing to describe it as a *best* experience is significant.

Secondly, of the three categories one specifically involves learning in school (study) and the other two, sports clubs and the school festival, are also connected to school and do involve learning in some way—learning sports techniques, how to get on with others, or how to manage a project. This fairly narrow set of themes is probably to be expected as the students were just out of high school and probably somewhat limited in the life experiences that they have had. Although this in itself is perhaps not surprising the fact that these students wrote about learning persistence in a positive way is something that language teachers may be able to turn to their advantage when teaching such students.

A third feature of the texts was that the students described some kind of study or hard work which resulted in self-development or maturation and change for the better. Many of the students expressed how they were proud of their own efforts and that through their own struggles they had

succeeded—for example, in entering university, or winning a competition, or carrying out a successful concert. The students write with a sense of justice that they did well because they tried so hard. Such efforts were often individual but could be made at the behest of a teacher or club coach, or in collaboration with friends and class-mates. There seem to be a range of social pressures, from self to school, which are exerted on the students to do well.

### Discussion

I think that there are a number of teaching implications suggested by this study: to push students more, to use *gambaru* as lesson content, and to examine ways to raise student self esteem.

To begin, it seems that there is some support here for the idea that the concept of *gambaru* is one Japanese *cultural learning theory* that is strongly embedded in the beliefs of many university students. If that is the case then language teachers should not be afraid to exploit this tendency for students to work hard and struggle with difficulties. I am not suggesting overloading the students with work or making their study harder than it should be; but, there must be ways in which teachers can push their students to learn. One way in which I do this, for instance, is to show that I have high expectations and encourage students to do a lot of work outside the classroom. I ask my students to write every week for homework and almost all do—some spending a lot more time on the task than I would ever imagine: up to three hours in some cases.

Secondly, the texts that the students produced are, I think, extremely motivational in themselves and might be useful

lesson content for other students to think about and to reflect on their own examples of *gambaru*. Below is one story that I think would be suitable for this. Readers who are not familiar with the term *manager* should note that this is not the team's coach but a female assistant to a male team. This is a very common role in Japanese sports clubs where such girls/women help at team practices carrying equipment, giving drinks, and even washing sports clothes.

*I was manager of basketball club boys when I was a high school student. It was very hard. We had club every day. Holiday was only December 31<sup>st</sup>, January 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. In fact I worried about retiring the club... it was very hard to me physically and mentally...after joining the club my grade was clearly down. Because I lived a little far from the school I came late and exhausted when I reached my house. Then I didn't do much study or review. I couldn't understand and I lost my motivation I could get so much weight. So it was very very hard and I had many trouble because of that. However I don't regret rather I'm proud of having been a member of that. I experienced many lessons from the coach, games, practices and members. How hard we try, we don't always succeed. But the efforts are sure to be of use in our life. We must have efforts to get our 'person level' up! The person who can't do what he must do can't do anything...The days as a member of basketball club had grown me up.*

I think that this is a very moving episode from this student's life centering on the conflict she had between

study and her club activities; a conflict that many other students can relate to. As well as looking at such stories it might be beneficial to get students to identify episodes in their own lives where they have previously succeeded through persistence. This might be particularly appropriate, if handled sensitively, for students who do not appear to have very high self-esteem or show evidence of “learned helplessness” (Dweck, 2000)—their own personal belief that they have previously failed at something and therefore will automatically fail again. Many students have previously *failed* at language learning in school and fully expect to fail again at university or junior college (Sakui, 2006). Showing them that they have succeeded at something in the past, and tuning them in to that cultural pre-disposition for *gambaru* may just boost these students' self image and encourage them to try again at languages.

One contradictory note that emerges from the student writing is that it is not clear how these students are socialised into making persistent effort. Some students clearly indicate that they succeeded through their own individual efforts whilst others did so in collaboration with friends or by being pushed by a teacher or coach. It is also interesting to see the distinction between school study and sports where there are frequent mentions of a teacher/coach figure and that of the school festival where the students were much more autonomous in their actions. This begs the question as to how far a teacher can push students and whether students do expect to be able to learn collaboratively. I am particularly keen to encourage pair and group work in my students but perhaps I should be a little more sensitive to the fact that many students may expect to struggle on their own. One can

take heart from a study by Hemmi (2006) in which she has found some evidence that Japanese students do expect to make a lot of effort and take responsibility when they work in a group, and that “learners' happiness may, in some cases be gained through hardships” (p. 6). This is one area that I would like to research more. One approach might be through attribution theory (Fincham & Hewstone, 2001; Weiner, 1986), investigating what reasons students give for their persistence, or lack thereof, in language learning.

Finally, it is interesting to note that students wrote about *gambaru* when asked to write about their best experiences. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper who suggested that it might be worth assigning the topic of *bad experiences* or others to test if students would write about *gambaru* in a similar way.

## Conclusion

This study has produced some evidence from student writing to support the claim that there are specific Japanese cultural learning theories. One of these is the strong belief in the value of persistent effort or *gambaru*. If it is the case that many Japanese students have a pre-disposition to trying very hard then language teachers may be able to use this belief to push their students a little bit further than they may already be doing so. Obviously this needs to be done sensitively and with regard for those students for whom *gambaru* has not worked in the past for learning languages. It is also important for teachers themselves to be made aware of the extent of such cultural learning theories—teachers may understand them at an intellectual level but not realize how deeply embedded these beliefs can be.

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