

Moving Beyond Self Introductions to Sharing Self Exploration and Expression

Language teachers can easily get caught up in the mechanics and outcome-based instruction of language teaching. Too often, the pedagogic relationship between the language teacher and learner are defined according to the narrowly defined discourse and task-based nature of the learning task designed for language acquisition. Pushing back the boundaries on this relationship and opening up opportunities for self-expression and self exploration through an introductory task termed Self Maps helps teachers and students to move beyond formulaic introductory exchanges and express themselves more deeply in their unique and singular individuality.

語学教師は授業の際、文の構造や学習の成果についとらわれがちである。また多くの場合、語学教師と学習者の関係は、言語習得のためにデザインされた、狭義でのディスコースやタスクに基づく学習活動の性質によって決まってしまう。この両者の間の境界を押し広げ、セルフマップという自己紹介活動を通して自己表現と自己探求の機会を与えることにより、教師と学習者は紋切り型の自己紹介を超え、個々の唯一無二の個性をより深く表現できるようになる。

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Introduction & Background Concept

At the beginning of each new term university English language teachers face new students who rarely offer up interesting aspects of themselves to help their teachers better get to know and distinguish them from their peers. In many instances, teachers themselves are reluctant to provide more than the limited information required by the institutionally defined and situated role they play as language instructors. Most readers will be familiar with the standard greetings that occur in the university language classroom, which usually go something like this, "Hello. My name is Ellen Motohashi, I come from The United States and I have been living in Japan for ...". Students, in return, mimic these narrowly defined categories of "self" by telling us the name of their hometown, number of family members, and possibly a hobby. These well-practiced, formulaic introductions allow little insight into the individuals that either the teacher or the student actually are, and, if left at that, limit opportunities to nurture authentic relationships upon which true communication, openness of self, and trust are built. These interpersonal relational qualities are the bedrock of authentic communication, which ultimately is the goal of our profession as language teachers, and the objective of most of our students.

The pedagogic relationship is a unique social relationship because it is defined by clearly delineated boundaries and roles between teacher and student, and comes packaged within a pre-ordained and institutionally sanctioned power structure. Both teacher and student "know" where they stand in opposition to the other, and, unless conscientiously reframed, interact according to pre-determined relational responsibilities and exchanges based on these roles. Richards (2006) claims that the language teacher-learner pedagogic relationship, in particular, is well-suited to this highly situation-dependent relation-

ship. Language classroom interactions are normally carefully crafted by the teacher to fit the needs of a simulated and situationally-defined discourse context. Often the language exchanges that occur in the language classroom leave the student at the mercy of the pre-determined discourse features or linguistic target determined by the lesson of the day, which generally require little investment, or deeper expressions of 'self', from either the teacher or the students. This particular pedagogic relationship need not be defined beyond the terms of the language needs of the students, which the teacher is required to determine and then strengthen.

Richards (2006) claims that in the language teacher-learner pedagogic relationship "teacher roles have for the most part been characterized as relatively static. In pedagogic terms, this tends to produce a two-dimensional picture of the teacher-learner relationship" (p. 52). Regardless of how "communicative" any one language lesson may be, the boundaries of the relationship and linguistic interactions between teacher and student tend to be instrumentally designed, formulaic, and defined by the teacher. Richards points out that these language-focused relationships and interactions pervade most language classroom exchanges and thus limits authentic expressions of self, by either the teacher or students. In a recent interview, Ema Ushioda (Falout, 2011) echoed Richards' (2006) concerns, stating that too often the 'self' is left out of the language classroom. There is no doubt that the very structure of the teaching-learning environment works against language teachers when confronted with large classrooms of 40+ students. However, even in smaller classrooms authentic acts of communication whereby both learner and teacher can engage one another beyond the boundaries of the institutionally defined relationship or pre-determined topic of study seldom occur. Ushioda uses the notion of transportable identities (Zimmerman in Richards, 2006), by drawing on the empirical work of Richards (2006). She discusses the potent possibility of interacting with students beyond our defined roles as language teacher-learner to rather relating to each other from the multiple positionalities that constitute us as singular individuals. "When you try to engage students' *transportable identities*, when you talk to them as people, when you connect with them in that way ... it can help to motivate them in terms of effort and engagement in interaction" (Ushioda in Falout 2011, p. 26).

According to the French philosopher of relational ethics, Emmanuel Levinas, the ethical relationship precedes the formation of knowledge (Todd, 2003). This is a provocative and important consideration for teachers regardless of specialization or discipline. Levinas' conceptualization of *ethical relationality* requires that individuals first see and understand *the unknowable difference* that is represented by the face of the individual we address, and seeks to recognize the interconnected nature of any encounter we share with an *other*. The ethical encounter requires that an individual not only recognize differences that define us in relation to each other, but also assumes responsibility to protect and respect those differences, which are ultimately shaped by, shapes, and changes us in our exchange with the *other*. Todd (2003) takes this concept and applies it to the pedagogical relationship by illuminating the centrality of the ethical relationship to the act of teaching-learning. "Teaching and learning are conceived as an ethical relation, not because of some prescriptive injunction, but because there are present two distinct beings who come face to face in an encounter" (p.30). The question is how our pre-determined and pedantically-defined interactions and exchanges in the language-learning classroom interfere with our ability to see our students, and them us, as singular, distinct beings. How can we come face-to-face with each other beyond our prescribed institutional roles and relationships? One way is to invite our students to explore aspects of themselves and open-up to their teachers and peers within more loosely defined boundaries by engaging in conversations that go beyond formulaic responses, like the generic self-introduction provided in the introduction.

Loosening the Boundaries from the Start

One of my greatest concerns as a teacher is to establish an open and safe space for my students to express themselves and engage in communicative activities as authentically as possible. In order to nurture openness and risk taking in the classroom I have to first create an opportunity for them to open-up and get to know each other, and me, as unique, singular individuals. Teaching Japanese students, in particular, it is easy to let the apparent similarities among them overshadow the distinct characters and diverse experiences they each bring with them when they enter our classrooms. Similarly, for our Japanese students, those of us who are non-Japanese are often seen as representatives of our national origin, despite possibly having lived

more of our lives overseas and identifying with various social, ideological, linguistic and cultural groups beyond the narrowly defined national categories we may seemingly represent. Contrary to popular opinion, students in Japanese dominant classrooms represent a diversity that is easy to miss if one does not dig below the surface of their shared appearance and mannerisms. It is important for the teacher to seek out, recognize, and utilize these differences to tailor their teaching to the unique needs of the individual students. Doing so benefits the students as they begin to appreciate the unique characteristics of their peers, despite all being *Japanese*

At the start of each term I introduce an activity entitled Self Maps to my students in an attempt to expose the differences and unveil the unique characteristics of each individual student. This activity works best in classes of 30 students or less, though could be designed for slightly larger classes because it requires breaking students into smaller groups. In particular, this activity allows students to gain a better self-understanding of the unique experiences and relationships that have shaped their worldviews. I ask my students to present their Self Maps in the third week of the term in small groups of four. The students typically present their visual representations of 'self' two times by rotating across groups, providing them an opportunity to share their Self Maps with as many students as possible. Additionally, I am able to attend to more than one presentation at a time, knowing that the students will be presenting their Self Maps more than once. This activity provides an opportunity for the students to move beyond the predictable introductions that they have become accustomed to, and allows them to be selective and creative about how they want to represent themselves to their peers and me, as their teacher. Additionally, students are provided an opportunity to reflect on their lives during a time of transition, thus offering them an opportunity to pinpoint those experiences that have been most vital in their formation as unique individuals. Lastly, the Self Map activity provides them with authentic language practice because the students are required to describe the major events of their lives that have brought them to this point, and consider those that will further guide them in the future.

The Nuts and Bolts of the Activity

The Self Map is designed to provide individuals a heuristic, whereby they can map out their lives

by considering three interrelated and overlapping aspects of identity or self: the enduring self, the situated self, and the emergent self. At first, these concepts are as foreign to the students as the language required to understand the activity. It is necessary to give students time to discuss, and reflect on, those experiences that they will highlight in the presentation of self that is the outcome of the project. The final project requires the students to present the three aspects of their identities, or self, representationally. I make it clear that the students are not to simply speak about their enduring, situated or emerging selves, but are to provide a metaphorical image that is representative of their life. Additionally, they are required to represent each of the three aspects of their identities/selves through poetic, lyrical, or visual images within the chosen overall metaphorical image they choose to represent their life journey thus far. In the past I have been surprised by the creative representations students have come up with as metaphors for their lives. Some of the most interesting have been: a planetary system, a recipe, a film strip, and a tree (please see the examples that follow).

It is always difficult for the students to determine what exactly is an enduring, situated or emergent self, so I provide them with a set of questions to help get them thinking about the deeper layers of their identities. Below is a shortened version of the questions I ask the students to reflect upon to help them design their Self Maps.

Exploring the Enduring Self - This is the identity that outlasts any particular situation. An enduring self is the part of yourself that remains consistent and is expressed when you are with the people, or in situations where you feel most comfortable (close to *honne* in Japanese).

- How has my family life shaped my enduring self? Do I feel most comfortable with my family? If, yes, then why? If, no, then why?
- Who are the most important people in your life? How has knowing them helped shape you?
- What momentous or very important events stand out in your life?
- In what kind of environments or situations do you feel most comfortable?
- What activities bring you peace of mind or, alternatively, excite you?

Exploring the Situated Self - These are identities that are associated with specific situations, individuals, or environments. You may feel more or less comfortable in any of them, and you often behave, or represent yourself, differently in each of them.

- High school or university club
- University classroom
- Part-time job
- Large family gathering (like a wedding or funeral)

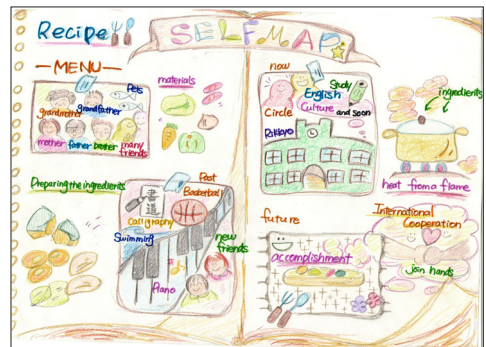
Exploring Emergent Selves - These are identities that are developing as you grow and change. This may be the identity, or *self*, you dream of becoming, or they may actually be emerging as meaningful parts of your life.

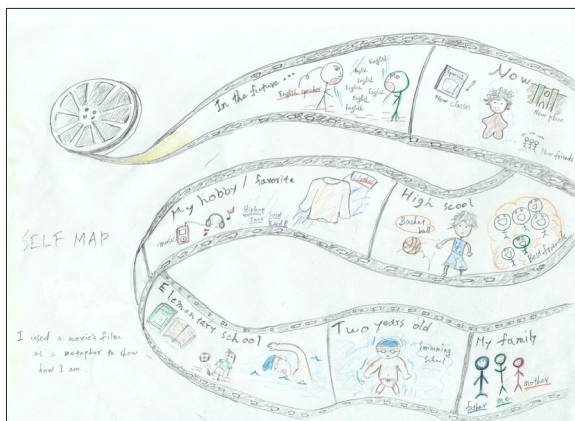
- How are you different now than when you were in high school? What has changed about who you have become today?
- How has becoming a university student changed you? Do you feel there is a part of you that is different? Do you like the changes you feel?
- How do you imagine your life in five years?
- Can you see yourself as a wife, husband, mother or father?

There is always the danger of asking the students to expose more than they may be comfortable with, particularly in the beginning of the term when the class is beginning to form as a cohesive learning community. I make it clear that the students should only choose aspects of their experiences or lives that they are willing to share openly. Before asking the students to present their Self Map, I present my own to them, both to share deeper aspects of my life and experiences, but also to use as an example of what they are to do.

I have used Self Maps at the beginning of each term and have found that the majority of students become involved and invested in this activity. At the end of the activity, I always have students who mention how enriching and interesting the activity was for them. Self-reflection and exploration are beneficial activities for an individual at any time, but during periods of major life transitions, as with freshman university students, this reflection is a particularly valuable experience. Mead (1934), pragmatist

and social psychologist, stated that, “It is by means of reflexiveness – the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself – that the whole social process is thus brought into the experiences of the individuals involved in it” (p.134). The Self Map activity sets up an opportunity for the students to seriously consider the life-changing experiences they are embarking upon while simultaneously opening themselves up to their peers and teacher as they engage in authentic discussions centered on reflection, exploration and the sharing of stories of the self. It also gives the students a chance to consider the trajectory of their lives metaphorically. This activity can be easily modified to include a writing component as well, if desired. Here are a few examples of some of the exemplary Self Maps I have received.





References

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Concluding Thoughts

Oftentimes as language teachers it is easy to get caught up in the fragmented bits of decontextualized meaning and linguistic targets required by our students to gain proficiency in their language study, in this case English. While it is important to keep the objective of the courses we teach and the desired language learning outcomes in mind during our time with our students, if we neglect the greater opportunity to engage them in self-exploration and expression alongside us, as teachers, and with their peers, we miss out on the joy of building authentic relationships that lead to truly communicative exchanges. As Ushioda (Falout, 2010) expresses in her interview,

The important thing here is to ensure that students do not constantly associate language learning with schoolwork (i.e. just another school subject that has to be studied) or with monotonous tasks and exercises, but that they see how this language can connect with their life outside the classroom and experience this connection in ways that are personally enjoyable or fulfilling. (p. 27)

Opening ourselves up to risking a little exposure in the classroom and sharing in self exploration and expression with our students will go a long way to not only creating more fulfilling teaching and learning experiences, but may just give the students something more valuable than proficiency in a second language. They may find that they have looked more deeply into themselves while recognizing that the differences, which are revealed between them, their teacher, and their classmates, add to the richness of their shared learning experiences and individual lives.

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