Teacher-Student Contact Moments in Classrooms in Japanese Secondary Schools

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Teacher-student relationships can influence various aspects of students' learning. A key concept to consider for teacher-student relationships is contact. Contact refers to a temporal momentary phenomenon and the related experiences. When teachers and students accumulate good quality contact moments, this can positively influence students' motivation, attitudes toward learning, and engagement. However, little research has been undertaken on contact. This study was conducted to investigate 1) how teachers and students accumulate contact moments, and 2) how the accumulation of contact moments helps build their relationships in Japanese secondary schools. The participants were two Japanese teachers of English and their students. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and focus-group interviews with students in one academic year. The findings of the study showed that the teachers and students actively accumulated contact moments, which eventually led to them building trusting relationships.

教師と生徒の関係性は、生徒の学習に対して様々な影響を与える。この関係性について考える上で重要な要素が、コンタクトである。コンタクトとは一時的な現象や経験を指す。教師と生徒が良いコンタクトを蓄積できると、生徒の動機づけ、学習に対する姿勢、エンゲージメントに対して良い影響を与える。しかしながら、コンタクトの研究はこれまでほぼ行われていない。本研究は、1) 教師と生徒がどのようにコンタクトを蓄積しているか、2) コンタクトの蓄積がどのように関係性構築へ影響を与えているかの2点について、日本の中学校、高等学校で調査を実施した。参加者は、日本人英語教師2名とその生徒である。データは1年間に亘って、半構造化インタビュー、授業観察、生徒対象のフォーカスグループによって収集された。結果として、教師と生徒は活発にコンタクトを蓄積しており、コンタクトの蓄積が信頼関係構築につながっている点が明らかになった。

Teacher-student relationships are crucial in learning and can influence various aspects of it. Furrer et al. (2014) reported that teacher-student relationships can influence students' motivation, learning, and achievement. Furthermore, it has been illustrated that teacher-student relationships are one of the most important factors for successful learning (Hattie, 2009). When students have good quality teacher-student relationships, they are more engaged in learning and likely to have positive outcomes in their learning.

A key factor to consider in teacher-student relationships is contact (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Contact refers to a temporal momentary phenomenon and the related experiences (Korthagen et al., 2014). Examples of contact can include eye contact, positive feedback, and greetings. It has been claimed that contact can greatly influence students' behaviors (e.g., Korthagen et al., 2014). The accumulation of contact moments between students and teachers can influence motivation, attitudes toward learning, engagement, and positive emotions (Korthagen et al., 2014). For instance, when students and teachers make contact, students can concentrate on their tasks better.

This study focused on contact moments between teachers and students and investigated 1) how teachers and students accumulate contact moments, and 2) how the accumulation of contact moments influences them in building their relationships. The participants were two Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in secondary schools and their students. Data was collected in one academic year. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted three to four times with each teacher. Classroom observations were then conducted six times in total. Additionally, focus-group interviews with the students were conducted twice in each school.

Literature Review

Contact and Self-Disclosure

Contact is a momentary phenomenon (Korthagen et al., 2014). This momentariness differentiates contact from relationships. One of the characteristics of relationships is

that they develop over time and may last for months and years. However, contact is a momentary experience related to an encounter in the here and now (Korthagen et al., 2014). Contact is "a point in time" or temporal, and includes factors such as eye contact and positive feedback. Contact also can vary from being superficial to more intense. For instance, when a teacher and a student greet in the corridor, it is a rapid contact, and it can be superficial. An important point of contact occurs when a teacher and a student become present to one another and are open and willing for a connection to take place. This means that when teachers and students are present, they are fully aware of each other's own thinking, feelings, wanting, and doing (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Contact, therefore, refers to each interaction between people. As the number of contact moments increases, relationships eventually grow (Noddings, 1984).

Contact can also greatly influence students' behavior. It influences students' motivation and attitudes toward learning, which can then enhance student engagement with learning. Students show greater understanding and positive emotions such as pleasure and are more likely to demonstrate joy or enthusiasm (Noddings, 1984).

Another important element to promote teacher-student relationships is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure refers to "statement in the classroom about the self that may or may not be related to the subject content but reveal information about the teacher that students are unlikely to learn from other sources" (Sorensen, 1989, p. 260). It has been reported that teachers' self-disclosure can motivate students and help them engage with study (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). Students will also be more likely to engage in self-disclosure when teachers do so (Cayanus et al., 2009).

Previous Studies on Contact

One of the important studies to investigate contact is Korthagen et al. (2014) which reports the findings of two studies. The first study investigated the elements of good teacher-student contact, and the second, how good teacher-student contact influences students. Study 1 was conducted in a small primary school in the Netherlands, and five primary school teachers participated in the study. First, five teachers were filmed in their classrooms during interactions with individual students for 10 to 20 minutes. After the recording, on the same day, each teacher was asked to view the recording and choose the two best moments of good contact. This resulted in ten cases. After they had chosen their segments, interviews were conducted focusing on their ideas and their experiences of good contact. The findings show that there are various types of good contact such as eye contact, which are difficult to categorize. How the teachers perceive

good contact greatly depends on the teachers and students because of their individuality. The study also indicates that good contact seems to influence the students' emotions and motivation, which eventually influences the students' learning behaviors.

Following the first study, Korthagen et al. (2014) then conducted Study 2 to investigate 1) how teachers think about contact, 2) what teachers and students think about contact, and 3) what motivates teachers to create contact. This study was conducted with the same five teachers who joined the first study. With these participants, a new round of observations was conducted for 10 to 20 minutes, focusing on one-to-one contact moments. These were videotaped and used as the basis for stimulated-recall interviews. In the interviews, the teachers were asked questions about good contact moments with the students in addition to bad ones seen in the recorded videos. Interviews were then also conducted with the students. The students watched the recorded videos and talked about how they experienced specific contact moments. The findings of the study show that the teachers have various ideas concerning contact, as was the case in the first study. In terms of the selected contact moments, the teachers noticed positive feelings in the students. These teachers' interpretations of contacts were generally consistent with what the students talked about in the interviews.

Henry and Thorsen (2018) is one of the few studies on contact in SLA and examines moments of teacher-student interaction and the influences on students' engagement and motivation. Specifically, they aimed to determine: 1) characteristic features in moments of contact in teacher-student relationships, and 2) the influences of moments of contact on students' engagement and motivation. Ethnographic research was conducted in secondary schools in Sweden. Classroom observations were conducted in 13 different classes by the same teacher, after which semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher. Student focus group interviews were also conducted twice. The findings of the study indicated that moments of contact differed depending on the type of teacher-student relationships. In emerging relationships, the teacher, for instance, made contact individually by explaining the focus of the task and disclosing personal information. In mature relationships, the teacher and students knew each other for several years, and they were more intimate. Students felt comfortable in the class, and each contact was longer and more familiar. The teacher and students, for instance, greeted by bumping fists, which was not seen in emerging relationships.

Contact is a critical concept in understanding the teacher-student relationship (Korthagen et al., 2014). However, research on contact has been limited, with few studies being undertaken, including in SLA, with Henry and Thorsen (2018) being a rare example. This study, therefore, aimed to help address this gap and investigated contact

moments and teacher-student relationships in an EFL classroom in Japanese secondary schools, using the following research questions:

RQ1 How do JTEs accumulate contact moments with their students?

RQ2 How do these contact moments influence teachers and students in building their relationships?

Methods

The participants for this study were two male full-time JTEs working in Japanese secondary schools in the Kanto region. These participants were recruited through personal connections. The participants' background information is summarized in Table 1. The names are pseudonyms. It should be noted that, although Jun had just started working in a secondary school at the time of the study, he had worked in a cram school for over 15 years.

Table 1
The Basic Background Information of the Participants

Name	Gender	Age	School	Working experience
Haruto	Male	20s	Public high school	Three years
Jun	Male	30s	Private girls' junior and senior high school	None

Before contacting the teachers, I obtained ethical approval to conduct the study from the university ethical research board. I explained the purpose of the study to the participants (teachers) and assured them that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. I also explained that the recorded materials will only be used for the study. The participants signed a consent form in Japanese. The participating teachers first introduced the study to the students before I went to each school. I further explained the purpose of the study to students on my first visit. School administrators were initially contacted by me or the participating teachers, followed by further explanation from me during my first visit when permission was formally obtained.

The data collection was conducted longitudinally over the course of one academic year. I used semi-structured interviews of teachers, classroom observations, and focus group interviews with the students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted three to four times with each teacher, and they talked about: 1) their past experiences as learners and teachers, and 2) their current experiences working as teachers. All of them were recorded with IC recorders. Classroom observations were conducted six times in each school to see how teachers taught the lesson, and how the teachers and students interacted with each other. Classroom observations were both audio- and video-recorded. Focus group interviews were conducted with two of each teacher's students to determine how they perceived their relationships with their teachers. Students were secondary school students, and might be nervous if they were interviewed one by one. Therefore, focus group interviews were adopted so that students were able to share their ideas more freely. See the Appendices for example questions used in the interviews and focus group interviews.

Data were first organized using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12). All data were added to NVivo 12, with coding initially undertaken. Through the interview data, I particularly focused on relevant discussions where the teachers talked about their relationships with the students, after which classroom observation data were used to pinpoint the interactions between the teachers and students. I also focused on what the students talked about concerning their relationships with their teachers in focus group interviews. I first coded with a broad category such as "the relationship with students," and then coded the details. By examining relevant data concerning the teachers and students' remarks along with concrete examples in the classroom, the study assessed how contact moments were accumulated as well as the influence of contact on teacher-student relationships.

Findings

Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher-Student Contact

This section provides examples of contact moments. The two teachers, Haruto and Jun, both valued the interactions with each of their students. One example of contact involved talking with each student outside of the classroom. Jun conducted consultations individually outside of the classroom. After every term exam, Jun provided opportunities for his students to talk about the results of the exam in terms of what they did well at and what they should have studied more. In addition, the students could also share any issues with Jun if they had any, or about their general daily life in the school. In Japanese secondary schools, students belong to a homeroom class, and it is common for homeroom teachers to conduct consultations regularly. However, it is uncommon for subject teachers such as Jun to conduct consultations with each student they teach.

Another example of contact involved asking and answering questions individually during the class. Jun taught the class by asking questions, as indicated in the following extract from his classroom teaching. (All extracts were translated by the author.) The whole class was conducted in Japanese only.

Jun: This is the second or the third lesson [to study participles], and probably some of you have not understood. Let's examine this carefully. First, in participles, there are two different types. What is the first one, A san?

Student A: Present.

Jun: Right. The other one is what, B san?

Student B: Past.

Jun: Right. How about the form? What comes after the verb in the present participle, C san?

Student C: ing

Jun: What does that mean?

Student C: Doing. (*Shiteiru*.)

(Extract from Jun's classroom teaching)

Jun always asked questions individually in the class to make sure each student could understand the content of the class. He also answered random questions from his students during the class, as indicated in the extract below. The students freely asked Jun any questions during the class.

Student D: How much space do we need in our notebook?

Jun: (Looking at Student D's notebook) Oh, that might not be enough. But you can use the space here. If you already understand this, you don't need to write anything down. This only reviews what we studied.

(Extract from Jun's classroom teaching)

A further example of contact involved creating opportunities for interaction as a whole class. Haruto suggested that they eat lunch together as a class after the students' first class in the school as first-year students. He also organized a supplementary class on his own volition after school so that the students could prepare well for the term exam.

The teachers also tended to share some of their own concerns with their students. For example, Haruto explained why he was having certain difficulties and asked for their cooperation.

Sometimes, I don't have time to sleep because of club activities and other issues, and I asked the students to wake me up if I was about to go to sleep. I also told the students that I was sorry that I didn't provide classroom reports for the students and their parents regularly, and the students said they would explain this to their parents. (Extract from Haruto's interview)

As the extracts from the interviews indicated, Jun and Haruto accumulated contact moments by communicating with students. They talked about various issues including ones that were not directly connected with the content of the class. The teachers also occasionally shared details of their individual concerns. In the classroom, both of them made eye contact with their students, and paid attention to the students' needs and helped them appropriately. This was consistent with the contact observed in Korthagen et al. (2014).

Students' Perceptions of Teacher-Student Contact

The students felt positive about the contact with their teachers, and understood it was helpful for them in building relationships with their teachers and classmates. Haruto's students noted the following in the focus group interviews.

Student E: We (Haruto and students) are close in age, and we can talk together easily. So, we don't have anything to worry about.

Student F: We can easily ask questions.

Student G: The cheerful atmosphere in our class is thanks to him.

Others: Yes, that's right.

Student F: From the beginning, our class was cheerful, and everyone was laughing. At first, everyone was nervous as we all came from different junior high schools.

Student G: Thanks to him, our class became what it is now.

Student H: At first, we ate lunch together after making a circle.

Student E: Thanks to that, everyone started talking with each other.

Student I: The class's atmosphere at this point is thanks to him.

(Extracts from focus group interviews with Haruto's students)

As the students stated, they were able to build positive relationships together as a whole class thanks to Haruto. One of the students saw Haruto differently compared to other teachers, as follows.

I feel that Haruto is different from other teachers. I feel that he has lived appropriately. He has something inside, and interacts with us just the way he is. For example, when I told him I wanted to leave school early, he said, "That's fine." I like him because he is very human. I just feel he is a human like me rather than always being a teacher. He says [when] he dislikes something, and explains why we have to do things.
(Extract from focus group interviews with Haruto's students)

Haruto and his students built a positive relationship, and this seemed to influence the students' attitudes toward learning.

Student G: When I don't understand something, I can say it, and he explains it again.

Student H: Yes, he teaches us again and again even when we ask the same questions many times.

Student E: Sometimes, he holds a supplementary class for us after school.

(Extracts from focus group interviews with Haruto's students)

Haruto's students understood that Haruto always supported them and was always ready to answer any questions, which seemed to help the students to study English more willingly.

Jun's students, too, had a positive attitude toward their teacher's communication, especially about his storytelling during the class. They also understood the importance of communication outside of the classroom, and their daily communication seemed to influence them positively.

Interviewer: What do you like about his teaching? What do you enjoy about it?

Student I: He sometimes chats with us during the lesson. It's fun and motivating.

Student K: I like listening to his stories about other people. It's fun, and motivates me.

(Extracts from focus group interviews with Jun's students)

He listens to us seriously, and gives us advice, even for other subjects. He often helps me with social studies, and math if I tell him I don't understand it well enough.

(Extract from focus group interviews with Jun's students)

As indicated, the students seemed to feel positively about the contact moments that they accumulated with their teachers. Both the teachers and students were ready to disclose aspects of themselves, and this helped them to build trusting relationships. As the students gained trust in their teachers, they seemed to develop positive attitudes toward studying English.

Discussion

This study investigated: 1) how JTEs accumulate contact moments with their students and, 2) how these contact moments influenced the teachers and students in building their relationships. Haruto and Jun accumulated contact moments with students by conducting consultations with each student, asking questions from each student, and creating opportunities to communicate as a whole class. Both teachers made eye contact with their students frequently, and they supported students appropriately, behavior also observed in Korthagen et al. (2014). As a result of these contact moments, the students and teachers built relationships that involved self-disclosure. As illustrated, Jun and Haruto actively communicated with their students, and often talked about something personal to them. Following the teachers showing a willingness to self-disclose, the students also actively engaged with communication and were prepared to talk about things personal to them.

This type of relationship, in which the teachers and students could engage in self-disclosure, was linked to building a trusting relationship. Trust means being able to rely on another's competence (Baier, 1985), and trusting is important for human learning because the extent to which people can learn greatly depends on the degree to which they believe their informants (Haataja et al, 2021). In a classroom context, teachers are the informants, and students can learn better if they build a trusting relationship. Haruto and Jun's students accumulated contact moments that led them to trust their teachers,

and which eventually, through the trusting relationships that resulted, influenced the students in acquiring positive attitudes toward learning.

Conclusion

This preliminary study investigated how JTEs in secondary schools accumulated contact moments with their students, and how contact moments influenced teachers and students in building their relationships. The participants in this study actively accumulated contact moments with their students. The teachers communicated closely with each student both inside and outside the classroom by conducting consultations and checking students' understanding during lessons. The teachers also provided opportunities for the students to communicate with each other as a whole class. By accumulating contact moments, the teachers and students built relationships in which self-disclosure could occur, facilitating the emergence of trusting relationships. Contact can be a key factor for teachers and students to promote their relationships, and a positive relationship can influence students' attitudes toward learning (e.g., Cayanus & Martin, 2008).

This study was conducted in a limited context. Further research needs to be conducted involving studies in various contexts to assess a more varied accumulation of contact moments. It is especially interesting to see how teachers' backgrounds, such as their beliefs and past experiences, influence them to build a relationship as indicated in Korthagen et al. (2014). Research is also recommended to further investigate how contact influences the building of effective and productive relationships, and on the connection between contact and language proficiency. It is also meaningful to see how teachers and students can accumulate contact and build a relationship in different types of classes. For instance, online classes are more common these days, and it would be interesting to investigate how teachers and students accumulate contact online. It is also interesting to see how the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom influences them to build a relationship. As shown in this study, good quality contact can influence students' attitudes toward learning, which is likely to have implications for helping students develop their language skills. Therefore, research is needed to help identify and develop classroom experiences where teachers and students can interact more positively.

Bio Data

Saki Suemori is an assistant professor at University of Tsukuba. Her research interests include teacher psychology and motivation in the classroom. <suemori.saki.ge@u.tsukuba.ac.jp>

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Appendix A

Sample questions for interviews with teachers (translated into English based on original Japanese questions)

The first interview

1. Relationship with English
   - When did you start learning (using) English?
2. Experiences in the process of learning English
   - What did you major in at university?
3. Past teaching experience
   - In which type of schools did you teach?
   - Which year of students did you teach?
   - What kind of important events did you experience in the process of teaching?
4. As a teacher
   - What is your priority in your teaching?
   - What do you value as an English teacher?
   - How do you spend most of your time and energy as a teacher?
   - How would you like to spend most of your time and energy as a teacher?
   - What do you value when you teach English?
   - What kind of difficulties do you have at this point?
   - What do you think about the relationships you have with others?
   - How close do you think your relationship is with students?

The second, the third, the fourth interview

1. Reflection for the first semester
   - Important events and experiences.
   - What did you emphasize the most during the semester?
2. English classes
   - How do you feel in your daily teaching?
   - In what kind of situation (or when) do you enjoy teaching?
   - In what kind of situation (or when) are you reluctant to teach?

3. The relationship with the students
   - What kind of influence do you have on your students' behavior and responses in the class?
   - Have there been any important responses or remarks from the students?
4. The relationship with colleagues
5. Individual questions based on the previous interview and monthly teaching journal

Appendix B

Sample questions for focus-group interviews with students (translated into English based on original Japanese questions)

1. English
   - What do you think about English as a subject?
   - What is your goal for studying English?
   - What do you want to be able to do in the future in English?
   - Is English necessary for you?
   - When and where will you use English in the future?
2. English classes
   - What do you think about English classes?
   - (General impressions and opinions about class)
   - What activities do you enjoy?
   - What activities do you not enjoy very much?
   - What do you think about specific activities in the class?
   - (I chose several activities after observing the class and asked questions)
3. Teachers
   - How does the teacher influence you?
   - (I will choose several teachers' behavior and ask how it influences them.)
   - What kind of response or feedback from the teacher makes you happy?
   - How does the teacher motivate you to study English?
   - How does the teacher demotivate you to study English?