

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

## Motivating non-English majors in English classes

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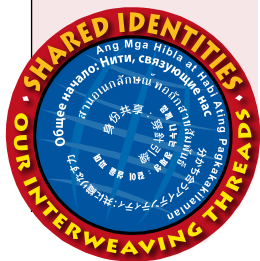
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Most Japanese undergraduates studying English are not English majors but students of other disciplines required by the Ministry of Education, and thus their university, to pass a general English course prior to graduation. However, some non-English majors have low intrinsic motivation to attend and actively participate due to negative perceptions of English or native teachers. This paper first highlights some student behaviors which workshop attendees identified as commonly occurring indicators of low motivation among their non-English majors, then suggests some underlying causes and practical solutions which may resolve or ameliorate the problem. Examples of English-based projects linked to the students' undergraduate programs are provided in support of the idea that such projects can improve student motivation. Finally, a framework by which such projects can be designed and implemented is outlined and exemplified.

英語を勉強している日本の大学生の大半は、英文学専攻ではなく他の学科を専攻しており、大学を卒業するために、文部科学省や在籍大学指定単位の履修目的として英語を学習している。しかしながら、英文学以外を専攻している学生の中には、潜在的に低いモチベーションを持ち積極的に参加しない者がいる。それは、英語自体もしくは外国人講師（ネイティブスピーカー）に対する拒否的な姿勢によるものである。本論文では、まず、被験者によって確認されたモチベーションの低い英文学専攻以外の学生に共通して見られる行動を定義し、根本的な原因の提議と実践的な解決策を提唱し、問題の解明又は改善を可能にする。学生達のプログラムと結びつけた英語に関する研究課題から得られた実例を起用し、学生のモチベーション向上における研究課題の実質性を裏付ける。最後に、この研究課題の計画および実施内容の概略を述べ、例証する。

**A** common element in most Japanese undergraduate curricula, regardless of degree subject area, is the requirement for students to pass a general English course, usually as part of their core studies in the first or second year of their program. This requirement, set by the Ministry of Education, is in effect a continuation of its ongoing policy of “Japanese with English abilities” initiated in 2003. This policy sets certain levels of English communicative competence for undergraduates (MEXT, 2003).



Some students enjoy these courses and do indeed improve various facets of their English linguistic, communicative and cultural competence through them, but a large proportion seem disinterested and do not acquire as much as might be hoped for given the resources expended (Mori, 2008). While poor study habits, health issues and other causes are possible contributory factors affecting the degree of second language acquisition for this latter group, another very likely significant factor is each student's level of intrinsic motivation, which has long been regarded as an important affective component of language learning (Brown, 1994).

This paper suggests ways in which English teachers might positively influence non-English majors' intrinsic motivation to study English. After briefly identifying some of the more common indicators and causes of low motivation among this population, practical suggestions are made that have helped to overcome, or at least ameliorate this problem in the author's own classes. Finally, a framework is proposed by which projects specifically tailored to the students' undergraduate program of study can be designed and implemented in English classes with the aim not only of increasing students' intrinsic motivation but also of supporting their undergraduate studies.

### Indicators of low intrinsic motivation

With experience, teachers develop a capacity to distinguish well-motivated students from those that are not so driven. However, for those teachers reading this article who may be new to teaching in general or teaching non-English majors at Japanese universities in particular, it is perhaps useful to highlight those indicators of poor motivation that the 45-50

workshop participants identified as commonly occurring in their own work settings. Doing so can also help in considering the underlying causes of low motivation.

During the workshop it became clear that, based on their teaching experiences at Japanese universities, a large majority of participants had experienced three commonly occurring indicators of low motivation among their non-English major students: poor attendance, poor participation and poor preparation.

#### *Poor attendance*

While it is true that even the most motivated student may be absent occasionally with good reason, persistent non-attendance or lateness may be indicative of low motivation on the part of the student towards the English course. Conversely, it may be an indicator of other, unrelated problems such as poor health, lack of sleep or poor public transport connections. Whatever the cause, those attending the workshop identified it as an issue.

#### *Poor participation*

Even when students attend, some may not participate. Workshop attendees identified student behaviours such as use of mobile phones or iPods in class and talking persistently off-topic in Japanese as commonplace in their classes, with self-isolation and refusal to work with others as additional concerns, in line with Richards and Lockhart (1996). While there may be alternative explanations for these behaviours including group dynamics and peer pressure, it was the view of a very large majority of attendees that such

non-participation is an indicator of disinterest in the subject, content, teacher or a combination of the three.

### **Poor preparation**

Attendees expressed the view that their students also exhibit what might be taken for low motivation by often attending without homework, textbook, dictionary or even basic stationary, though it is difficult to ascribe this to any single cause.

Even well motivated students may occasionally exhibit some of these behaviours, but it is those students for whom these behaviours are the norm with which this paper is primarily concerned.

### **Underlying causes and practical solutions**

Likely causes for the above indicators are suggested below along with practical solutions that have worked for this teacher in the classroom. Though the list is not exhaustive, personal experience supported by the reactions of workshop attendees strongly suggests that the following are common grounds for concern.

### **Perceived high difficulty**

A colleague pointed out that there sometimes exists a discrepancy between a teacher's expectation of what students *should be able* to do with English as undergraduates and what they actually *can* do and that this disparity can result in course content and/or tasks that are too difficult for the students. If students perceive the content or tasks to be

too difficult, it is unsurprising that they might fall behind, lose interest or attend less frequently. Of course avoiding this disparity in the first place would be preferable but if a teacher finds him/herself in this situation, below are some ideas for working around the problem that have worked for this author.

One very low level, poorly motivated university group had acquired very little of the first semester's content, so at the start of the second semester students were given the choice either to use the remaining course time to review the first semester's material, thus halving the year's content, or to continue with new material. Also, on the assumption that processing the material via the written word rather than the spoken word would give students more time to process the language successfully, in consultation with the students the existing speaking- and listening-based method was replaced with a writing- and reading-based method. Subsequent comparison of first and second semester test scores offers anecdotal evidence to suggest that they acquired much of the content that they had previously failed to acquire, though it is conceded that the data was not analysed statistically.

Whether such improvement was due to the effect of reviewing the content, the change in method or both is unclear but it suggests that halving the content (or doubling the contact time) and/or changing to a method that better meets the students' needs might make content more accessible. The same colleague also remarked that everyone loves to win and that being winners, students want to come back for more. Starting at an easily accessible level, going at a slower pace, covering less content or changing method apparently helped these students to 'win' in this particular

case, though there is a risk that such strategies might impede the progress of the more capable students.

Finally, it is this writer's view that designing materials and tasks to make the language and activities more comprehensible can also reduce the perceived level of difficulty. It seems safe to suggest that material design which anticipates and tries to eliminate as many opportunities for misunderstanding as possible on the part of the student will be more user-friendly and accessible. This may or may not motivate, but at least it does not have the potentially de-motivating effect that confusing or incomprehensible materials or activities might have.

### *Negative perceptions of the native English teacher*

Shimizu (1995) shows that her tertiary students did not think of native English speaking teachers as capable ELT professionals, but rather as entertaining distractions from the more knowledgeable and competent Japanese teachers' "real" English lessons. Though her research is now 14 years old, personal experience and a lack of substantial evidence to the contrary suggests that this is still a very commonly held view among freshman.

It seems important to dispel such misconceptions as early as possible with new students so that they modify their view of the teacher and their expectations for the course accordingly. While they may naturally modify their view over time as a teacher proves him/herself, in the interim these misconceptions might adversely affect their motivation to study or attend.

Demonstrating knowledge of and competence in the course area as early as possible might help. Create opportunities in the classroom to do this, for example by outlining more advanced concepts in lesson one when explaining the syllabus. Dropping the subject of your MA in Applied Linguistics casually into a conversation might be an alternative, as might be giving a sample presentation on the subject of your teaching experiences.

The idea of relating to students at both a professional and personal level in order to build a working relationship through which pedagogic aims can be collaboratively achieved is not new (Kirchhoff, 2007). Anything a teacher can do, and importantly, be seen by students to be doing, to show consideration for their education, welfare, or comfort can work towards this end. A simple example would be allowing students to drink (non-alcoholic) beverages in class during summer to rehydrate. Another example would be explaining to students why you are modifying the syllabus in light of problems you've encountered, as mentioned above with respect to halving course content. In short, show students that their teacher cares.

### *Perceived irrelevance*

#### *Lack of personalisation*

One aspect of relevance is the degree to which content and tasks can be personalised by individual students (McDonough & Shaw, 1993) and it might be safe to assume that the more personalisable materials are, the more appealing and therefore potentially motivating they might be.

Good online e-learning resources permit such personalisation as well as interactivity (ChanLin, 2009), though the prerequisite internet computers may not always be available. If used creatively, a single laptop computer connected to the classroom's projector or television can work too, for example by downloading an interactive quiz from the internet which can then be presented in class on screen for all students to see and do. However, this might take more preparation in lesson planning or at the materials or activity design stages.

Alternatively, brainstorming with students to learn about their social life, ambitions and current study or future work life can generate ideas for content and activities. For example, what subject areas do they study in their undergraduate program? Which one(s) are they most interested in? What jobs do they want to do upon graduation? What tasks do those professions require, especially those performed in English? (If they do not know, finding out could be useful and interesting for students and teacher.) This information could be used to create projects using undergraduate program-related language, content and tasks with personalisable materials. For the sake of cohesion here, examples of such projects are described later in this paper.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002) suggests that students will be more inclined to participate and invest in a course that they have helped to design. This requires some flexibility on the teacher's part, since administrations require syllabi to be submitted *before* the course starts, but these can be adapted at the beginning of the course in line with the students' preferences.

Another suggestion might be to allow each student to progress through worksheets at their own pace. Admittedly though, some courses such as language lab-based listening, composition or reading may lend themselves more to this approach than others such as speaking and it might be useful to link course grades to the number of worksheets that students complete.

### *Perceived irrelevance of content and tasks*

If we accept that course content relating to students' current studies, interests or future career is of more interest to students, then it seems desirable to incorporate such content into an English course.

One reason why some students feel that English is irrelevant, or only marginally relevant, might be because in some cases it probably is. There are some majors who, realistically, are unlikely ever to need English in their chosen vocation. However, it is worth pointing out to students that at least some research or other study resources for these fields are available largely only in English and that a level of English proficiency makes these resources more accessible. The information they provide can then be used in their undergraduate studies.

Another explanation for English's perceived irrelevance might be that the students receive no explanation from administrators, curriculum designers, undergraduate professors or English teachers as to why it is on the curriculum. This can give students the impression that English exists on their curriculum in isolation, without justification and that it is therefore disconnected from the

rest of their undergraduate program. The solution might be to offer an explanation that satisfies students: perhaps not just that MEXT dictates its inclusion as part of its “Japanese with English abilities” policy (MEXT, 2003), but also that it can be *potentially* very useful to their studies and/or in the workplace.

If non-English majors believe English to be irrelevant, English teachers need to find a way to demonstrate that this is not entirely the case, especially in fields such as sciences and technology which loan heavily from English. One way to do this is to link their general English course with elements of their major subject. Though this may not be a groundbreaking idea, surprisingly, it does not seem to be widespread practice among teachers of non-English major general English courses, yet it need not be difficult. Below are a few examples from a range of courses.

1. Initially the teacher needs to know a little about the students’ undergraduate program, so a generic starting project could be for students, in groups or individually, to provide some basic information about their undergraduate program. What subjects do they study? Who are their teachers? What jobs can their program lead to upon graduation? (If students don’t know, researching this can be set as a homework assignment.) What job do they want to do? The results from this initial project can then be used to inform other future projects’ topical areas. This effectively constitutes a rudimentary needs analysis and starts to cover some of the English vocabulary specific to their major subject. It also has the added potential advantage of showing the students that the teacher is interested in them and so can enhance the teacher-student relationship from the outset of the course, as advocated above. Some further examples of projects are given below.
2. Many of the students in a low level Jurisprudence course stated an interest in becoming police officers upon graduation, so police-related English was included for tasks such as giving directions to tourists, checking foreigners’ alien registration cards and doing bicycle registration checks. The declarative and interrogative forms were very general and therefore went some way to satisfying MEXT’s requirements for English for General Purposes (EGP) whilst simultaneously introducing elements of discipline-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as advocated by Orr (1998) and Orr and Yoshida (2001).
3. High beginner Food and Nutrition majors made A3 size English posters to explain and exemplify the various food groups using related technical English.
4. High beginner Japanese majors made B4 size English posters to present their favourite stories or poems and why they liked them. This encouraged students to use critical thinking and discourse skills as well as book review-related language.
5. High beginner Child Welfare majors wrote a short story in English for young children on a topic of their choice, and then read their stories in class in small groups in simulated kindergarten teaching practice. As a follow-up activity, the students in each group then asked questions in English about each other’s books and illustrations.

Of course these simple examples are specific to these particular majors and each discipline will have its own linguistic, technical and vocational skills needs. Fortunately, this approach does not require English teachers to be deeply knowledgeable in any particular discipline (other than English teaching of course) because the technical knowledge comes chiefly from the students. Discussion with the undergraduate professors about the curriculum can also provide additional information, ideas for projects and insights from an alternative, informed perspective.

With a little imagination and preparation, such projects can be used with any other major discipline to cover linguistic items, cultural knowledge and discipline-related skills. The process for designing and implementing such projects is outlined briefly below, with a contextual example where necessary.

### **Making English-based projects for non-English majors**

The following outline is exemplified by the Child Welfare children's story project mentioned above.

#### ***Step 1: Identify potential project areas***

Through discussion with the students, learn what they do and study in their undergraduate programs. Identify aspects of their degree course which they might find useful, interesting or fun to be able to perform in English. Such aspects are not limited only to linguistic items but can also include technical, cultural or vocational knowledge or skills useful in work areas their degree could lead to. For example, Child

Welfare students have kindergarten teaching practice as part of their program, during which they read stories to the children.

#### ***Step 2: Linguistic content***

Consider the language items students might need to successfully complete a particular project and pre-teach or review them or elicit them from students after a dictionary search. More advanced students might need less support with this. Child Welfare undergraduates reviewed verb tenses commonly used for story-telling.

#### ***Step 3: Explain the project***

Explain the project clearly, including word count, poster size, design issues, deadlines, student groupings, anticipated content and assessment details if applicable. An example handmade storybook was shown to students so they could see what was expected of them.

#### ***Step 4: Ongoing tutorial support***

Give students the opportunity for office-based tutorials if they need to ask questions, get more ideas for their project or check their work.

#### ***Step 5: Show and tell***

Students present their project work during class and ask follow-up questions of each other related to the technical content and/or the English used. During this time, students

become speakers, audience members and peer teachers. Child Welfare students read their stories, showed off their books and illustrations and provided background information on the storyline all in English.

### **Step 6: Assessment (optional)**

Assess the work in line with the information provided at step 3 and return the work with the grades and feedback.

Such projects have met with considerable success in my own classes with uninterested and even disruptive students becoming participatory and enthusiastic.

### **Conclusion**

Intrinsic motivation is a key affective factor in language learning (Brown, 1994) but a significant proportion of low-level non-English majors at Japanese universities seem to have low motivation to attend or actively participate in the learning process. To ameliorate this problem it can help to build mutual understanding between teacher and students (Kirchhoff, 2007). This paper has proposed and exemplified several ways in which this can be achieved over time. Following Deci and Ryan (1985, 2002), students can help in choosing the course's content and tasks, as was done with a low level group in the second semester. Discussing their undergraduate program with students shows additional interest and can provide information useful in designing discipline-specific projects, as advocated by Orr and Yoshida (2001). Examples taken from various undergraduate programs have shown how these can be used to review

or teach undergraduate program-related linguistic items, vocational skills and cultural knowledge. Designing these projects to facilitate personalization and free choice, as with posters or stories can further enhance intrinsic motivation (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Finally, a framework by which such projects might be designed and implemented has been proposed and might be of use to those wishing to try this approach.

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