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The Effect of Teacher Praise on Motivation and Learning in the Japanese English Classroom

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Much research has been done to investigate the factors influencing learner motivation to study a second language (L2). A wide range of factors have been identified as playing key roles in L2 learners' motivational levels, such as a desire to integrate with the target culture (Gardner,1985), a desire to achieve specific external goals (such as passing an entrance exam), a perception of achievement in reaching learning goals, intrinsic interest in the target language and its culture, and more personal factors such as personality (Ellis,1994).

This paper is concerned with a very specific element of the L2 learner's educational experience on his motivation to learn; that is, the effect of teacher praise. The effect of teacher praise on learner motivation could be examined from a number of viewpoints, but this paper will take a sociological perspective on the issue. Specifically, the effect of teacher praise on L2 learners' motivation and learning will be analyzed from a symbolic interactionist sociological perspective applied to the English learning experiences of Japanese learners in both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts.

Motivation Research in L2 Learning

A review of the literature on motivation studies and theory reveals some general tendencies regarding motivation in L2 learners. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of second language acquisition highlights the importance of each language learning experience in the formation of learners' attitudes towards subsequent learning experiences. These general attitudes continue to influence learner motivation towards subsequent learning experiences in an ongoing process which ultimately affects the maximum level of proficiency in the L2 that a learner is likely to achieve (Gardner,1985).

There are many things that may be within the teacher's control which contribute to the shaping of such attitudes, such as teaching methodology, choice of materials, teacher expectations of learner success (Rosenthal & Jacobson,1974), and interpersonal relations between teacher and students and between other students (the latter can be influenced by the teacher

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guiding partner-and small-group formation) (Berwick & Ross,1989; Ellis, 1994; Kobayashi, Redekop & Porter,1992; Toms,1994). Teacher praise can be an important part of many of these elements, especially teaching methodology, teacher expectations, and, of course, interpersonal relations.

In research specific to English instruction in Japan, it has been shown that what takes place in English language classrooms, particularly at the high school level, has a direct effect on the subsequent motivation of college-aged students and adults to learn English. Much research takes issue with the broad structure of the Japanese educational system, which relies on a series of demanding entrance examinations, as well as with the teaching methods employed in Japanese English classrooms in order to prepare students for those exams (Berwick & Ross,1989; Kobayashi, Redekop & Porter,1992; Toms,1994). More relevant to this paper is the underlying theme in the same research, which indicates that negativity prevails in Japanese English classrooms, where the teachers are pointedly negative in urging students to meet the short-term study goal of passing entrance examinations (Kobayashi, Redekop & Porter,1992). Consequently, students expend efforts to achieve that goal motivated not by an intrinsic interest in English but by the threat of failure.

An interesting contrast to the situation in EFL classrooms in Japan is provided by a diary study on a Japanese learner in an ESL context conducted by Matsumoto (1989). The learner in this study exhibited strong motivation to study English, evidenced most clearly by the fact that she made the effort to go abroad to study English. The researcher's findings highlighted a number of factors that influenced the learner's continuing motivation to study, but most relevant to this paper is Matsumoto's (1989) finding that teacher praise strongly influenced the learner's affective state towards the learning experience: "Even a short utterance of teacher praise had a notable positive influence on [the informant's] L2 learning" (p.175). The researcher emphasizes the "strong positive impact teacher praise makes upon L2 learners, an impact noted in past diary research as well" (p.175). This study clearly indicates a strong correlation between the offering of teacher praise and increased levels of motivation in L2 learners.

While the above research supports the notion that teacher praise can lead to higher levels of learner motivation, it is important to note that the offering of teacher praise alone is not enough to maintain motivation levels. In a paper detailing a syllabus designed to improve learner self-efficacy (that is, a person's belief in his own ability to accomplish a given goal), Templin, Shiroku and Taira (1999) make the important point that, "Although psychological/physiological states, verbal praise, and vicarious experiences are helpful to raise self-efficacy, mastery is still the most important way for students to improve their self-efficacy in English. It is doubtful that students' self-efficacy will increase if their language abilities do not increase in some way" (p.1). This assertion acknowledges the importance of teacher praise but helps to keep the scope of its effect in perspective.

A review of the literature in L2 learner motivation thus provides many indications that a positive classroom atmosphere and positive orientation towards learning goals, both of

which encompass the use of teacher praise, are directly related to higher levels of motivation to study and learn in Japanese students of ESL and EFL. In an overview of motivational issues in Japan, Toms (1994) nicely sums up the notion that EFL teachers in Japan can make a great difference in their students' thinking about English studies. He notes that teachers preparing students to take university entrance examinations can do "little to reorient...learner [motivation, but]...can do much in terms of fostering positive attitudes" (p.43).

A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective on the Sociology of Teacher Praise for Japanese Students of English

This paper analyzes the sociological effect of teacher praise on Japanese students from the symbolic interactionist perspective for a number of reasons. First, this perspective is a microsociological one, concerned with "small scale patterns of social interaction" (Henslin,1995), which is suitably applied to the teacher-learner interaction necessary in the offering of teacher praise. Second, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes the symbolic meaning of interpersonal relationships (Henslin,1995). The way in which the participants in classroom interaction view the symbolic role of "teacher" and "student" is of great importance in the efficacy of teacher praise in enhancing L2 learner motivation, particularly in the Japanese cultural context.

Another reason for choosing to analyze this issue from the symbolic interactionist perspective is that a survey of sociological issues in education from this perspective turns up a great deal of research showing that teacher expectations can greatly influence student successes and failures. The general conclusion of a number of studies conducted in this area is that students are likely to live up (or down) to the expectations that their teachers have of them (Henslin,1995; Rosenthal & Jacobson,1974). This correlation between teacher expectation and student performance supports the thesis of this paper that teacher praise is correlated to motivation and performance levels of Japanese EFL and ESL students. Students may perceive teacher praise as an indication of high expectations of further learning successes, thereby motivating them to live up to those perceived expectations by making more of an effort. Matsumoto's (1989) informant exhibited such behavior when, after being praised by her teacher, she noted in her journal her resolve to, "...work harder for the remaining weeks" (p.174).

A look at the basics of Japanese societal hierarchy suggests that the effect of teacher praise and expectations on Japanese students in particular may be even more powerful than the effects noted in the self-fulfilling prophecy research by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1974), which was conducted in the United States. This is due to the more rigid social hierarchy that exists in Japanese society, where the teacher, or *sensei*, is highly respected, even revered. Throughout the long history of Japan, a clear understanding and acceptance of one's place in the societal hierarchy has been essential to the smooth functioning of society in general (Ellington,1992). (A macrosociological functionalist view of this situation would suggest that

each level in the social hierarchy performs a necessary function in maintaining a harmonious existence.) At the microsociological level, *sensei*, keeper and impartor of knowledge, is to be “highly respected, and students [are] expected to passively absorb knowledge” (Ellington, 1992; p.20). In the symbolic interactionist view, then, *sensei* is an important and powerful symbol with much higher status than his or her students in Japanese society. The gap in status between these two symbols in society means that words of praise or criticism from teacher to student are likely to carry much weight and have a significant effect on the person occupying the role with lesser status.

First-hand quotes from Matsumoto’s (1989) diary study informant illustrate the powerful effect of teacher praise on that particular Japanese ESL student:

In the afternoon class we talked with our teacher about the previous weekend. ...We talked in English quite a lot. He praised me, saying, “Now you can speak much better than before. Great improvement!” How glad I was with his words! I would like to speak tomorrow as successfully as I did today (p.174).

Analyzed from the symbolic interactionism viewpoint, Matsumoto’s (1989) informant’s excitement and sense of satisfaction with her teacher’s praise is the natural reaction of a person in a low-status role in response to positive recognition from a person who is in a position that is afforded the highest respect by the informant’s Japanese culture.

English Teachers in Japan and North America-Symbolic Differences?

An interesting contrast to the above situation is my own experience as an ESL teacher in Vancouver, Canada. In North American culture, the symbol of “teacher” is respected but not as reverently as in other cultures. Henslin (1995) supports this idea by pointing out that the importance of educators in a given society can be indicated in part by the salaries they are paid, and that Japanese teachers are better paid than their North American counterparts.

Analyzing the status of North American teachers in their native society one step further, it has been my experience that in the smaller society of education professionals, ESL teachers are regarded with less respect than teachers of other subjects such as mathematics or literature. I have not discovered any empirical research to support this personal observation other than the understanding through personal communication with education professionals in fields other than ESL that ESL teachers are even less well paid than many teachers of other subjects in North America. However, this alone, as Henslin (1995) points out, is an indication of the status of the role of ESL teacher in North American society.

In light of this observation, I find it rather ironic that the teacher who pleased Matsumoto’s (1989) informant so greatly by offering praise likely occupies a less-respected symbolic role in his own culture’s societal hierarchy than he does in the societal hierarchy of his

Japanese student's culture. An interesting extension to this discussion would be to discover if the motivation of ESL students from societies where teachers are less highly regarded is as greatly influenced by teacher praise as the motivation of Japanese ESL students; however, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Implications for Non-Japanese ESL/EFL Teachers

It is important for non-Japanese teachers of English in Japan to be aware of the difference in the status of their position as *sensei* in Japanese society as compared to the status afforded them in their home countries. As members of North American society themselves, Canadian and American ESL/EFL teachers may be socialized to view the symbolic gap between teacher and student roles as smaller than it is here in Japan. An awareness of this difference between cultures will help non-Japanese teachers to take their role more seriously and to be more cognizant of the possible effect of their words of praise or criticism towards their Japanese students. An understanding of this issue can contribute to a teacher's overall efficacy in contributing to his students' levels of motivation and overall achievement.

Observations and Conclusion

Much has been written about the apparent lack of motivation among Japanese students of English (see for example Berwick & Ross,1989; Kobayashi, Redekop & Porter,1992; Toms,1994). The reasons behind these low levels of motivation are manifold, including problems with the entrance examination system, teaching methodology, and negativity in the classroom. Teachers seeking to overcome these problems have a formidable task ahead of them; however, this paper asserts that the simple offering of sincere praise to students by their teacher can have a positive and motivating effect on their attitudes towards their studies.

Taking a symbolic interactionism sociological viewpoint on this issue provides some explanation as to why this may be so. Given that members of Japanese society who occupy the relatively low-status "student" role are likely to be unaccustomed to hearing positive words from a person in the high-status "teacher" role (Kobayashi, Redekop & Porter,1992) , it is reasonable to surmise that praise could have a fairly powerful effect on the attitude and motivation of the lower-status member of society, who is socialized to strive to please those higher in the Japanese social hierarchy (Ellington,1992). Furthermore, sociological research on teacher-student interpersonal relations has shown that positive or negative teacher expectations have a direct and parallel correlation to student performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson,1974). If one accepts that praise is one manifestation of positive expectations, it follows that the regular offering of sincere praise to students by their teachers may well lead to enhanced motivation and performance.

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