

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Role models for language identity: A video project

## *Changing students' self perceptions*

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Japanese learners of English often have low self efficacy, lack socially defined linguistic self-confidence and are demotivated by their low self-confidence and the image that English is difficult and/or not for them. To give students positive role models and help them redefine their self-images, mainstream Japanese faculty members were interviewed in English on video. They answered discussion questions from the English program. The resulting interviews were used as the basis of English class listening and discussion materials. The students reacted very positively to the videos and reported increased attention, motivation and sense of connection to English.

日本人英語学習者は、低い自己効力感、不十分な社会的に定義された言語に対する自信のため、また英語は難しく、自分達にはむいていないという思いこみによって、やる気をなくしてしまいがちです。英語学習者に対して、ポジティブなロールモデル(模範になる人)を提供し、自己イメージの再確立を促すために、英語教育を専門としない日本人教師の英語インタビューをビデオ撮影しました。日本人教師は、英語プログラムで取り上げられる討論議題について回答し、そのインタビュー映像は、英語クラスのリスニングや討論のための教材として使用しました。英語学習に対する興味ややる気が増した、また英語を身近に感じるようになったという意見など、教材としてのビデオに対する生徒からの反応も前向きなものでした。

**J**apanese learners of English often have a problem seeing themselves as bilingual, or as speakers of English, and their motivation suffers as a result. This paper examines a project in which mainstream Japanese faculty members were interviewed in English discussing class topics with the resulting videos being used as the key element in a listening and discussion based English course. The rationale for the project, its procedure, and its results are described below.

## Motivation

Motivation is an extremely complex construct with multiple dimensions. The relevant issues of motivation for this study are self-efficacy, socially defined linguistic self-confidence, and the notion of demotivation.

Self-efficacy is the idea that learners begin with a predetermined notion of their levels of success. This impacts greatly on their motivation. If they believe from the outset that success is within their grasp, they will reach for it. Conversely, if they have a predetermined notion that they cannot succeed, they will be much less likely to put effort into the task (Dörnyei, 1998). In the writer's experience, Japanese learners, on the whole, can be seen as having low self-efficacy in terms of language learning. They tend to have high language learning anxiety (Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 2001), and many students come into university English classes already lacking motivation to learn English (Koizumi & Matsuo, 1993). This is especially true in rural areas where the students do not see English as a relevant part of their futures (Miyazato, 2001). In effect, they have an expectancy of failure and thus do not strive for success.

This expectancy that English is hard is not confined to university classrooms. Self-confidence in language learning situations can often be influenced by cultural factors. A given learner's self-confidence is influenced by their culture and society. It is defined by the attitudes of society at large, and the learner's particular community (Clement, Gardner & Noels, 1994). In Japanese society there seems to be a widespread belief that English is difficult and that Japanese people cannot and do not need to learn it. Socially defined linguistic self-confidence seems to be lacking. As a result,

learners often seem to define themselves as monolingual. The sentiment, "We are Japanese so we don't speak English," is not unusual among Japanese EFL learners in undergraduate programs (Hadley, Jeffrey & Warwick, 2001, p.3), and many learners tend to feel that English is something that is either American or British and could never really be something for Japanese people (Bayne, Usui & Watanabe, 2002). They do not see themselves as members of the global community of English speakers (Kowalski, 2002).

Demotivation also seems to be important in the Japanese context. Dörnyei (2001), working with Hungarian learners, identified several factors that could detract from language learning motivation. This list of demotivational factors includes (in no particular order) negative experiences with current and former teachers, poor school facilities and materials, low self-confidence, bad opinions of the L2 or the L2 culture, negative attitudes of other group members, and the fact that language study is mandatory. Working with Japanese learners of English, Falout and Maruyama (2004) found that low self-confidence and a negative attitude towards English itself were the two most prevalent factors in demotivation in university EFL classes.

## Changing students' perceptions

If we accept the proposition that students' negative perceptions are socially defined, one way of changing them that seems promising is based on giving the students role models (Murphey, 1998). If they see a non-native speaker from their own community working confidently and effectively in English, they will have a chance to develop a positive language identity in English (McKay, 2002). In the

Japanese context, this means exposing learners to Japanese speakers of English using unscripted and unrehearsed English to express themselves authentically.

### Current language role models

The language role models currently available to many English learners in Japan are a mixed bag. On the one hand, positive role models seem to have been few and far between. Few students have had direct exposure to English speakers (native or non-native) outside school. In pop culture, effective speakers of English have been hard to find. Television dramas have often portrayed interactions with English speakers as a source of discomfort for the characters. Difficulties studying English have often been shown as being a natural part of life, or even cute. Even in educational programming, language learners have often been shown making mistakes, which then need to be corrected by the expert Japanese presenter or a native speaker.

On the other hand, the situation does appear to be changing. There is more and more acknowledgement of the role of Japanese teachers of English as models, not only of the language itself, but also of positive language identity. Miyazato (2007) identifies this role as one of the assets that Japanese English teachers bring to the classroom. And recently in pop culture, Japanese characters with foreign language competence are increasingly being shown. In educational programming as well, Japanese speakers of English are being showcased more and more for what they can do rather than what they cannot. One excellent example of this is NHK's *Eigo De Shaberenaï To*, which regularly profiles successful Japanese people who use English effectively and confidently.

### Mainstream Japanese faculty – An untapped resource

While Japanese teachers of English can act as effective role models of language identity, it may also be good for learners to have role models who are not language specialists; that is, people whose profession is not tied to English, and who have not dedicated their education to English but who none the less use English as part of their professional and private lives. It is also beneficial to the learners if the role models can be close to the students' own experiences, backgrounds, and communities. Murphey (1998) advocates using fellow students as *Near Peer Role Models* for language learning. He says that learners benefit from role models who are "close to one's social, professional, and/or age level, and whom one may respect and admire" (Murphey & Arao, 2001 para. 5).

This project proposes that in a university context mainstream Japanese faculty members can be effective role models, despite being somewhat remote from the learners' age and social position. They often have a very high degree of competence in English, and have had some of the same experiences as the students in undergraduate language programs. They are also respected and well-known members of the students' community.

### The video project

Though mainstream faculty members can be excellent role models for language identity, logistical constraints make it impractical to have faculty members participate as guest speakers or in mentoring roles on anything other than an irregular basis. However, if mainstream faculty members are

captured on video, this can be used as often as is needed in language classes.

In this project a total of nine faculty members from Niigata University of International and Information Studies (seven Japanese, one Korean and one Russian) were interviewed on video. They were asked their opinions on a variety of topics from the English curriculum (see table 1). They were not interviewed as content experts, but rather as educated laypersons sharing opinions. These video interviews were then edited together to make class DVDs. These DVDs became the basis for listening comprehension and discussion tasks in the advanced classes of the Communicative English Program as described in Hadley (2006).

**Table 1. Sample topics discussed by mainstream faculty members on the interview DVDs**

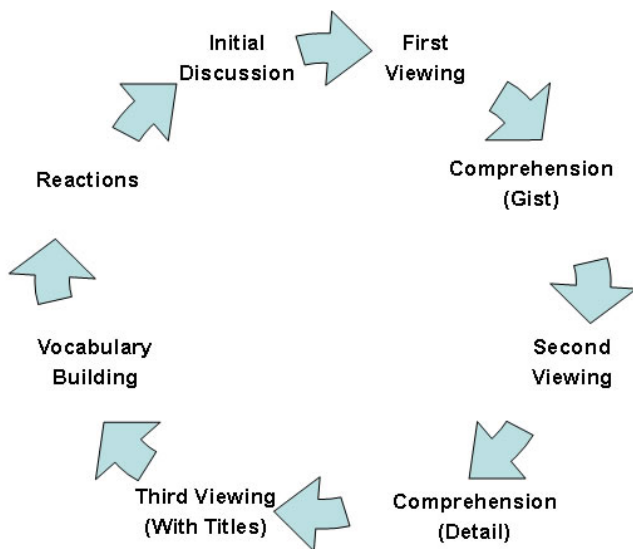
Topic	Examples of Interview Questions
Immigration into Japan	Are you in favor of a more open immigration policy? Would an open immigration policy be popular in Japan?
Smoking in Public	Would you support a ban on smoking in public places? In such a ban, what spaces would be defined as “public”?
Language Choice	Why is English the 2nd language of choice in Japan? In the future, what language(s) might become a global language?

Topic	Examples of Interview Questions
Japan’s economy	Are you optimistic about the future of Japan’s economy? How will the rise of the BRICS countries affect Japan?
Youth Culture	What factors have lead to the rise in NEETs and FREETERs in Japan? Is “Boys be Ambitious” still an appropriate motto for the youth of Japan?
Rich vs. Poor	Has the gap between rich and poor in Japan been growing recently? What can / should the government do to reduce the gap?

The faculty interview DVDs were used as part of a 5-day lesson cycle. For four 90-minute lessons, the learners participated in reading, vocabulary building, discussion, and other tasks based on a central theme. On the fifth day, the DVDs were used to both wrap up and expand on the ideas covered in the first four classes.

Video Day classes followed a standard format (see figure 1). A typical listening class started with an initial discussion of the topic followed by three viewings of the relevant faculty interviews. After the first viewing, learners completed general comprehension questions. Detailed comprehension questions followed the second viewing. The third viewing was used a basis for vocabulary building activities. Teachers then had the option of a fourth viewing using a version of the interview captioned with a summary of the interviewee’s statements. After viewing the video and completing the tasks, the learners then revisited the initial

discussion questions and took them up again in light of what they had seen on the DVD.



**Figure 1. Standard class pattern for Video Day**

There were several challenges in preparing and implementing the CEP Interview Project. First and foremost was the challenge of recruiting faculty members to participate in the interviews. They are naturally busy and could well be reluctant to participate in a project outside their own fields. There may also have been reluctance to showcase their English, which they may have thought of as imperfect and not good enough to show to students. This

hurdle was overcome through years of positive relationship building on the part of current and previous English faculty members. Some mainstream professors were occasional guest speakers in English classes in the past and had positive experiences. Recruiting interviewees was also made easier by the small and close-knit nature of the school's faculty.

Planning was also a challenge for this project. Interviewing the faculty, editing the videos and making the DVDs was a time-consuming process. In order for the video interviews to accurately reflect the other class contents, curriculum and teaching decisions had to be made well in advance. The class was carefully and fully laid out a full three months in advance of the first lessons so that the video interviews would match the class contents.

Another issue came in preparing the class materials to accompany the videos. The video interviews were a real challenge for the learners' listening skills. Firstly there was the simple issue of the sound quality of the recording. The videos were made with home video equipment and without professional guidance. Thus the quality of the sound was not always high. Also the interviewees were asked to speak naturally. They were not scripted and did not simplify their English to suit the students in any way. This made their language authentic with all of the hesitations, fillers, and overlaps common to unplanned speech. A final difficulty came from the language used by the interviewees. They tended to speak at a language level above what the students were used to. And, being professors, they naturally tended to speak in a rather detailed and in-depth way. These factors combined to make the video interviews very challenging for the students.

This issue of the depth of the professors' comments was judged to be the most serious and was overcome in several ways. Firstly, *Video Day* was scheduled to be the last day of a given topic. This gave the learners a chance to work with and internalize many of the relevant concepts before seeing them on the video. It also gave the English class teacher a chance to include many of the key new words or collocations used on the video in activities so that students had, at least, a receptive understanding of them. Another strategy used to make the videos more accessible to the students was in the design of the class materials. The materials included all of the key vocabulary points in print, and the comprehension and discussion questions were designed to lead the students to fuller understanding. A final strategy to simplify the videos was preparing captioning. The DVDs were prepared with two versions of the interviews. The first was not captioned. The second was captioned with a running summary of the professors' points (see figure 2). This captioned version was not a direct transcription but it could be used to check and reinforce students' understanding.

## Discussion

### *Teachers' reactions*

The interview videos were used by four different teachers in the first year of the project. Two teachers used the videos cursorily, using them in one or two lessons, while the other two teachers used the videos extensively, teaching with them as a key element of the course curriculum.

All four teachers reported positive results with the videos. The two teachers with brief experience with the videos



Figure 2. Example of captioning.

reported enthusiastic student reactions and said that they were able to take the class to a deeper understanding of the issues through using the video interviews.

The two teachers with widespread experience with the videos also reported positive student reactions. They both reported that *Video Day* was one of the highlights of the course. Both also reported that the extensive planning, materials development, and team-teaching required to integrate the video interviews into the course resulted in a closer working relationship and better overall classes. They also reported a greater sense of community with the school as a whole. It is rare for any educational experience to integrate so many faculty members from so many specialties. The English class teachers enjoyed working with the DVDs as a shared platform where the whole school worked together to help the students.

### **Interviewees' reactions**

Before and immediately following the initial taping sessions for the interviews, the mainstream faculty members who participated in the project seemed to have common feelings about the videos. All participants expressed some degree of embarrassment and worry that their English level was insufficient to be used as an example for students. However, when the videos began to be used in class, the reaction changed somewhat. The majority of participants were happy to have been a part of the project. Several commented in informal discussions that as long as the students were getting something out of it, they were pleased with the results. There seemed to be a great deal of interest in how the project was progressing. Almost all of the interviewees asked the teachers involved repeatedly if the videos were really being used and how the students were reacting to them. This had the somewhat unexpected result of improving the relationship between the mainstream tenured faculty and the non-tenured English instructors. Thus a sense of collaboration and community were a byproduct of the project.

### **Students' reactions**

The students' reactions to the video interviews were gauged through both class observations and interviews conducted with students after a semester of using the DVDs in class.

Class observations were almost universally positive. The students were engaged in the materials and excited to hear what their professors had to say in English. They were more focused and interested in the *Video Day* materials than they were in other class materials. The interviews seemed to spark

their curiosity, and they wanted to know more about the topics and were pleased to identify areas where they did and did not agree with what their professors had said. They also noted and actively commented on similarities and differences between opinions and ideas expressed in earlier classes and the ones expressed by the interviewees.

The students were also very impressed with how well the professors spoke English. Many students commented in class that they didn't know that their professors spoke English until they had seen them on video. Several students also reported that listening to the professors' deep explanations of the issues brought home the fact that the students' own English still needed work. But they also said that they now had a goal and a sense that the goal was achievable.

There were three especially encouraging signs that stood out in the class observations. The first came on the first test day of the semester. The majority of students referred to the ideas on the DVDs in their test answers and several were able to quote individual professors' comments. This pattern was seen throughout the semester. The second positive sign was when several students expressed interest in seeing the interviews outside of class. Student who were absent on *Video Day* did not want to miss the video, and students who were present asked to borrow the DVDs to review at home. This led to copies of the DVDs being placed in the university library's self-access center for the students to watch there. The third sign came in the second semester. Without any prompting from the teachers, students continuing in the class from the first semester described the videos to new classmates. The returning students said that they were strongly hoping to continue studying with the interview videos.

The only real negative point observed in class was that the listening level of the videos was quite challenging for the students. It was difficult due to both the sound quality and the depth of the interviewees' comments. This was observed in an early pilot version of the course and led to some changes in the accompanying class materials (described above) to make the videos more accessible.

Following a complete semester of using the videos, several students were interviewed to gauge their reactions. Their comments were almost entirely positive and enthusiastic. They can be grouped into three categories: reactions to the videos, practical matters, and lasting impressions of the project.

The students had very strong reactions to the video. They were surprised and impressed to see their professors speaking English even though they were not English teachers. The students were especially interested and tended to listen more carefully when one of their own professors appeared on the video. Several students commented that they felt that the class as a whole was generally excited when they knew that that day's lesson was a *Video Day*.

On a practical level, most students noted that listening to more than one professor speak about the same topic and thinking about the similarities and differences between the comments helped them clarify and deepen their own ideas. Some interviews were naturally harder to understand than others, but this seems to have been related to the content rather than the language used by the interviewees. Although the professors' comments were sometimes hard to understand because they spoke very deeply and used technical words, the students who were interviewed said that they did not want simplified videos.

The captioned version of the interviews, developed to make the videos more accessible, seems to have been successful. All of the students said that it helped them understand new vocabulary and grammar structures used by the professors as well as confirm their understanding of the professors' comments. It was an important part of the *Video Day*. However, most students did not want to watch only the captioned version. They wanted to watch the uncaptioned version first. Some students also mentioned that having *Video Day* at the end of the study cycle was helpful since the videos allowed them to understand the class topic better and consolidate their ideas. On the other hand, studying the same topic for four days before *Video Day* helped other students understand the interviews.

The students' lasting impressions of the video project were unanimously positive. For them, *Video Day* was very useful and they thought it should be continued in the future. The interviews were with professors that they knew so they were more valuable than other commercially prepared listening or video materials. Furthermore, the students were happy to have materials made just for them. Their English class was not a class that they could have gotten anywhere else. Several students talked about improved motivation and self-confidence, and two noted that answering questions and expressing their opinions in English was initially stressful and a little frightening but after watching the videos it was easier for them. They felt that if their professors could do it, they could too. Most students said that after *Video Day* classes, they wanted to continue talking with their classmates, and other people, about the interview topics. The *Video Day* lessons always seemed to be too short to say everything they wanted to say.



One interesting result came when the students were asked about the reasons for the project. Even though it had not been discussed in class, all of the students interviewed accurately identified the main purpose of the project. They all said that the videos were made to give them role models and to show them examples of non-native speakers using English. They said that the videos helped them feel closer to English because they saw Japanese people they know and respect speaking English.

The students also raised some very interesting possibilities for the future of the project. One student suggested having student volunteers conduct the next round of interviews and work to edit the videos. Another recommended interviewing current students and making a new set of DVDs each year to show to the following year's students. This would certainly have value considering the importance of the *senpai – kouhai* relationship in Japanese school life (Le Tendre, 1999) and would bring *Video Day* closer in line with Murphey's view of *Near Peer Role Modeling* (Murphey, 1998). These ideas have merit and need to be considered.

## Conclusion

The faculty interview project and the resulting *Video Day* lessons have been a success. They have helped students achieve a greater sense of connection to the community of English speakers, increased motivation, and provided a new sense of ownership of English. They have also brought the English program faculty and the mainstream faculty together in a cooperative project.

Considering the overwhelmingly positive reaction of the students, the future of the project seems clear. The videos

must certainly continue to be used in the future. It also seems important to expand the project. Since the students reported being more interested and paying more attention when their own seminar or class teacher was on screen, more professors should be recruited in order to appeal to the widest possible range of students. This would also allow for more topics to be covered.

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