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Autonomous learning: How can I help my students foster it?

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Japanese high school students are not usually given the opportunity to take charge of their own learning in large mixed level classes, but are required to take many exams while at the same time developing their English competence. This gives the students a negative attitude towards English. On the other hand, when they are placed in situations where they need to communicate with people from abroad, they use English as much as possible in order to make themselves understood. This paper describes such students' attitudes towards English and their learning environment and also considers ways to improve their autonomy.

日本の高校のクラスは一般に生徒数が多く、個々の能力にも開きがあると言われていた。また、生徒自ら選択し学ぶ機会が十分に与えられているとは言えず、いつも小テストや定期考査などの試験に追われているのが実情で、それが英語学習態度にもよくない影響を与えている。その一方で、英語を使って意思伝達を図りたいという姿勢は随所に見られ、そこで得られた成功体験が前向きな学習態度につながっている。本論では、そのような生徒の前向きな英語学習態度をどのようにクラスでの自律的な英語学習に活かせるかについて考察する。

The English classes in my school are organised according to a curriculum and syllabus in order to help develop the students' language competence. Following the introduction of the new curriculum by the

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT), the school syllabus has changed and new teaching methods and activities have been introduced in order to provide the students with more exposure to English in the classroom.

Traditionally, the Japanese English classroom is teacher-centered, each class normally consisting of 35 to 45 students of mixed competence. Teachers tend to be perplexed at how to deal with such groups and find these conditions taxing. Within a limited number of class periods, students are required to read English newspapers, books, and MEXT-authorized English course books, and also to increase their knowledge of grammatical rules and apply them to their practice of English conversation or essay writing. This may be why some students feel that it's difficult to keep up with the classes. They are also required to take numerous weekly mini-tests and term examinations, whose marks directly affect their grades. The results of these tests tend to influence the students' attitudes towards English. Those with poor results have negative attitudes towards English, asking why they have to study English even though they are Japanese and don't have to use English in their daily lives.

However, the students do like to use English when they communicate with people from over-

seas. When I took some of the students to the tourist district of Asakusa in Tokyo to interview foreign tourists in English, all of them tried to make full use of what they had learned in their classes in order to communicate. This experience boosted their confidence and they realized that what they had learned in English classes was really meaningful. As a result of our trip, some of the students developed a more positive attitude towards English, some saying they intended to increase their contact with English pop culture and read books and newspapers.

Connecting such positive feelings of students to their current classes is something I would like to explore further. However, it is not a simple matter to construct these “perfect conditions” to improve students’ motivation, as McCombs and Pope (1994) assume. Studies have shown that learners cannot foster autonomy in isolation, but need social interaction with a teacher and other learners in the classroom. Little (1999), has said that teachers should provide learners with group work, so they are able to gain motivation from frequently exchanging ideas with other group members. Dam (1999) has mentioned that the teacher’s involvement produces powerful effects on learners taking responsibility for the whole process, from choosing their goals to assessing their own motivation. According to Ushioda (2012), it is beneficial to create an environment where learners can learn a language by means of interaction with the teacher and other learners and where they can be praised or encouraged by the teacher. Thinking of these studies in relation to my own classes, it may be necessary for me to create the kind of classroom environment where the students can socialize and shape their motivation, and where I can support and encourage the students wherever I can by giving them opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning. But are these measures really enough? What else do I have to do to improve my classes?

I have returned to graduate school to study English language teaching in more depth. Studying while working as a full-time teacher and taking care of two boys is quite challenging, but I find time to read, which broadens my horizons and enables me to look at my classes from different perspectives. As I read books on English language teaching and recall my 16 years of teaching at a private girl’s school, I think it more necessary for teachers to help learners voluntarily study and utilize English outside the classroom. So I have become a member of the Learner Development SIG. I am very grateful

that I have been given the opportunity to study learner development and to make improvements to my classes.

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