Showcasing role models for Japanese learners

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Students in Japan are regularly exposed to subtextual messages about English and language learning both in school and in the popular media. Many of the role models in these contexts may not be a positive influence on learners' attitudes towards English. The idea that English is remote, difficult, and irrelevant can be reinforced by the behavior and attitudes of current role models including Japanese teachers of English as well as media and entertainment figures. This study aims to counteract this trend by showcasing effective language learning role models within a small-scale case of a single school community. Results indicate that viewing videos of non-English specialist faculty members using English has a positive effect on students' motivation, confidence, and sense of connection to English.

日本における英語授業は、日本語を使って教授される。このため、コミュニケーションのための英語というよりも、1つの勉強教科というイメージを与えてしまう。多くの近年の研究や教育活動は、学生に対するよき言語モデルとして日本人教員が授業中に積極的に英語を使用することを推奨している。それとともに、英語以外の授業を担当する教員も生徒の英語学習のためのよきロールモデルになり得る。本研究では、英語教育を専門としない、英語が母国語でない教員が英語を話している様子をビデオで撮影し、その様子を学生が見ることによって、学生の英語学習に対するやる気や自信、また英語を身近に感じるといった点で利点があることがわかった。

Role models play an important part in the development of young people. The presence of role models in an adolescent's immediate community, institutional school setting, or in the wider society and pop culture can be linked to later development of fundamental attitudes and values, including views of gender roles and ethnic identity (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). In terms of language learning, Murphey (2000) argues that the lack of effective role models for English language learners in Japan is crippling to students and leads to a perpetuation of the widely-held belief that English is difficult and that Japanese people cannot learn English well.

In Japan, there seems to be a widespread lack of connection to English and English language learning. In schools, many students are convinced that English is not something for Japanese people; it is something western, something *other* (Bayne, Usui, & Watanabe, 2002). The average university student begins college already demotivated to learn English (Falout & Maruyama, 2004), particularly in rural areas where English is not seen as a relevant part of students' futures (Miyazato, 2001).

If one accepts Murphey's (2000) argument that a lack of effective role models contributes to this situation, a necessary part of breaking this cycle would seem to be the showcasing of highly effective role models of language learning and language use.

Current role models

English in schools

In Japanese junior and senior high schools, the principal medium of instruction for English classes has tended to be Japanese (Gorsuch, 2001) and few Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) see themselves as a model of language use (Mahoney, 2004). The strong focus on native speaker varieties of English in Japanese language education contributes to this. JTEs have traditionally seen the native speaker as the only correct model. Without conforming to native speaker standards, they do not believe that they can be an appropriate model of language use for their students (Honna & Takeshita, 1998).

Other factors contributing to the lack of English-medium instruction include the perceived need for Japanese preparation for high school and university entrance examinations (Guest, 2000), the strong position of traditional grammar-translation based teaching (Sakui, 2004), low expectations of student ability (Murphey & Purcell, 2000), and the teachers' own language anxiety (Komiya-Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004).

While still not the primary language of instruction in most junior and senior high school classrooms, English is being used more and more by some JTEs and a great deal of effort has gone into increasing the overall amount of English used in English classes. MEXT is promoting an English-only policy for secondary school English classes and many researchers are working on ways to increase the amount of English used communicatively in English classes. Examples include Welker (1996), who reports success based on taking small steps in building up English use for classroom management. Heywood (2008) conducted live, in-class interviews in which ALTs and JTEs discussed topics chosen by students, dramatically increasing students' exposure to authentic target language input. Murphey (2000) edited an entire volume of case studies looking at how JTEs increased the amount of English they used in class and how their students responded to it. All of these steps are moving towards primarily English medium English classes, but in many schools, learners still face a language teacher who rarely, if ever, speaks to them in the target language—hardly an effective role model.

English in popular culture

A visitor to Japan may be forgiven for believing that Japan is awash in English. One finds English in advertising, in the media, in the lyrics of pop songs, printed on T-shirts, and gracing the covers of most magazines. But a closer look reveals that the English used is isolated, treated as discrete units and, as often as not, divorced from meaning. It is English used for ornamental purposes rather than for meaningful communication (Stanlaw, 2004).

Examples of actual meaningful English use may be harder to come by in Japanese pop culture. In fiction, television dramas often portray English teachers who do not speak English and students whose struggles with English are seen as cute and a natural part of adolescence. Figures in the media who display proficiency in English are often seen as elite intellectuals or they are *half*—a term used in Japan to refer to a child of a biracial family. Either way, they are remote from the average language learner's experiences and frame of reference. And in the very well-developed commercial language learning industry in Japan, English is often portrayed as something that one aspires to as part of changing one's life rather than something one actually achieves (Seargeant, 2009).

Influence on students

The role models encountered by students in school and in pop culture are bound to have an impact on student attitudes towards language learning and thus on their overall learning outcomes in language classes. Following media theorist Marshal McLuhan, it can be argued that in language teaching, the medium is the message (cited in Murphey, 2000). When classes are conducted in the students' first language, students receive a not very subtle message that language learning is not about use and proficiency, but more about knowledge and mastery (Murphey, 2000). If the target language is not used even in language classes, how will average students be able to imagine themselves speaking it naturally? This is only compounded by the distant and aspirational, as opposed to achievable, images of English in pop culture.

More effective role models

Moving towards more effective role models

In calling for a shift away from a focus on the native speaker in language learning, Cook (2000) argues that learners need to see non-native teachers speaking the target language. They need to see an achievable goal, that is, "someone who has arrived where the students want to be, not someone who happens to have been born there" (p. 330). Following on from this, McKay (2002) suggests that non-native speakers from their own community working confidently and effectively in English may inspire students and give them a chance to develop a positive language learning identity in English. In Japan, this idea is beginning to take hold in junior and senior high schools—the primary second language community for most such learners. There is more and more acknowledgement of the role of JTEs as models, not only of the language itself, but also of positive language identity (Miyazato, 2007). But are the JTEs the only appropriate non-native speaker role models? Could others also be effective?

One interesting definition of *effective* role models is based on the ideas of nearness and peer relationships. Murphey and Arao (2001) focused on the potential influence of respected peers with whom students could somehow identify. They found a strong transfer of positive attitudes towards language learning when students were exposed to videotaped statements of beliefs about language learning from other students, their peers, who were near them in terms of their social status, professional level, and age. To this list of criteria for nearness can be added community. It seems natural that role models with whom the learners share a sense of community will be effective. For many language students in Japan, the primary community would seem to be the school, but this community is not limited to the language classroom.

Role models outside the language classroom

A typical school in Japan is rich in potential role models for language learning. Language teachers, be they native or non-native speakers of the target language, play a central but not exclusive role. Office staff, PTA members, and content faculty, among others, can also contribute to students' positive language learning identity.

In earlier research on this topic, Brown (2008) involved non-language-teaching faculty in a role model project aimed at contributing to the development of students' positive language identity. University content faculty members, that is specialist teachers in subjects other than language, were interviewed on video in English discussing topics taken from an English communication course book. These interviews were then used as teaching materials, supplementing, and in some cases replacing, the existing listening comprehension materials. Anecdotal class observations and post course interviews with students indicated that the students felt a greater sense of connection to the community of English speakers and a new sense of ownership

of English, along with increased motivation and self-reported gains in proficiency.

The students also seemed surprised by the faculty members' confidence and competence in English. Until seeing the faculty interviews, the students had never considered the idea that their content professors could speak English. There seemed to be a common assumption among the students that only JTEs and other specialists could speak English. They reported never having thought that English proficiency could be incidental to another specialty and also reported feeling reassured that they would be able to maintain their English proficiency while pursuing other specialties.

The current study

The current study continues and expands on the earlier work involving faculty role models discussed above. Japanese faculty members from other departments (i.e., not specialist English teachers) were interviewed in English on video. They were asked to discuss their views on a variety of topics taken from a global issues curriculum used in a mixed second-, third-, and fourth-year English Communication program. Topics included environmental problems, changes in Japan's immigration policies, and economic globalization, among others. The interviews were unscripted to preserve the authentic non-native character of the language use.

Faculty members were chosen to participate in the project based on their ability to use English confidently and proficiently. The interviewees' confidence was important since developing the students' confidence was one of the overall aims of the project. Proficiency was also a key factor. Faculty interviewees were chosen, somewhat subjectively, for their ability to express ideas clearly and concisely in a manner judged likely to be comprehensible to students. Proficiency in this context was not taken to include grammatical, phonological, or lexical accuracy. In fact, a certain amount of inaccuracy was desirable since it would make the faculty members represent more realistically achievable models for the students. It was hoped that the students would see clear communication of ideas without the need to be completely accurate in all aspects of speech.

A total of nine faculty members were interviewed individually over the course of three months. Interviews covered eight different topics and the interviews were edited together to show the sometimes similar and sometimes opposing views that often emerged in discussing controversial issues. Interviews varied in length but were typically three to five minutes long. DVD collections of the interviews formed the basis of the listening comprehension component of the course. Students worked with the interviews once per week throughout the 15 week semester. For more details on how the videos were created and exploited in class, see Brown (2008).

Data collection

The study examined results from a total of 28 students. Data was collected in surveys (see Appendix) conducted in class at the beginning and at the end of the 15 week course. Both closed (Likert-scale) and open-ended items were included in the surveys. Survey items were developed based on interview data collected from students involved in the previous pilot project (Brown, 2008). Results of that study indicated that students showed more positive attitudes towards English class and developed a closer sense of connection to and ownership over English following a semester working with the interview DVDs. This study aimed to confirm and move towards quantifying those findings.

Results

Some interesting patterns and trends emerged from the data, showing signs of intriguing changes in students' attitudes following the use of the faculty interview DVDs. Table 1 shows the average responses (measured on a Likert scale) to the closed prompt statements. Of particular interest are the dramatic increases in the responses related to ability to learn English (items 1 and 2) and the potential to become bilingual (items 3 and 4). Another interesting point pertaining to bilingualism is the contrast between the students' general feeling that Japanese people can be bilingual (item 3), and the doubt that they personally could become bilingual (item 4). Responses to prompts dealing with affective factors—feelings of connection to English and confidence (items 9 and 10)—showed smaller, but still notable, increases between the pre and post surveys.

Table 1. Student responses to selected statements before and after viewing faculty interview DVDs

Likert scale statements	Average	
(1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)	Pre	Post
1. Japanese people are good at learning English.	2.4	2.9
2. I am good at learning English.	2.3	2.8
3. Japanese people can be bilingual.	3.6	4.1
4. I can be bilingual.	2.4	3.3
5. It is important to speak English perfectly.	3.1	2.6
6. I need to speak English perfectly.	3.0	2.9
7. Making mistakes when I speak English is OK.	2.6	2.8
8. I have a clear goal for my English.	3.5	3.4
9. English is close to me.	3.3	3.5
10. I am confident speaking English.	2.1	2.3

The responses to the open-ended prompts (shown in Table 2) were also revealing. Before using faculty interview DVDs "no one" was the most common response to questions about role models and bilingual speakers in students' lives. Following the course, the most common response for both of these questions was "Japanese faculty at my school." Also of note is the fact that *senpai*, the Japanese term for senior or upperclassman, was the second ranked response to both questions before and after the course. *Senpai* is used as a title or form of address for those in an organization (school, club, company, etc.) who are older or have more experience and seniority. The position of "my junior high school teacher" at the bottom of the pre-course results for both questions is also worth noting.

Table 2. Student responses to open-ended questions before and after viewing faculty interview DVDs

	Who are your language learning role models?	
Rank	Pre (percentage of responses)	Post (percentage of responses)
1	No one (43%)	Japanese faculty at my school (43%)
2	*Senpai* (29%)	*Senpai* (32%)

Who are your language learning role models?		
Rank	Pre (percentage of responses)	Post (percentage of responses)
3	Foreign teacher at my school (11%)	None (14%)
4	My junior high school teacher (7%)	Friend (7%)
What bilingual Japanese people do you know?		
Rank	Pre (percentage of responses)	Post (percentage of responses)
1	No one (39%)	Japanese faculty at my school (39%)
2	*Senpai* (25%)	*Senpai* (29%)
3	Friend (21%)	None (18%)
4	My junior high school teacher (7%)	Friend (11%)

Discussion

The closed survey item results appear to indicate a positive change in attitude associated with watching the faculty role models interviewed on video. Students seem to have more positive attitudes towards English after seeing their own non-language specialist teachers confidently using English to communicate. The students seem to have developed confidence and a belief that they could effectively learn English, become bilingual, and take ownership of the language. It seems that, as was predicted, the participating faculty members became role models for the students and may have engendered these positive attitudes.

Watching the faculty interviews seems to have also changed the students' image of Japanese speakers of English. Before the course, the abstract idea that Japanese people could be bilingual was clear to the students but, on a personal level, they did not feel that they, themselves could be bilingual. This may be connected to the large number of participants who did not personally know any Japanese speakers of English whom they considered bilingual. Following the course, Japanese faculty members featured in the DVD were listed as both bilingual Japanese people the students knew and as language learning role models. At the same time, the feeling that Japanese people in general and the students themselves in particular could be bilingual increased and the gap between these two ideas decreased. For these students, Japanese-English bilingualism seems to be changing from a theoretical possibility to a personally achievable outcome.

One other interesting finding is the strong position of *senpai* in the results. In the study group, *senpai* and *kohai* (the opposite term, referring to juniors) study together since the communication program is streamed by English proficiency level rather than school year. Of course, the importance of the *senpai-kohai* bond among students in the Japanese school context cannot be overstated. It is the backbone of the social hierarchy in the school (LeTendre, 1999). That these students identified their *senpai* as both suitable language learning role models and effective bilingual speakers of English speaks to the power of the connection. *Senpai* are clearly another potentially powerful role model in the school community.

Another heartening note was the position of "my junior high school teacher" in the results. As noted above, findings by Gorsuch (2001) and others indicate that most junior and senior high school JTEs do not use English as the primary medium of instruction in class and thus may not be acting as positive role models for language learning. However, some of the participants in the present study viewed junior high school teachers to some extent as both bilingual Japanese-English speakers and language learning role models, if only in the pre-course data

set. This raises interesting questions about how English is being used in junior high schools, and how JTEs may be acting as stronger, more positive role models for their students than was previously thought.

Limitations and directions for further study

It would be over-reaching and premature to ascribe the changes in attitudes seen in the results of this study solely to the faculty interview videos. There are always other possible influences from both within and beyond the classroom. One in particular that warrants more attention is the presence of *senpai* in the mixed age class. They were clearly seen as a role model by some students and may have contributed as much, or even more, to the positive attitude changes as the faculty did.

The size of the study group was another limitation. The number of participants was small and the term of the study was too short to make broad claims of long-lasting efficacy. It must also be noted that the participants in this study enrolled in an elective English Communication course. This self-selection may have lead to results skewed towards positive motivation.

This study can best be seen as a pilot project. Similar projects focusing on interviews with the students' *senpai*, JTEs, and other faculty members can be conducted to expand on the results of this work. Future larger-scale studies should also investigate actual changes in language proficiency which may or may not be correlated with the attitude changes seen here. Longer term studies are also called for to confirm that the improvements in attitudes and confidence seen here are not transitory.

This study may also show resonance with situations beyond the limited use of video discussed here. It may be possible to show even greater positive influence on students' attitudes by creating an environment where L2 use is the norm in the school community. Along with video interviews, a guest speaker program, content-based instruction classes, and even sheltered instruction or partial immersion programs are all possible ways to create such an environment.

Conclusions

Despite the limitations of the study, some tentative conclusions can be drawn which are quite intriguing and suggestive for changes in practice. It seems clear that exposing students to L1 group members with whom they identify and who are using the target language confidently and proficiently can have some real benefits in terms of how the students perceive English and their relationship to it. When these role models come from the students' community (i.e. the school), the sense of connection is well established and this proximity can contribute to the positive influence. Faculty members represent an excellent set of potential role models for language teachers to draw on.

Informed consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

Bio data

Howard Brown has been working in language education for 20 years including time in Turkey, Canada, and Japan. His current research interests include role modeling and learner psychology, self-access language learning, and the use of fiction in global issues curricula.

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Appendix

Questions used in pre / post surveys

1. 次の各文章に対し強く反対する場合は１、強く同意する場合は５として、最も適当と思われる番号に○をしてください。

日本人は、英語学習が得意である。	1 2 3 4 5
私は、英語学習が得意である。	1 2 3 4 5
日本人は、バイリンガルになれる。	1 2 3 4 5
私は、バイリンガルになれる。	1 2 3 4 5
完璧に英語を話すことが重要だ。	1 2 3 4 5
完璧に英語を話すことは、私にとっては重要だ。	1 2 3 4 5
私は、英語を話すときに間違っても気にならない。	1 2 3 4 5
私は、英語学習の上で、はっきりとした目標がある。	1 2 3 4 5
私にとって英語は身近なものだ。	1 2 3 4 5
私は、英語を話す自信がある。	1 2 3 4 5

2. 言語学習において、ロールモデルだと思う身近な存在（友達、家族、先輩など）がいますか。いる場合は、誰ですか。

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3. バイリンガル（英語以外の言語でもOK）の日本人を知っていますか。知っている場合は、誰ですか。

_____