

Creating basic motivational conditions in the JHS classroom: self esteem, sense of place and purpose

Guy Smith

Komazawa University

Why are some teachers able to construct unified and calm learning groups while other equally dedicated ones struggle to do so? In the context of the EFL Japanese Junior High School, this article looks at a case study of one successful teacher and her facility in rapidly creating unified learner groups. Her strategies create individuals who display strong situational self-regulation skills in willingly accepting class group needs, thus creating a classroom environment which offers all participants a fair, productive, and supportive foundation for learning progress.

なぜある教師が落ち着いたあるクラスを構成出来る一方で、他の教師はそこで苦しむ事になるのか？本稿では、まとまりのあるクラスを作る、ある中学校教諭のストラテジーを紹介する。そこでは、クラスが求めるニーズ、すなわち公平で生産的かつ効果的に学べる環境、を自ずと受け入れる自己抑制力のある個を生み出している。

Second language learning (L2) motivational studies have been moving towards more socially situated approaches focusing on dynamic and evolving relationships between individuals, groups, and environments (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The complexity of investigating social and individual components of L2 learner motivation in their L2 studies has resulted in more situated approaches viewing learner motivation through contextual micro-perspectives (Dörnyei, 2003), e.g., teacher personality, task motivation, and group specific motivational components as they develop in time, for example evolving classroom cohesion.

Five years of EFL co-teaching with Japanese teachers in public Junior High Schools in the Kanto region let me experience teaching with over 50 teachers. It mystified me as to why while nearly all teachers demonstrated caring personalities with sincere interest in their students' welfare, some teachers were effective in rapidly building cohesive and calm learning environments, while many others struggled with

SIG Spotlight: TED SIG

Teacher Education & Development SIG is a network of foreign language instructors dedicated to becoming better teachers by exploring educational practices and helping others teach more effectively. Active since 1993, TED members teach at all levels of education. TED's annual conference, EFL Teacher Journeys, and its publication, Explorations in Teacher Education, an on-line journal and newsletter, are devoted to providing teachers with forums for discussing their research into teaching practices and offering advice for professionals at various stages of their teaching journeys.

disruptive and sometimes demotivated classrooms. Why were some teachers so continually successful?

The rewards of working with teenagers attract many energetic and dedicated educators. However, motivating this age-group to adhere to group norms allowing the teacher to maximize classroom time can be tricky and patience testing. Teacher A, with 30 years of teaching experience, employs effective initial management strategies in building unity with learners who present serious challenges in classroom management. I was able to observe her classroom over a period of five years with more than ten learning groups, demonstrating the effectiveness and practicality of her strategies.

A Framework for Discussion

Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a motivational and personality macro-theory which sees the extent to which behavior towards growth is self-determined, affects adversely or favorably, the intensity and persistence of motivation. Self-determined behavior can be promoted and encouraged by people perceiving psychological needs as being fulfilled. Rochester University researchers Edward Deci and Richard

Ryan and Deci (2002) have detailed 3 key needs in the theory; competence, relatedness, and autonomy. (For an investigation of SDT in the Japanese context, see Honda and Sakyu, 2005).

1. Competence refers to the perception that we are acting effectively.
2. Relatedness refers to the need to be connected.
3. Autonomy refers to our desire to be in charge of and responsible for our own actions.

The SDT framework will allow us to define and investigate links between Teacher A's natural classroom strategy and her subsequent success in classroom management.

Strategies

Competence 1. Success

According to SDT, people need to feel effective. Teacher A includes some assessment in every lesson. Assessment activities are quick reviews of lesson points. For example, from today's class of the letters A to G, students are required to write these letters five times in a five-minute period. Grading is decided solely by completing the activity. The teacher circulates, encouraging and helping any students in need. Not surprisingly, all students receive an "A" grade. Such assessment focusing on concrete and visible success continues for two or three weeks. Students perceiving themselves as effective learners will be vital in fostering a commitment to co-operate with the group needs.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) number 3 elements improving the chances our students will be successful:

- offering sufficient preparation and assistance
- making sure exactly what success involves
- removing serious obstacles to success

Relatedness 1. A sense of purpose

Teacher A nearly always starts out lessons with a rationale of how or why today's learning may be useful. Simple activities such as learning numbers are given a context, for example, noting down a telephone number. Paul Nation (2009) in *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* comments, "The main focus should be on language that the learners can use quickly for their purposes rather than on too much grammar explanation" (p. 19). Littlejohn (2008) further points out, "At the very least then, we can say it

is the responsibility of the teacher to explain why it is useful to do a particular activity and how that activity relates to the wider goal of learning the language" (p.4).

I observed few teachers (including myself) consistently giving students a reason or context for learning to aid directed student motivation. Many teachers seemed to rely upon beliefs that students' should listen to and follow the teacher's instructions. Many young EFL learners without clear goals become demotivated, one crucial problem can be an ineffective teaching style (Kikuchi and Sakai, 2009).

Relatedness 2. Caring, respect, and tolerance

Teacher A has a problematic student in one of her classes. In one class, this student raised his hand three times in five minutes claiming he "did not understand the activity." Teacher A remains calm praising the student, saying the student has raised a question other students may want to ask but hesitate to do so. The teacher always asks him by name to be quiet, and thanks him when he makes an effort to do so.

This student comes to follow lines of acceptable behavior, and becomes a positive contributor to class. A potentially disruptive student has been assimilated as a valued member, not sidelined or ignored. Importantly, "relatedness is deeply associated with a student feeling that the teacher genuinely likes, respects and values him or her" (Niemeic, 2009, p.139) and teacher behaviors play a vital role in class cohesion. Teacher A demonstrates it is important a caring attitude emerge in practical strategies and behaviors all students can *relate to* and *clearly recognize*.

Discussion

Few things are less disheartening than facing 3 years of teaching a disruptive and demotivated group. Dörnyei (2003) identifies cohesion and acceptance of group norms in the classroom as a vital part of creating basic motivational conditions for learner progress. By focusing on developing individual self-esteem and sense of place, teachers can acquire the willing consent of students to accept group norms.

In my 5 years of team teaching, I observed many teachers new to teaching struggle to create unified groups with young learners. Lack of practical strategy in creating unity often led to shouting at disruptive students, or punishments fostering dislike for the teacher. Teacher A's

strategies offer practical and concrete guiding principles for new teachers wondering how to create positive group unity.

In summary, teachers in the Japanese JHS context may have more success in early stage group forming by, paradoxically, focusing on classroom strategies that foster individual perceptions of self-esteem, place and purpose within the group by

- Focusing on perceived student competence (Can I be an effective learner, here in this classroom with this group?)
- Increasing sense of purpose in context (Why am I learning/doing this?)
- Building a strong and visible relationship with the teacher (Is the teacher's concern and respect for me and the class real, and being expressed in a tangible manner?)
- Emphasizing each individual's place (Do I have a role to play in the group?)

Sometimes sadly, our enjoyment of teaching is severely diminished by frustratingly non-cooperative classrooms and students. While real classroom teaching will always be emotional and stressful, it should also be satisfying. Teacher A shows us that we can, through proactive and practical strategies, create positive and successful classrooms which promote student growth and also support and build our enthusiasm for teaching and keep alive the vision of having a positive impact on the lives of our students.

References

- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2002). An overview of self-determination theory. In E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of self-determination research* (pp. 3-33). Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2003). Attitudes, orientations, and motivations in language learning: Advances in theory, research, and applications. In Z. Dörnyei (Ed.), *Attitudes, orientations and motivations in language learning* (pp. 3-32). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Harlow, Longman.
- Honda, K. & Sakyu, M. (2005). The Concurrent and Construct Validity of Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation in Japanese EFL Learners: A Self Determination Perspective. 大阪教育大学教科教育学会『教科教育学論集』[Osaka Kyouiku

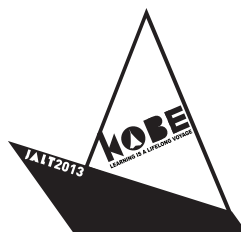
University Research Group for Curriculum and Education "Articles on Learning and Curriculum Development"] 4, 41-54.

- Kikuchi, K., & Sakai, H. (2009). Japanese Learners' Demotivation to Study English: A Survey Study. *JALT Journal*, 31(2), 183-204.
- Littlejohn, A. (2008). The Tip of the Iceberg: Factors affecting Learner Motivation. *RELC*, 39(2), 214-225. Retrieved December 11, 2011 from <andrewlittlejohn.net/website/docs/iceberg.pdf>
- Niemiec, C. P., & Ryan, M. R. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(2), 133-144.
- Nation, I. S. P. & Newton, J. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*. Routledge, New York.

This essay first appeared in *Explorations in Teacher Education (Teacher Education and Development Special Interest Group of the Japan Association for Language Teaching)*, Volume 20, Issue 3, pp. 3-10. For this publication, it was shortened and edited.

Guy Smith holds an M.A. in TESOL from the University of Technology in Sydney. He teaches at private universities in the Tokyo area. His research interests focus on social psychology in educational contexts. When not trying to figure out how to keep some students a little

quieter and persuade others to participate, he enjoys practicing Okinawa style karate. He can be contacted at <guyantony607@gmail.com>.



JALT2013

October 25-28, 2013

Kobe International
Conference Center &
International Exhibition Hall

<jalt.org/conference>