

Learner Centred-Method for Japanese Adult Learners

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I . INTRODUCTION

Many Japanese adult learners feel that they will never be able to use enough realistic language to communicate successfully in the target language in real situations even though they learned English at school for ten years (three years for junior high school, three years for senior high school and four years for university). Schools in Japan start teaching English from the first year of junior high school continuing until at least the third year of high school, but the students are unable to speak or comprehend English. The reason lies in the fact that in the past, Japan relied heavily on the reading and writing method of teaching English (Grammar-Translation Method).

Ever since the time of the Meiji Restoration the foremost aim of the study of foreign languages in Japan had been neither the improvement of trade nor the furthering of friendly relations with foreign countries, but rather the rapid acquisition and appropriation of the cultures and techniques of Western civilization. This had meant that the learning of foreign languages was seen as a kind of service to the state. Under the heading of civilization is included commerce, finance, economics, law, medicine and education. (Morita 1976, p36)

Moreover, the method of learning English in Japan is teacher-centred where the teacher directs the classroom. Rogers (1994) suggests some characteristics of the teacher-centred method the consequences are fixed for all students and students are allowed limited responsibilities. Consequently, there is a need for a new method to language teaching which will shift the focus of attention from the teacher-centred to a learner-centred method. However, if learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted for Japanese adult learners, they would have some implications for both Japanese adult learners and their tutors.

II . BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Learner-centred methods emerged in the 1960s from teachers and educators dissatisfied with the “traditional teaching method” which focused on the teacher’s decision making. Illich (1972) mentions involvement and participation are necessary for learning.

“In fact, learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being ‘with it’, yet school makes them identify their personal cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation.” (Illich 1972, p44)

Campbell and Kryszewska (1992) and Deller (1990) provide an interesting survey of the range of learner-centred activities which have made their way into mainstream language teaching practice. However, on a very practical level, Deller says that she found learner-centred activities to be a means of countering the difficulties caused by large classes, low-tech materials and inadequate course books. Campbell and Kryszewska (1992) also found that a learner-based mode of teaching offered a way of overcoming the dissatisfaction generated by course books which “did not meet the real needs and interests of learners.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) mention as following:

“Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackage assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.”

A learner-centred approach differs from traditional approaches to teaching in that it is based on an active involvement of learners in the development of their study programme in terms of goal-setting and choice of methodology. This has a number of advantages, not the least of which is that course design decisions are made on a broader knowledge base than in the case of a traditional teacher-or expert-based approach. (Tudor 1996, p34)

The adoption of a learner-centred approach to teaching has a number of implications for the learners involved. The most evident of these is the more active and participatory role allocated to learners in the development of their study programme and the importance given to their subjective needs and learning preferences. A learner-centred approach to teaching also has implications for the role and responsibilities of the teacher. (Tudor 1993) Additionally, teachers should pay sufficient attention to the contextual dimension of language teaching.

As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out, learning a language is ‘not just a mental process’ but ‘a process of negotiation between individuals and society’. The contextual factor relates to the learning culture and traditions of learning both in the educational

system concerned and in the community as a whole. Moreover, classroom culture is one component of the contextual factor that relates to the learners. Sensibility to the learning context and to classroom culture is essential in a learner-centred method to teaching. The teacher needs to show adaptability in realizing the basic principles of learner-centred methods in a contextually appropriate manner. For example, the teacher should know the student's culture because language is related to its culture. In Japan, we live in a homogeneous nation and speak only Japanese compared to the U.S where many languages are spoken in a multi-cultural nation. We have only one Japanese culture so that we do not speak a lot, but can understand each other. As a result, we tend to avoid verbal intimacy. Teachers from Western countries are sometimes confused with this attitude in English classes. However, if they knew Japanese culture they could manage their classes more effectively.

Studying a language is an interactive process between the teacher and her/his students. If a change takes place in the role of learners then a parallel change in the role of the teacher is in fact inevitable. Adopting learner-centred methods of teaching can represent a challenge to the teacher's professional skills and adaptability. Learner-centred methods may thus represent a more or less marked innovation with respect to the skills and classroom behaviour of the individual teacher.

III . RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the implications for both Japanese adult learners and their tutors if learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted. In this paper, I will focus on learner-centred methods and their greater effectiveness than teacher-centred methods for Japanese adult learners.

IV . METHOD

1. Participants

The participants of this study comprised of a group of five Japanese adult learners. They were all Japanese expatriates residing in foreign country. The number of years that they had been living in foreign country varied greatly, from just a few years to twelve years. Four of five were housewives and one was a businessman. The people's names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

2. Interview

In my research, a structure interview was chosen over the unstructured interview. The interview was conducted all in Japanese. Therefore, the participants felt comfortable telling me their personal thoughts and feelings. Patton (1980) states that interview is the

best way-and perhaps the only way-to find out “what is in and on someone else’s mind”. (Patton 1980, quoted in Merriam 1988, p.86) In other words, interviews can be seen as one of the most important sources of information. One of the aims of conducting this research study is to investigate the implications for both adult learners and their tutors if learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted. This study is very specific situation and will provide insights on the quality of our instruction rather than the outcome or confirmation such as whether its method is good or not.

The interview questions I selected to probe for answers to the research questions included:

- 1) What do you think are the reasons that caused you to have a poor command of spoken English?
- 2) What do learners see as the benefits and ineffectiveness of learner-centred method?
- 3) What are the benefits for Japanese adult learners if learner-centred method is adopted?
- 4) Which do you prefer Teacher-centred method or Learner-centred method? Why do you prefer that method?
- 5) How can the learning process of Japanese adult learners of English be enhanced through Learner-centred method?

Each participant was also asked to give information about her/his personal study history, experiences abroad, and social contexts such as influence of instructors and teaching method.

V . RESULTS

These main results are drawn from the interviews with these Japanese adult learners and their questionnaires. Interviews are a data collection procedure used in the qualitative research. I originally chose five people from as diverse backgrounds as possible.

< Case 1: Tomoko >

Tomoko is a housewife and has lived in English-speaking countries for a total of six and half years since leaving Japan due to her husband’s overseas postings. Her first language is Japanese and she learnt English at school by the Grammar-Translation method. She is taking lessons (learner-centred method) at the moment because she has a clear aim to study English in order to communicate with English speakers. She felt that English classes at school were not effective because of the study of grammatical points and translation. During her lessons, the ratio of speaking between her and her tutor is seven to three and she prepares and reviews the lessons more often than her school days. Compared to her school days, she studies hard and learning is effective because she now realises the best method of learning for her. She prefers a learner-centred method to

a teacher-centred method because she likes to learn more conversation, listening and speaking. One of the reasons she prefers a learner-centred method is the fear of making mistakes in front of other people is reduced. However, she mentions that she does not benefit from other learners speaking English and the tutor is able to understand the learner's incomplete English easily. (i.e. the tutor may be not challenging her enough)

< Case 2: Yoko >

Yoko is a housewife and has lived in English-speaking countries for a total of three and half years since leaving Japan due to her husband's overseas postings. Her first language is Japanese and she learnt English at school by the Grammar-Translation method. She is currently taking lessons (learner-centred method) because she would like to communicate with English speaking people. During her lessons, the ratio of speaking between her and her tutor is two to eight and she prepares and reviews the lessons more often than her school days. She mentions that her learning English experience is efficient now. She prefers a learner-centred method to a teacher centred-method because she likes to learn more conversation, listening and speaking. One of the reasons she prefers a learner-centred method is she is afraid to make mistakes. However, she mentions that she is not able to self-assess her progress.

< Case 3: Sachiko >

Sachiko is a housewife and has lived in English-speaking country for a year since leaving Japan due to her husband's overseas postings. Her first language is Japanese and she learnt English at school by the Grammar-Translation method. She has been taking lessons (learner-centred method) for a year and half because she has a clear aim to study English in order to communicate with English speakers. She enjoys learning English very much. She felt that English classes at school were not effective because of the study grammatical points and translation. During her lessons, the ratio of speaking between her and her tutor is four to six and she prepares and reviews the lessons more often than her school days. Compared to her school days, she studies hard and learning is effective because she now realises the best method of learning for her. She prefers a learner-centred method to a teacher centred-method because she likes to learn more conversation, listening and speaking. However, she mentions that a learner-centred method is less effective because the congeniality between the tutor and the learner has reached a point where the tutor is less strict with respect to accuracy, are the tutor is able to understand learner's incomplete English easily.

< Case 4: Naomi >

Naomi is a housewife and has lived in English-speaking country for two years and seven months since leaving Japan due to her husband's overseas postings. Her first language is Japanese and she learnt English at school by the Grammar-Translation method. She

used to take lessons (learner-centred method). During her lessons, the ratio of speaking between her and her tutor is five to five. She likes to learn English by listening, speaking, writing and learning studying a grammar book. She is the only one to prefer a teacher centred method to a learner-centred method, because she believes that learning English is effective only when she listens to other people speaking and she does not care about mistakes in class. However, she does not enjoy learning English very much.

< Case 5: Tomoki >

Tomoki is a male businessman and has been in English-speaking countries for a total of twelve years. His first language is Japanese. He started studying English in junior high school and transferred to senior high school in the U.S.A. He learnt English by the Grammar-Translation method at junior high school but not at senior high school. When he came back to Japan, he continued to study English by lessons (learner-centred method) to keep his English competence. During his private lessons, the ratio of speaking between him and his tutor is five to five. He had never prepared and reviewed the lessons because he was very busy at work. He believes that his learning experience for English has been effective. He prefers a private lesson to a class but he mentions that it is inefficient to listen to other learners.

VI. DISCUSSION

1. Implications for Japanese adult learners

a. Self-direction in adult learning

Self-directed learning occurs when learners control both the learning objectives and the means of learning. That is, learners engage in self-directed learning by making their own decisions about what and how they are going to learn. (Lowry, 1989)

When learners take on a self-directed learning project, they gain more than new skills or knowledge. They may also develop motivation, independence, discipline, and confidence (Abdullah, 2001).

Knowles (1990) mentions andragogical assumptions and the six dimensions of learning.

The learner's need to know:

Adults need to know why they must learn something.

The learner's self-concept:

Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and their own lives, thus adults take responsibility for their own learning and are self-directing.

The role of the learner's experience:

Adults have greater and more varied experience which serves as a rich resource for learning. In adult education emphasis should be placed on individualization of teaching and learning strategies, experiential learning, and peer-helping activities.

The learner's readiness to learn:

Adult readiness relates to the things that he or she needs to know and do in real life.

The learner's orientation to learning:

Adults have a life-centred orientation to learning involving problem-solving and task-centred approaches.

The learner's motivation:

Adult motivation is largely internal, such as self-esteem, quality of life, and job satisfaction.

Figure 1. Knowles 1984, p55~61

Interviews with adult Japanese learners have yielded the following conclusion. All of them have gone through the teacher-centred methods in their school days and switched to learner-centred methods because a teacher-centred method for learning English is inefficient for them. Compared to teacher-centred methods, learner-centred methods encourage learners to learn English. This means that learner-centred methods lead adult Japanese learners to self-directed learning, because the principles of learner-centred methods are to identify learner's objective needs, selecting methodology and the decision-making. For instance, most of my interviewees have a clear aim and goals to study English, so that they will be able to ask their tutors to prepare their curriculum for their objectives. It is effective for learners to learn what they want to learn. Most of them want to learn communication English (speaking and listening skills) so that their tutors prepare the materials which focus on speaking or listening then learners tend to study hard because the class is the one they want. One of the interviewees had a clear aim which was get to an English proficiency qualification and she asked her tutors to prepare materials for particular examinations. As a result, she passed the examination. She said that if her tutors did not know her aim and goals, she did not want to study hard and would not be able to pass the examinations. Moreover, all these adult learners decided to start learning English by themselves and prepared and reviewed the lessons more often than in their school days. To sum up, they are responsible for their own learning and this leads them to self-directed learning.

b. Adults bring experiences to the learning situation

Most adults learners bring a range of experience and knowledge to the classroom. Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater and a different quality

of experience from youth. Knowles (1984) suggests that the experience for children is something that happens to them, however adults create their sense of self-identity. Experience of teaching adults reveals that there is often as much unlearning to be done as new learning because of the emotional investment in the existing patterns of experience. In other words, as adults accumulate experience, they tend to develop mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that tend to cause them to close their minds to new ideas, fresh perceptions, and alternative ways of thinking. In my survey, most adult Japanese learners mentioned that learning English is difficult and there is no efficient method for learning English as they never are able to acquire English. If their learning experience was less difficult and more enjoyable, they would accept learning English and would be more comfortable in their English lesson. Also, they have gone through the Grammar-Translation method at school, so they translated Japanese to English when they tried to speak English. Accordingly they were not able to speak English efficiently. However, learners turn their previous experience to advantages for language learning by adopted learner-centred methods. Learner-centered methods identify learner's biographical data such as current proficiency level, age, educational background, previous language course, nationality, marital status, the length of time spent in the target culture, previous, current and intended occupations and language, educational and life goals. If the tutors knew the learner's English background, they would be able to gather information on each learners nuances and manage their classes effectively. Consequently, adult Japanese learners would be able to learn their target English efficiently. The result of my survey clearly shows that the learner's experience would be useful and effective if learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted. Moreover, in my survey, learners tend to bring their previous foreign language learning experience learner-centred classrooms than the teacher-centred classrooms. The reason why I mention this is that Japanese are quiet, shy and do not express what they mean in a big classroom. In small or private classes, however, learners are able to show their feeling to their tutors directly. It seems reasonable to suppose that Japanese adult learners would bring more learning experiences to the learning situation if learner-centred methods were adopted.

2 . Implications for the tutors of adults

Most people tend to think of "adults" in terms of age but no single age can define an adult. Merriam and Cafarella (1999) assert that "The taking on of social roles characteristic of adulthood- roles such as worker spouse or partner, voter, and parent-differentiates adults from children better than chronological age does'. In my survey, interviewees were in their late thirties. They all have different priorities so that their tutors need to prepare lessons for them individually.

Some see themselves as more adult than others; some are still searching in education for autonomy, others are more willing to accept dependency for the purpose of learning.

They are all at different points in the continuum between those who require to be taught everything and those who wish to find out everything for themselves; and they each have some belief in what they can and cannot do in the way of learning. (Rogers 2002, p82)

I am faced with a difficult task regarding adults that are growing and developing in different directions and at a different pace. For example, some Japanese adult learners wish to speak English more, but some do not in their class so that tutors need to understand their needs and learning habits. That is, there are more varieties of learning needs for adult learners than for children.

Some bring a good deal of experience and knowledge in different parts of the subject matter, others bring less; and there are varying degrees of willingness to use this material to help the learning process. (Rogers 2002, p82)

Moreover, as I mention before, the difference between adult and child learners is that adults bring their experience into their learning. The richer experience obviously puts the adult at a considerable advantage, because he/she can fit the new information into a much more complex perceptual framework than a child. In other words, adults have greater ambiguity and complexity in intellectual or social problems than they did when younger. When the tutors know how to solicit and use the range of an adult's experience, it can often be a great advantage to the adult learner. That is, tutors should know learners so that the learner's experience can be effective language learning. To sum up, adopting learner-centred methods of teaching can represent a challenge to the teacher's professional skills and adaptability such as learners at a different developing pace or with different experiences. In other words, tutors professional skills might increase if learner-centred methods were adopted.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that there is reasonable evidence to conclude that there are some implications for both Japanese adult learners and their tutors if learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted. In this essay I have discussed the implications of self-directed learning, how learner's experiences affect adult learning and their tutors need to know and treat the learners individually. Findings from this study also support that learner-centred methods are more efficient for Japanese adult learners to acquire English. They are facing a problem of having no communicative ability with English-speaking people. Learner-centred methods such as those based on an active involvement of learners in the development of their study programme in terms of goal-setting and choice of methodology would be able to lead to success for Japanese adult learners.

The future direction of this study will look at how learner-centred methods integrate with the Japanese traditional method (teacher-centred methods) efficiently and effectively.

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(2017.9.1受稿,2017.9.15受理)

— Abstract —

Many Japanese adult learners feel that they will never be able to use enough realistic language to communicate successfully in the target language in real situations even though they learned English at school for ten years. The method of learning English in Japan is teacher-centred where the teacher directs the classroom. If learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted for Japanese adult learners, they would have some implications for both Japanese adult learners and their tutors. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the implications for both Japanese adult learners and their tutors if learner-centred methods of teaching and learning are adopted. In this paper, I will focus on learner-centred methods and their greater effectiveness than teacher-centred methods for Japanese adult learners.