

*nihongo no jugy\_ wo aisuru y\_ ni*

To Love Japanese Class: Revitalizing Foreign Language Education  
as applied to the Secondary Japanese Classroom

PART ONE: Issue Assessment

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Why study French? Or German? Or Spanish? Or any other language?

That, simply enough, is the straightforward yet subtly complicated question every American language teacher should be able to answer. But an “answer” is hardly enough. ...[W]e must – one would hope – be able to respond to this query by drawing before our questioner’s eyes a vision of something not only worthwhile, but wonderful; of something important, of something eminently desirable. Something, most of all, which will serve to carry the student through the mental drudgery of spending at least one year in acquiring little more than the rudiments of self-expression in the second language. If, after all, we fail to articulate some such vision of the goal involved, of the real point of the whole thing, we can hardly fault the intelligent student for putting up with no more than a few weeks spent discovering the giddy joys of gender assignment, verb conjugations, and vocabulary acquisition.

Kavanagh 83: 35

The study of foreign languages has always been a peculiar beast, a massively challenging undertaking, often involving years and years of effort only to result in a tenuous proficiency in the target language. And of course, this is a result which the individual student may see no opportunity to use outside the classroom, and indeed rarely uses, in which case it can easily be lost – years of hard work vanishing into oblivion, yet another sad reminder of the ever-present problem of language attrition. It is little wonder, then, that many students in the secondary and post-secondary schools of the United States dread fulfilling their foreign language requirements. And, seeing as how (at the moment) the English language holds hegemonic sway over much of the rest of the world, students can hardly be faulted for a lack of motivation to learn a foreign language – after all, shouldn't the rest of the world be speaking *English already*?! Hence, foreign language teachers in the United States are faced with dilemmas on all sides, including a lack of ways to motivate their students, a lack of methods to make learning a foreign language meaningful, and a lack of strategies to help students truly cope with the daunting challenges of learning to express themselves in a different tongue.

The problems currently afflicting foreign language education in the United States are intimately and organically related – often arising from the way that we teach teachers to teach, which is in turn based on pervasive beliefs *about* foreign language learning that permeate our culture, which also in turn influence students' motivations and choice of learning strategies in the foreign language classroom. In this paper, I will attempt to describe some of these problems and their root causes. However, first a brief word about some terminology used in this paper:

A *first language* (L1) is any language that a speaker acquires as their primary language during childhood. And yes, a child who is raised as bilingual or multilingual can be classified as having more than one L1, provided that the child exhibits truly native-like mastery of each and every language. L1 is, in many contexts, used interchangeably with the term *native language*, for obvious reasons. In contrast, a *second language* (L2) is learned anytime after the speaker has at least acquired the rudiments of an L1. Additionally, some authors make a distinction between a *second language* versus a *foreign language* (FL). A *second language* is learned by speakers in a context in which the L2 in question is used frequently or dominantly in the surrounding environment. For

example, this would describe the experience of immigrants coming to the United States and learning English as a second language. By contrast, a *foreign language* is NOT spoken frequently (if at all) in the surrounding environment of the learner. For example, this would be an accurate description of my experience studying Japanese while attending high school in the middle of a predominantly white, middle-class suburb in Iowa. However, it should be noted that in most research, as well as in many of the quotes that I pull from my sources and cite throughout this paper, both *second language* and *foreign language* are often used interchangeably.

Next, a brief breakdown of the organization of this paper. I will divide the issues that I want to discuss into three sections: Beliefs about foreign language learning, Practices in the foreign language classroom, and How we teach what to teach. Additional subpoints will be explored beneath each heading. Many of the problems that I discuss are so closely interrelated that it's nigh impossible to tease them apart and list them separately; hence, there will be much overlap and repetition between different sections of this paper. But such is the nature of issue assessment, I suppose.

## **I. Beliefs about foreign language learning.**

Learners' epistemological beliefs (beliefs about the nature of knowledge and truth) largely account for the individual choice of strategy use when learning a foreign language (Mori 99). In particular, epistemological beliefs in the foreign language classroom are based largely on beliefs about the nature of foreign language learning, specifically. And there are some very salient, yet often self-defeating, beliefs about foreign language learning that permeate our society.

### *A. The hegemonic power of English.*

The customer is always right, say the Japanese. They pride themselves on speaking their customers' language or languages. We do not. Everybody knows English, we say; though this is not true.

Simply stated, many students within the United States, even if they aspire for careers that involve international travel or contact with other cultures, see very little need to exert the effort to learn a foreign language. And, to a certain extent, they're right. The United States frequently dispatches monolingual diplomats abroad, and we simply expect the rest of the world to learn English in order to be able to communicate with us. Nancy Dorian writes:

It is unfortunately possible for the United States (as it would not so easily be for, say, Denmark or the Netherlands) to send officials abroad without special language skills, and both diplomats who are political appointees and experts who represent the United States in technical areas like agriculture or military training are all too often dispatched to non-English-speaking countries with no language preparation at all. The U.S. government can be said to remove incentive for foreign-language mastery (and to contribute to the ill-will that citizens of other countries often feel toward a people who make no linguistic gestures of respect...) with each such appointment.

Dorian 82: 50

Indeed, in a survey of perceptions of first-year students of French, German, and Spanish at the University of Texas, Elaine K. Horwitz found that “few agreed that Americans think it important to speak a foreign language” (Horwitz 88: 292). And whereas twenty years ago economic fears about being unable to compete with, say, the Japanese could be used as an argument in favor of studying foreign languages and cultures (i.e., Dunnet 83), today increasingly that is not the case. In fact, almost nobody studying Japanese is doing so because he or she wishes to pursue a business career anymore (Parker 04); the expectation among businesses in the United States is that their Japanese partners will simply know how to speak English. And, since this belief is largely an accurate reflection of the hegemonic status of the English language, it is also, unfortunately, largely true.

*B. Ethnocentrism as an affective barrier.*

Foreign language teachers rarely pause to consider the fact that “to some extent, learning a second language can be a threat to cultural identity” (Gardner 82: 35). This stems from the much-documented belief that language and identity, particularly group affiliation and cultural identity, are intimately related. Language acts as an important qualification for membership within certain groups, and as an equally important boundary between

groups. This has historically been true within the United States. Wolfgang Wölck writes,

Americans more than any other people I know are strongly convinced of the close relationship between language, thought and culture, a belief which has become very popular in this country since the writings of Whorf and Sapir... Americans believe in the determination of thought and culture by language so much that their military command in Germany after World War II decided to have English taught in all elementary schools hoping, apparently, to instill democratic principles through the means of language

Wölck 83: 126

Today, the belief still persists. According to the 1992 American National Election Study, 67% of those polled agreed that knowing English was an “extremely important” or “very important” quality needed to make one a “true American.” In addition, half of the sample who also agreed that “treating people of all races and backgrounds equally” was very important were among those who said that not speaking English meant that one was not yet a true American. In 1998, a California public opinion poll found that 60% of those surveyed were opposed to the bilingual voting ballots required by law. In addition, those surveyed agreed that “*citizens* who can’t read English shouldn’t be allowed to vote” (Citrin et al. 94, emphasis theirs).

Hand-in-hand with an emphasis on language as a requirement for group identity, or, in this case, with the English language as a hallmark of being a “true American,” comes at best a devaluing of other languages, and at worst a mistrust of foreign languages. Roger Shuy, commenting in 1983 over an informal survey of magazine and newspaper editorials and articles, writes:

In general, the public image of language is reducible to three categories: 1) the notion that the world is going to hell in a handbasket and language is leading the way; 2) evidences of outside interferences on language which have led it astray; and 3) evidences of false assumptions about languages on the parts of writers. People... believe that the world is in serious decline, largely as a result of our imprecise, slovenly use of language. Others feel that the media, technology, the Watergate morality, the rise of minorities and careless immigration policies have led us down the primrose path to linguistic destruction. Still others assume that only if we could recapture the glories of Latin, everything would be okay again. Language variability is not understood at all. Bilingualism is considered a serious threat to national security.

Shuy 1983: 75

Granted, 1983 was over twenty years ago. But have things really changed that much? Now, instead of Watergate, we have Monica Lewinsky. Teachers frequently complain about how the internet, particularly message boards and instant messaging, are destroying both written and now spoken language as well. The English Only movement,

spearheaded by U.S. English, bemoans the detrimental existence of bilingual education (see U.S. English 2004). And citizens who are able to speak in one or more Arabic language are suspected of communicating secret “terrorist” messages.

Thus, on the one hand, the perceived value of learning a foreign language plummets, as long as English (and English only) is held to be worthwhile, valuable, and useful within our society. As a reflection of this trend, currently, 27 states in the United States have “Official English” laws. There is a huge national movement to institute English as the official language of the entire country, which would mean that official government documents, records, and public functions would be conducted and written in English only. Although the Official English movement claims to not regulate the private, business, or religious spheres, it also goes hand-in-hand with the positions that *bilingual education* for immigrants ought to be short-term and intensively English-only, that government ought to take no hand in encouraging multilingualism at any level, that multilingualism leads to “linguistic enclaves,” and that immigrants oppress themselves by not learning English, the “language of opportunity” (U.S. English 2004).

And, often, either a need to identify with the culture of a one’s native language, or a need (whether conscious or sub-conscious) to NOT identify with the target culture of the foreign language, leads students to perform not as well as they could in the foreign language classroom. For example, Kimiko Hinenoya and Elizabeth Gantbonton support the notion that “loyalty to the in-group may be another motivational variable affecting L2 proficiency,” and remark that studies in Canada have shown that “francophone students listening to fellow francophones speaking English associated increasing levels of proficiency in English to increasing loyalty to English Canadians and decreasing loyalty to French Canadians” (Hinenoya and Gantbonton 2000: 226). Hinenoya and Gantbonton studied Japanese learners of English to see if there was a correlation between ethnocentric beliefs and second language achievement. They found a significant correlation between low ethnocentric scores and high ESL achievement, although not, surprisingly, a significant correlation between high ethnocentric scores and low ESL achievement (Hinenoya and Gantbonton 2000).

Lending support to the theory that strong ethnocentric identification inhibits foreign language learning, Claire Kramsch notes that language, and accent, are so

strongly tied to identity that some foreign language learners even *resist* sounding native in their pronunciation (Kramsch 2000: 318). Personally, I can attest to experiencing something similar in my study of Japanese. I *know* that I have a strong personal resistance to pronouncing Japanese words borrowed from English with proper Japanese pronunciation. While studying abroad in Japan, I even engaged in a battle of wills with one of my professors because she wanted me to pronounce the name of William Shakespeare, the subject of one of my oral speeches, as “shay-ku-su-pi-a,” which would be the correct Japanese pronunciation of Shakespeare’s name written in Japanese orthography. Unfortunately, I found it hard to shake my belief that “shay-ku-su-pi-a” was just plain *wrong*, a horribly mangled mispronunciation of the Bard’s name. Thus, I was docked points during my speech for stubbornly pronouncing “Shakespeare” like the true Midwestern native English speaker that I was.

*C. It’s quick and easy!*

We are bombarded by newspaper and magazine advertisements that promise fluency in a foreign language in as little as a few months, for as little as a few minutes of study each day. In the University of Texas survey cited above, Elaine Horwitz found that “a substantial number of students felt that a maximum of two years [of college study] is sufficient for learning another language... a large group of students expects near-fluency from a four-semester sequence of classes, a judgment that many, if not most, foreign-language teachers would consider a significant underestimate of the difficulty of the language learning task.” (Horwitz 88: 286-87). Thus, when students fail to achieve the fluency that they expect in the time allotted, they often grow discouraged, frustrated, or quit studying a foreign language altogether.

*D. It’s too hard!*

On the other hand, there’s some belief that foreign language learning is a “gift” that some people are born with, some people aren’t, and that it’s pointless for a person without the

“gift” to devote themselves to years and years of fruitless study for no positive outcomes in the first place (Horwitz 88).

Throughout our society, foreign language study is usually seen as an extraneous frill, a subject pursued only in the best secondary schools, or only in colleges and universities. Thus, foreign language study is almost seen as a privilege for the well-educated, especially in light of its “uselessness” both at home and abroad. This, coupled with the fact that we all know how frustrating and slow progress in a foreign language can be, supports the view that foreign language study is “an elite endeavor with no expectations for actual practical use” (Tedick and Walker 94: 302). Unless one has the “gift”, then, or the motivation to be seen as part of an educated elite, foreign language study is too difficult to be worthwhile.

#### *E. The Critical Period.*

A profoundly pervasive belief shared not just within the United States but throughout the world is that a language, any language, is best acquired during childhood (usually defined as “before puberty”), or it simply can’t be much acquired at all. This is referred to as the “critical period” hypothesis within linguistics research. The critical period hypothesis typically exists in one of two permutations, either a) language acquisition during childhood is natural and effortless, or b) even if not, then at least language acquisition after puberty is exponentially more difficult, and it’s nearly impossible for an adult learner to achieve native-like levels of proficiency in a second language. The critical period is based on the theory that there is a fundamental biological difference between the brains of children and adults, and that children’s brains are somehow “receptive” to a language in a way that adult brains are not. Intuitively, this explanation seems true – indeed, there ARE differences between a child’s brain, and that of an adult! However, this belief has contributed not only to lowered expectations of older students in the foreign language classroom, but also, students report feeling frustrated and helpless in the face of the fact that learning a language is so much more difficult because they’re older.

Fortunately, there has been a growing body of research that challenges the existence of a “critical period” for language acquisition. First, learning a language during

childhood is not an easy or effortless endeavor; it takes children years of practice and *constant* effort to master their own native language. The key word here is *constant*; research has shown that success in foreign language learning is closely correlated with the sheer amount of minutes and hours that a student spends concentrating on the task. During early childhood, this effort is literally 24/7. Children who are acquiring a native language not only have the best motivation on Earth to do so (after all, they are driven to communicate to their family and friends instinctively), but they spend almost every waking moment either practicing their babblings or mentally rehearsing as their inner thoughts slowly transform into language. In contrast, however, older students who only spend one or two hours a day, a couple times a week, learning a language within a classroom setting, can never hope to replicate either the fundamental motivation that drives childhood learners, nor can they be expected to spend twenty-four hours, seven days a week, concentrating on their foreign language of choice.

Therefore, rather than a matter of “stages of brain development,” the ability to master a language, any language, depends on the motivation and effort of the individual learner. This alternative explanation to the critical period hypothesis can explain well-documented cases of adult learners who, although not exposed to a particular foreign language until after puberty, are nevertheless able to acquire native-like fluency, and native-like (or near-native-like) pronunciation. Hebert Seliger proposed in the early 80’s that these adult learners could be accounted for by the fact that their brains were “exceptional” in the sense that they had not yet “lateralized” their language facilities, the way that most brains do before puberty, and therefore their cognitive facilities were more plastic and pliable (Seliger 81). There is not much research to support this claim, however. I would instead like to counter with the observation that adult learners who achieve native-like fluency in a foreign language almost *always* experience some sort of immersion environment, usually wherein they have to speak and use the language in order to survive from day to day. This would lend support to the idea that L2 acquisition is primarily a matter of motivation and effort, NOT a matter of “plasticity of the brain” or any such thing.

Where there is still support for the critical period theory, however, is in the matter of pronunciation. There is something to be said for the fact that certain muscles of the

face and tongue, and certain tricks that one can do with one's vocal cords, are difficult if not impossible to "train" or "re-train" past puberty. However, since adult language learners are often competent enough to communicate using correct syntax and an expansive lexicon, pronunciation is rarely such a devastating handicap. It is also important to note that merely exposing a child to a second language during early childhood is *not* enough to guarantee that the child will be able to grow up speaking the second language without an accent. There are many cases of speakers who are exposed to a second language in early childhood, but who are never able to speak without shedding their L1 accent. "Exposure before puberty is necessary but not sufficient condition for accentless speech," but these cases do not disprove the more common version of the critical period hypothesis "because it does not predict that everyone will acquire accentless speech given sufficient second language exposure; rather, it claims that no one will acquire accentless speech *without* prepubescent exposure" (Scovel 81: 58-59, emphasis his). But it does explain away the common misconception that native-like L2 acquisition before puberty is somehow "effortless."

In addition to pronunciation, there is research that suggests the existence of "sensitive periods" for certain aspects of language acquisition, during which a learner's cognitive development or extrinsic motivations may be primed for, say, syntactic processing, or vocabulary acquisition. But these various sensitive stages do NOT all occur during childhood. Rather, speaking of "sensitive periods" recognizes the fact that language learners do have advantages and disadvantages tied to differences in age. For example, studies have shown that children before puberty are better at learning to pronounce a foreign language, but students who start learning after puberty are better at learning and applying new systems of morphology and syntax (Chun 80), probably due to the fact that these older learners are more sophisticated cognitively, and have experience processing an L1 to build upon. Also, as previously mentioned, older learners are *not much motivated* to worry about their pronunciation, since "older learners may rely less on pronunciation, because they are better at other things (vocabulary, morphology, and syntax)" (Chun 80: 290). These findings are further supported by Fred Genesee, who in a study of "late immersion" (junior-high age) French programs in Canadian schools found that such late immersion programs were "very effective."

In fact, research carried out in Montreal over several years has found that students attending 2-year late immersion programs achieve the same level of proficiency in all aspects of French as do students who have attended early total immersion programs... The effectiveness of the late immersion option has been attributed to the cognitive and linguistic maturity of older students, which is thought to contribute to more rapid progress in second language learning.

Genesee 85: 558.

In conclusion, there is little empirical evidence for a general decrease in L2 learning ability as age increases (Chun 80). Both children *and* adults have to make a “conscious, labored effort” to learn a language. Although there is evidence to support the idea that pronunciation is best learned in early childhood, there is also evidence that syntax and morphology are more easily acquired by older learners. Either way, it is important to make foreign language teachers and learners more aware of these facts, both so that older learners will not be discouraged, and so that teachers will not believe that merely having children study a language early in life is enough to ensure that they will learn anything worthwhile at all. As previously mentioned, effort and motivation are key, and if younger learners are neither motivated to learn a foreign language, nor put the effort into learning it more than a few hours a week inside the classroom, then they are likely to have just as much difficulty as their older peers in high school and college.

*F. What this all means in terms of The Holy Grail (that is, Motivation).*

“The prime determining factor [in foreign language achievement] is motivation” (Gardner 85: 56). Or, more technically, motivation determines the amount of effort a student invests into learning a language, and amount of effort invested, in turn, determines how much time the student spends learning, as well as which sorts of learning strategies (labor-intensive, versus quick-and-easy) he or she will use.

Psychology has long distinguished between extrinsic motivation (motivation to achieve rewards and avoid punishment) versus intrinsic motivation (motivation to perform actions because of personal satisfaction, or to perform actions for their own sake), and has long supported the idea that intrinsic motivation is much more powerful, and much more sustaining, than extrinsic motivation. Applying these ideas specifically to foreign language learning, Robert Gardner has come up with two types of motivations that drive foreign language students. The first is *instrumental motivation*, or wanting to

study a language because it will be useful in some way. This accounts for students taking a language because they want a career as a diplomat in a foreign country, because they want the opportunity to work for a company in China, or because they want a job in the FBI and know that Arabic is currently the hot ticket. The second is *integrative motivation*, or motivation to “integrate” oneself with the target language and culture. This accounts for students taking French because they are inspired by a love of French literature, or the boy who takes Japanese because of his Japanese girlfriend, or the girl who studies Arabic because she is fascinated by Arab cultures (see Gardner and MacIntyre 91, and Gardner et al. 97). Of the two, integrative motivation is generally understood to be more intrinsic in nature.

As mentioned in the previous section about the critical period hypothesis, motivation is a primary factor that determines foreign language achievement. Motivation directly affects the amount of time spent learning a language, as well as learner independence – in short, the effort that a learner invests in foreign language learning.

Learner initiative and independence, along with the amount of extracurricular time spent on language (and vocabulary) learning are seen as two crucial factors related to higher levels of achievement... Time alone does not seem to suffice. Foreign language learning takes also takes initiative on the learner’s part, a willingness to put extra effort into the learning process, to take it outside the classroom, and to build on it by independent learning activities.

Kojic-Sabo and Lightbrown 99: 190.

Most importantly, motivation can be influenced, constructed, and deconstructed by the classroom environment. “Motivation is not just an internal, private phenomenon... A student’s motivation is affected by external variables (teaching and testing practices, peer interaction, overall task requirements, and institutional environment)” (Oxford and Nyikos 89: 296). But there are a number of problems that plague both research in the field of motivation, as well as everyday motivational practices often used in the classroom. These will be discussed in detail below.

### *F.1. Emphasis on extrinsic motivation.*

Our academic culture is nicely set up to foster extrinsic motivation, while at the same time discouraging the development of intrinsic motivation. For example, since our society demands that academic results must be measurable and quantifiable, foreign

language achievement is measured by standard, traditional tests that evaluate discrete variables such as verb endings or vocabulary acquisition, but rarely evaluate authentic communicative competence. Martha Nyikos explains:

One, if not the major index of academic expectation in classroom-based language learning is the final grade... Academic students (as opposed to naturalistic language learners) are often quite adept at “reading” the criteria for test-based achievement and utilize formal, rule-related learning strategies which they believe will assure success in “grade-getting.”

Nyikos 90: 275.

Surveys have continually found that “[t]he goal of most university students is to achieve high grades” (Oxford and Nyikos 93: 19). Since emphasis is placed on the importance of the final grade, students are motivated to focus on the final grade, simple as that.

Grades and tests, as well as pervasive beliefs in the classroom that place value on being technically correct and being competitive, foster extrinsic motivation but fail to truly engage the learner. For example, practices that emphasize social comparison, such as announcing grades and ability grouping, are detrimental to intrinsic motivation (Dornyei 94).

However, extrinsic motivation in and of itself is not entirely a bad thing. Proximal goal-setting, a practice firmly rooted in extrinsic motivation, can be a very useful tool in the foreign language classroom. A series of small, attainable extrinsic goals can be an important factor in bolstering student self-confidence and efficacy (Dornyei 94). Rebecca Oxford and Madeline Ehrman continue:

Motivation will be high only if expectancy of success is high, along with the value students place on success. If one of these values is low, motivation will be negatively affected. Students must also believe that the outcome is at least equal to the input (effort) if motivation is to remain strong.

Oxford and Ehrman 95: 68.

Even if small extrinsic motivations are helpful, the fact remains that too much emphasis placed on the instrumental value of a foreign language is a surefire way to crush motivation, especially in a culture that places so little value on the usefulness of a foreign language in the first place. When society simultaneously proclaims that a language is only valuable as a tool in a choice career, while at the same time sending the message that no foreign language is truly valuable as tool in a choice career, then it’s little wonder that students feel they must focus on extrinsic factors to motivate themselves, and yet find none. Thomas Kavanagh laments the fact that “even at the age of 17 or 18, the student is

dragooned into believing that every academic decision must be executed as part of an overall strategy aimed at securing the best paying job” (Kavanagh 83: 35). While at the same time universities in the United States rely on “Business French” or “Business Japanese” courses to increase student enrollment and ensure the survival of foreign language departments (Kavanagh 83), teachers in Scotland cannot get their students interested in learning Scottish Gaelic, because there are no practical uses for the language, in the sense that there are no jobs, not even in government or education, that require it (Thomson 79, cited in Dorian 82: 50). Telling students to focus on extrinsic motivation, while at the same time providing none or downplaying the practical value of a foreign language, creates a vicious cycle that destroys motivation.

*F.2. Teachers are unaware of what motivates students.*

Researchers who study motivation are predominantly concerned with categorizing types of motivation, not with discovering *how to* and *what can be used to* motivate students to learn. Rebecca Oxford and Jill Shearin write:

Research shows that motivation directly influences how often students use L2 learning strategies, how much students interact with native speakers, how much input they receive in the language being learned (the target language), how well they do on curriculum-related achievement tests, how high their general proficiency level becomes, and how long they persevere and maintain L2 skills after language study is over... Therefore, motivation is extremely important for L2 learning, and it is crucial to understand what our students' motivations are.

Gardner states, “The source of motivating impetus is relatively unimportant, provided that motivation is aroused”... However, while this conclusion may be true for researchers, quite possibly the source of the motivation is very important in a practical sense to teachers who want to stimulate students' motivation. Without knowing where the roots of motivation lie, how can teachers water those roots?

Oxford and Shearin 94: 12, 15.

Research on motivation also fails to recognize the fact that students' motivation also changes over time. Oxford and Shearin continue, “Rarely have we seen an L2 teacher administer a motivation survey or discuss students' goals... Still less often have we found teachers tracking the changes in students' motivations over several years. Actual motivations of students, in our observation, are infrequently employed for establishing

the nature of classroom activities... Instead of finding out directly, many teachers make assumptions about students' motivations" (Oxford and Shearin 94: 16).

It should be little wonder that students feel unmotivated in the foreign language classroom, if the teacher continually asks them to pursue goals that they're not interested in – or, even worse, of students get the sense that the teacher expects them to be fascinated with activity X for Y reason, yet they know that they couldn't care less. What is clear is that teachers should be asking students about their motivations, not simply making assumptions about said motivations, or relying upon research to make all of the assumptions for them. Gardner's widely-accepted categories of motivation can't and don't account for all of the real motivations that students bring into the foreign language classroom. For example, in a survey of 218 high school students asked to explain why they were studying Japanese, two-thirds of the students reported reasons that fell outside the categories of *instrumental* or *integrative* motivation. These reasons included enjoying an intellectual challenge, bragging rights, fascination with the writing system, and curiosity about Japanese cultural "secrets" (Oxford and Shearin 94).

### *F.3. Motivation is essential to language retention and to the prevention of language attrition.*

Robert C. Gardner provides a broad definition of the terms *language retention* and *language attrition*:

Language retention refers to the maintenance or improvement of proficiency in a language following its initial acquisition; attrition refers to a decrease in the level of proficiency... this retention or attrition take place in a context where continued use of the language is not required by social demands operating on the individual. Where the individual is in a situation in which he/she uses the language in a rather continuous fashion from day to day, the concept of language retention is synonymous with language use.

Gardner 82: 24-25.

There has been much research done about language loss as a result of neurological disorders, such as aphasia. However, there is to date precious little research that investigates the much more common problem of simple language attrition (Berko-Gleason 82: 13). *Language attrition* can refer to both first- or second-language loss, but

in the context of this paper attrition with regards to foreign language only will be discussed. Language attrition is a constant problem within the foreign language classroom, especially when students spend weeks or months between class sessions during the run of an average school year, rarely practicing their language skills during long vacations.

Language retention is related to success in prior learning, and interest and opportunity to continually use the language in a meaningful context (Gardner 82). Basically, the same factors that support success in language learning, namely a positive attitude toward the language and other intrinsic motivational factors, contribute to language retention as well. Positive attitude and good motivation will make the learner more likely to seek out ethnic contacts, persevere in his or her language study, and participate more actively in the classroom (Gardner 82).

Passive skills such as reading and listening comprehension are more easily retained, even over long vacation periods, or months during which the student is not studying or learning the language in question. However, speaking proficiency in particular is the quickest to go (Valdman 82:187) and perhaps the most difficult to recover. Speaking from my own personal experience, I can attest that now, years after having given up my study of Spanish, I can still read authentic Spanish texts fairly well, although I can neither speak nor write nary a word of it. Therefore it is important that students practice speaking and listening outside of the classroom, a labor-intensive, high-effort endeavor that can only be accomplished if students are sufficiently motivated to do so.

#### *G. Anxiety as an affective barrier.*

Foiling motivation and self-confidence at every turn is *anxiety*, the perpetual elephant in the foreign language classroom. Studies show that FL proficiency increases as a student's anxiety decreases (MacIntyre and Gardner 91). On the flip side, there is a significant correlation between high anxiety levels and poor performance in terms of written and oral proficiency tests, poor listening comprehension, poor word production, and well as a slower rate of vocabulary acquisition, in a variety of foreign languages

(MacIntyre 95; Gardner et al. 97). To make matters even worse, for many students, foreign language classes are the most anxiety-inducing classes that they take (MacIntyre 95). Peter MacIntyre explains how anxiety affects the foreign language student:

[L]anguage learning is a cognitive activity that relies on encoding, storage, and retrieval processes, and anxiety can interfere with each of these by creating a divided attention scenario for anxious students. Anxious students are focused both on the task at hand and on their reactions to it. For example, when responding to a question in class, the anxious student is focused on answering the teacher's question and evaluating the social implications of the answer *while giving it*. To the extent that self-related cognition increases, task-related cognition is restricted, and performance suffers.

MacIntyre 95: 96, emphasis his.

Related to anxiety but in a way its polar opposite, self-confidence is a variable positively associated with the motivation to learn a foreign language (Gardner et al. 97), and therefore also intimately linked to FL achievement.

So why this discussion of anxiety and self-confidence in a section about language learning *beliefs*? Well, quite simply, anxiety can sometimes result from students' beliefs about language learning (i.e., "It's too hard" or "I'll never pronounce this right"), but it can also result from teachers' beliefs and expectations regarding student performance.

Dolly Young writes,

For example, most beginning students, unless they are highly motivated, will not sound like a native speaker. If they believe that pronunciation is the most important aspect of a language, they will end up frustrated and stressed. The same frustration and anxiety sets in if they believe that they should be fluent in two years. In other words, when beliefs and reality clash, anxiety results.

Young 91: 428.

Some students are anxious about speaking in front of a group, or anxious about their grades. Students with low self-esteem are constantly pre-occupied with what others think of them, thus creating even more anxiety (Young 91). However, for some students, anxiety arises as a result of continual difficulties, which are sometimes related to undiagnosed problems in native language skills, a theory which is discussed below.

#### *H. The Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis.*

Richard Sparks and Leonore Ganschow have been the primary articulators of what they call the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis, hereafter referred to as LCDH.

LCDH, in a nutshell, forwards the idea that students who suffer from certain deficiencies

in their ability to “decode” L1 material, particularly phonological (sound) and orthographic (writing) codes, as well as syntactic codes (grammar), although not so much semantic (vocabulary) systems, often have problems learning a foreign language (see Sparks et al. 92, Ganschow et al. 94, and Ganschow and Sparks 96). On the surface, this doesn’t seem like a particularly astounding insight – after all, why shouldn’t students who experience difficulty reading or speaking their first language also have difficulty learning a second language? However, the coding deficiencies studied by Ganschow and Sparks are of the insidious type that are rarely *obvious* in an otherwise competent student’s academic performance, and do not have to be the type that we usually test for or label as a learning disability. Sparks et al. write:

Recent research by the authors and others suggests that many students with histories of FL learning problems are not diagnosed as LD until after they enter college, where they are discovered because of their inability to complete the college’s FL requirement.

Sparks et al. 92: 142.

In general... good foreign language learners have been found to exhibit significantly stronger native oral and written language skills and foreign language aptitude than poor foreign language learners. These differences have been demonstrated at both the secondary and post-secondary levels of education.

Sparks and Ganschow 96: 201.

Anxiety can be a double-edged sword, and the theory that anxiety results from deficiencies in L1 encoding doesn’t apply to every anxious student. In a survey of college students studying Spanish by Sparks, Ganschow, Anderson, Javorsky, Skinner, and Patton, twenty-five percent of students identified as “High-Anxious” subjects received an A average in their FL classes. However, the study found other students “whose language skills are not commensurate with their intelligence,” and also found that students who scored low on a test of phonology performance had lower foreign language GPAs than students who tested high (Sparks et al. 94).

But ultimately, what matters is that teachers must not believe that anxiety alone can account for the relatively weaker performance of some students in the FL classroom. Sparks and Ganschow urge teachers to test the native oral and written language skills of struggling students, and to identify students who may need intervention. “[F]oreign language educators might consider alternatives other than affective variables, such as anxiety, in examining reasons for the relatively weaker performance of some of their students” (Sparks and Ganschow 96: 207). They also caution that although teachers are

taught to believe that “natural communication” methodologies work well for every student, the fact remains that, well, they don’t. “[W]eaker phonological skills have an impact on listening comprehension. . . [S]tudents with weak phonological skills may find it very difficult to learn an unfamiliar linguistic coding system quickly or efficiently, causing immediate failure” (Sparks et al. 92: 153).

Now, since this is a section about language learning beliefs, and since belief in the truth of the LCDH is a belief, it would only be fair, at this point, to provide a quick critique of the theory, which is currently in vogue. It is important to recognize that sometimes anxiety can be a cause, not a consequence, of learning difficulties. Anxious students report a variety of reasons for their nervousness, ranging from feeling overwhelmed by the number of rules required to speak a language, to fear of being laughed at by other students. A student anxious about rules may restrict his or her own cognitive ability to process rules simply as a result of said anxiety; likewise, “[t]he fear of being laughed at by other students may occur for a number of reasons other than language decoding deficits, such as poor group dynamics and competitiveness in the language classroom” (MacIntyre 95: 95).

### *I. Epistemological beliefs and learner strategies.*

Finally, outside of specific beliefs about language learning, many students harbor much broader beliefs about the nature of truth and knowledge as a whole. These broad epistemological beliefs affect each student’s individual choice of which learning strategies to employ in the foreign language classroom. For example, a student who strongly wants to avoid ambiguous answers, and who seeks simple, clear-cut answers, will be less likely to combine two different types of clues when trying to figure out an unknown kanji combination (Mori 99). Yoshiko Mori identified avoidance of ambiguity, belief in the efficacy of translation, seeking the quickest answer, belief that learning ability is innate rather than acquired, and overdependence on appeal to authority as epistemological beliefs that contribute to poor learner strategies.

Examples from foreign language classrooms throughout the country abound. Students who believe that it is important to rely on authority will listen primarily to what

the teacher says and does, and will avoid independent, self-directed work inside and outside the classroom. The belief that traditional methods of language acquisition, such as translation and grammar study, are the most efficient methods, leads students to rely too much on these methods alone, at the detriment of sampling other strategies. The belief that grades are the most important measurement of language proficiency leads students to rely on “grade-getting” strategies solely, instead of attempting to develop genuine communicative competence. However, rarely are students’ beliefs about language learning ever solicited or identified, even though it would not be impossible to identify and *change* them (Oxford and Nyikos 93).

But, wait a minute – what’s all this about efficient strategies versus detrimental strategies? What’s so bad about translation? The answers to these questions will be discussed in the next section.

## **II. Practices in the foreign language classroom.**

Having just read through twenty pages of beliefs about knowledge, truth, and language learning, now we will finally see how those beliefs translate into sometimes problematic practices within the foreign language classroom. A discussion of learner strategies in particular is critical because:

Use of appropriate learning strategies enables students to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction... As they move toward language proficiency, language learners develop their own understandings or models of the second or foreign language and its surrounding culture. Unlike most other characteristics of the learner... learning strategies are readily *teachable*.

Oxford and Nyikos 89: 291, emphasis theirs.

Learning strategies are more specific than cognitive style (one’s general approach to structuring and conceptualizing the world) or personality traits (patterns of behavior that characterize a person’s response to the environment) and can more easily be modified through training.

Oxford and Ehrman 88: 253.

Therefore, learner strategies in particular, and how classroom practices affect learner strategies, will be discussed in this section.

*A. Communicative strategies.*

Modern FL classroom emphasize authentic communicative activities, which means that students engage in group work and collaborative learning. However, many teachers simply group students together and expect collaborative learning to happen by itself; unfortunately, that is often not the case.

For one thing, the success or failure of collaborative learning is largely dependant upon the social skills of the students working together. However, social skills, cooperation, and the ability to work with a group cannot simply be assumed – they often need to be taught and modeled, especially in the younger grades (Dornyei 97). Collaborative learning is a difficult process that requires much careful planning, and continual observance and refinement, on the part of the teacher. But, as previously mentioned, all too often teachers stop short by simply grouping students together and then giving them an assignment. Something more must be done.

*B. Focus on communication, test on something else.*

“In today’s foreign language classroom the notion that teachers want students to develop some degree of communicative competence is a truism” (Donato and McCormick 94: 453). However, studies of strategy use by students in language classrooms have found that strategies closely related to actual communicative competence, particularly the social use of language, are rarely used. “In other words, the types of strategies that most directly benefit students in developing language ability were the ones that they appeared most resistant to using” (Donato and McCormick 94: 454). Donato and McCormick forward the idea that the “social life of the classroom,” or a “community of practice,” is the most important determinant of which strategies students will be receptive to using when learning a foreign language. A classroom culture that both provides opportunities for functional language practice, as well as incorporating *tests and grading* that reflect “authentic and purposeful language use,” is necessary to ensure that students will be motivated to engage in good language learning practices.

However, the classroom culture is stunted when everyday practices focus on authentic communication, but tests and grading focus on something else entirely. As was previously discussed in the section about motivation, “evaluations and grading procedures do not usually have a communicative orientation. Academic requirements dictate that learning must be measurable, and test scores are thus viewed as the main gauge of success. Evaluation and grading procedures focus on verb endings, prepositions, and other discrete-point ‘testables,’ and therefore lead students to forsake gaining real communication skills” (Oxford and Nyikos 93: 19). This encourages students to focus on the “grade-getting” strategies discussed above, instead of concentrating on developing true communicative competence.

Now, an emphasis on getting good grades and the motivation to achieve communicative competence do not have to be mutually exclusive. What often makes them so is the problem of testing and evaluation practices. Were we to actually test students on authentic communicative competence, the two motivations would compliment each other well. However, such authentic evaluations are difficult to design and execute, especially on a large scale, and especially in the midst of a culture that would prefer more quantifiable, measurable results to ensure standards of teacher accountability.

### *C. Over-reliance on translation.*

“In the first months of learning, L2 words are more effectively stored in memory when they are linked to their L1 equivalents” (Prince 96: 479). This is because in the beginning stage of L2 acquisition, the “translation” phase, L2 words are stored in the brain as linked to their L1 translations. This may be because most of the words first acquired in an L2 are concrete in nature (i.e., “pencil” or “friend” or “Monday”). However, truly advanced levels of L2 acquisition are marked by the learner’s ability to think, read, write, and speak in the second language *without* first translating everything in his or her head. When the L2 exists autonomously and independently within the learner’s brain, a holistic system of form and meaning in and of itself, that’s when we begin to say that the learner is approaching fluency. Again, informal comments from many of my

friends who are fluent or near-fluent speakers of a second language, as well as my own experience learning Japanese and Spanish, intuitively support this progression. Much of this has to do with the fact that once you really start to learn a second language, especially a language unrelated to your native language, you encounter the simple and inescapable fact that *some things just don't translate well, if at all*. In fact, I now find myself in the position of having Japanese words and phrases floating around in my head, words and phrases that *don't* have decent English equivalents, that I have to make a conscious effort not to slip into my everyday English conversation.

However, transition from the “translation” to the “autonomous” phase of language learning does not happen in the blink of an eye – it is a slow process, including a long transition phase in which the L2 is partially independent from the L1, and still partially dependent on translation. Also, when and how long this transition occurs varies enormously between individual learners. Finally, at all stages of learning, even in the “autonomous” phase, the initial acquisition of new vocabulary words is, of course, most effectively accomplished by providing simple translations. Since learning through translation is *easier* at all stages of learning, many students “actively resist” moving beyond the translation phase into reading and listening for content (Prince 96: 480). Language teachers, as well, “when faced with a choice between a high-effort strategy such as inferencing and a low-effort shortcut such as translation learning, they will tend to choose the latter” (Prince 96: 480).

In a study of ESL learners judged to be “weaker” versus “stronger” in their abilities, Peter Prince found that “the weaker group performed better when recall was by translation, irrespective of the learning condition... The inability of the weaker learners to transfer knowledge represents a clear limit to the usefulness of their otherwise impressive ability to learn words with their translation... It must be kept in mind that the weak learners who participated in the experiment were by no means at the beginning stages of learning English, but had several years of study behind them; it seems likely, therefore, that they are overdependent upon translation links and so have failed to develop certain processing strategies crucial to the effective use of context... [I]t seems likely that persistent reliance on L1 is one of a complex cluster of factors that lead to ineffective L2 learning and that this reliance stems largely from a desire to understand

quickly. The results reported here suggest that the weaker group belong to a population of learners who use low-effort strategies that lead to rapid learning but are ultimately ineffective in using broader skills” (Prince 96: 486-487). Therefore it is especially important to foster intrinsic motivations early in the language learning process – and it’s important to foster the belief that quick, easy answers aren’t always the best choice! In fact, it would be helpful to simply discuss the advantages and disadvantages of translation learning with students right from the start, although this discussion, of course, rarely happens (Prince 96).

Unfortunately, the belief that translation is the best method for learning a second language is prevalent. In the Horwitz survey cited above, students of German and Spanish “overwhelmingly (seventy and seventy-five percent) supported the idea that learning a foreign language is mainly a matter of learning to translate from English” (Horwitz 88: 289). Surprisingly, only the French students responded overwhelmingly in the opposite fashion, stating that they disagreed that language learning was merely a matter of translation. And, as previously stated, belief in the efficacy of translation learning is not unfounded – translation learning really is easier. It can also become addictive to the point of becoming a crutch that inhibits further development of an autonomous L2 system, and that inhibits the transfer of L2 knowledge across contexts. In sum, “L2 words are easily learned when presented with their translation, and this is no guarantee that they will be successfully accessed for use in an L2 context” (Prince 96: 488).

#### *D. Learning for content.*

Opposed to translation learning is “learning for content,” in which FL students are expected to read authentic texts and listen to authentic media while trying to understand most of what is written or said, rather than translating everything word-for-word. On the surface, this method would seem to avoid many of the pitfalls of translation, discussed above. Learning a foreign language with this holistic method discourages the learner from relying too much on linking discrete L2 units to their L1 equivalents. However,

content learning is not without its own disadvantages, especially in terms of vocabulary acquisition.

“Increasingly, it is considered that effective communication relies less upon the mastery of grammatical rules than on the possession of an adequate and appropriate vocabulary” (Prince 96: 478). But reading for content discourages a focus on vocabulary acquisition. Readers who read for content will be able to skip over words that are not important for the overall meaning of a sentence or passage. When the focus is on understanding the holistic meaning of a text, “the chance of readers remembering a word after encountering it in a text that is read for content is very small indeed” (Prince 96: 479). Marjorie Wesche and Sima Paribakht concur,

Furthermore, many researchers have noted that even if a learner succeeds in inferring the correct meaning of the unknown word in the given context, the correct guess does not necessarily lead to acquisition of the new word... This failure may occur because once the immediate communicative need has been met, the learner does not undertake further mental processing of the word.

Wesche and Paribakht 2000: 197.

I can personally attest that this is true in my experience reading authentic Japanese texts for my Japanese classes. After I finish reading a text, I will be able to remember the *meaning* of what I read, but every new word that I had to look up along the way will already be promptly forgotten. Even worse, and perhaps a problem particular to a language like Japanese that employs a logographic writing system, I can sometimes remember the meaning of new kanji compounds that I encounter, but will be unable to recall how to read (that is, how to pronounce) these new characters. For example, I knew that the compound [deleted for web formatting] meant “forbidden/prohibited” long before I ever learned that [deleted for web formatting] was read and spoken as *kinshi*. Peter Prince also found similar results in his study of translation versus content learning: some students in the “content learning” group failed to recall new vocabulary words because “once subjects felt that they had understood the sentence during the study phase, they did not attend to the new word forms enough to be able to retain [the new words]” (Prince 96: 488).

*E. Different strategies for everyone.*

Because of individual variables like age, ethnicity, cultural background, and gender, some learning strategies may be more appropriate for some learners than others. For example, one individual variable that has consistently shown to affect learner orientation and thus the effectiveness of certain learning strategies is gender.

Studies continue to confirm that females exhibit superior verbal skills compared to males, especially considering the fact that females, at least in this culture, are socialized toward placing a great importance on communicative skills. Females are generally found to do better in foreign language classrooms that emphasis choral drills and practice, have low levels of competition between students, and include a great deal of personalized teacher contact. Males, on the other hand, perform better in teacher-dominated classrooms, where hand-raising is the main method of teacher-student interaction (Nyikos 90).

Therefore, it is important for teachers to realize that although there is much research to support the fact that X strategy or Y practice is strongly correlated with high levels of FL achievement, the simple fact remains that teachers must account for individual learning differences in their classrooms. Unfortunately, the monolithic nature of research in the FL classroom (including much of the research that I've quoted so far in this paper) tends to discourage this mindset.

*F. A lack of self-awareness on the part of students; complete cluelessness in the teacher's corner.*

FL learners rarely reflect upon the efficacy of their own strategies, a simple practice which would be enormously helpful. Izabella Kojic-Sabo and Patsy Lightbrown write:

Encouraging learners to reflect on their personal practices for vocabulary study may increase their awareness of what they do, provide them with a starting point to assess the effectiveness of their efforts in relation to their progress, and help them discover other learning strategies that would suit their personal learning styles... [N]o vocabulary learning strategy can be effective for all learners. What is essential in enhancing students' lexical competence is to make them aware of all the possible ways vocabulary acquisition can be approached and, ultimately, to make them responsible for their own learning.

Kojic-Sabo and Lightbrown 99: 190-191.

On the other hand, teachers are usually equally as unaware of the strategies utilized by their own students, both inside and outside the classroom. As mentioned at the very top of this section, learning strategies *can* be taught and modified, and some *are* better than others. That is why it is especially important that teachers are aware of students' strategies. Martha Nyikos writes:

Several factors conspire against teacher awareness of students' present learning strategies: 1) foreign language classrooms with large numbers of students; 2) little, if any, elicitation of learning strategies from students; 3) teacher-dominated classrooms; 4) the competitive, non-cooperative type of learning inherent in the grade-oriented educational system; and 5) lack of personalized interaction between teacher and learner during the learning process.

Nyikos 90: 278.

Simple questions, simple solicitations, on the teacher's part would really be enough.

If classroom practices can determine strategy use, and if strategies can be taught and modified, then an enormous amount of the responsibility for creating a good classroom culture, and for modeling and encouraging good strategy use, now rests on the shoulders of the foreign language teacher. To make sure that teachers are up to the task, they, in turn, ought to be taught how to do what needs to be done. Often, however, this simply isn't done. Thus, we have arrived at the topic of the third and final section of this paper.

### III. How we teach what to teach.

Although the “proficiency movement” has pushed for a greater emphasis on authentic communicative competence in the FL classroom, studies have shown that the *way* that we prepare language teachers to teach has changed very little in the past thirty years. And foreign language teachers repeatedly report that the history, culture, and literature courses that they take in college (specifically as part of their FL teacher training) rarely meet their needs as teachers (Tedick and Walker 94). So, in short, research tells teachers to create “classroom cultures” that emphasize authentic communication, and teacher training still trains teachers to drill for noun decaescents. The curriculum used in most foreign language classrooms also remains sterile and *inauthentic*. These and other problems will be discussed in this section.

#### *A. The text as curriculum, complete with sanitized, disinfected, ready-to-teach culture.*

Many teachers in both secondary and college-level courses rely solely on the FL textbook, which consists of “poorly developed synthetic texts,” and any supplementary materials that it includes, as their curriculum (Lange 87: 71, 95). Therefore, decisions about what materials are included in the FL curriculum are largely determined by the publishing houses that print the textbooks.

These decisions are made by publishing houses through less-than-scientific surveys, the data from which supply instructions to authors of texts as to the content and orientation of contracted texts... The resulting materials are, in fact, quasi-censored materials in terms of content... The questions of who makes the decisions [about what materials to use] is not an easy one to answer. If the curriculum is the text, then it appears as though decisions are made more by publishers and text authors than by curriculum specialists or teachers.

Lange 87: 75-76.

“Quasi-censored” texts present the target cultures of the foreign language classroom in markedly non-controversial, distanced ways. “Cultural competence” is taught as both knowledge about the target culture and a general tolerance (or even better, acceptance) of that culture. Rarely is the target culture taught in comparison or relationship to students’

own culture, or rarely are students asked to reflect critically upon their own culture in relation to the other (Tedick and Walker 94). Furthermore,

It is much easier to talk about culture in a neutral and non-threatening way. It is easier to deal with Oktoberfest in the German classroom than to contrast and compare this emergence to parallel patterns in the United States. Second language textbooks support this neutral approach to culture... In other words, the cultural world being presented is a rather static and sanitized one. Cultural artifacts – the visible products of the people – dominate the presentation. The deeper cultural questions of values, beliefs, and attitudes, and the contradictions and conflicts associated with them are left unexplored.

Despite what we profess about the foreign language as a vehicle for producing multicultural individuals, the twice-removed “elite” nature of foreign language education helps to maintain a “distance” between majority culture students and the “multicultures” of the world in which they live. First, as evidenced by our experiences with teachers and by an exploration of content in popular foreign language textbooks, in “major” languages, attention to culture tends to focus on particular European representations of particular cultures, i.e., “Life in France” and “A Visit to *El Prado*” as opposed to “Life in Senegal” or “The Mural Art of the Latino Barrio in St. Paul, Minnesota.” Such limited explorations of culture reinforce stereotypes and, at the same time, deny students access to the diversity of cultural groups who share a particular language.

Tedick and Walker 94: 309.

Distancing students from authentic culture not only makes the target culture less interesting, in the sense that it is harder to relate to a student’s own, but also decreases integrative (hence intrinsic) motivation, turning the foreign language classroom into a thoroughly uninspiring environment. Although Diane Tedick and Constance Walker suggest using Freire’s “problem-posing” curriculum to make even the foreign language classroom relevant to students’ lives and problems, the fact remains that this is rarely, rarely done, especially since on the surface, it does seem rather difficult to teach verb conjugations in French while at the same time somehow relating it to the lives and struggles of mostly white, upper-middle-class students in an Ohio suburban high school.

### *B. Teaching to the test.*

It’s funny how this is yet another re-iteration of the same theme that has appeared in the two previous sections of this paper. Anyway, the “stringent demands of accountability that American society associates with publicly funded and publicly performed tasks” (Byrnes 2000: 481) have perpetuated a “teach-to-the-test” mentality in many foreign language classrooms, which has in turn “marginalized the reasons why many teachers

have entered the FL profession in the first place, namely their love of the literature and cultures that their language represented” (Byrnes 2000: 488).

Since foreign languages are often seen as useless, impractical fields of study, in order to legitimize their field, language teachers have forced the foreign language to become an academic subject, or more accurately an “object” of study. Now, instead of as a medium of communication, languages are treated as objects to be dissected, analyzed, taught in discrete segments, and tested in discrete segments. Diane Tedick and Constance Walker further: “Foreign language teachers in particular have traditionally needed to justify their content area as more than a ‘frill’. In so doing, they have needed to define a body of knowledge or content for their discipline and to develop a scope and sequence for delivering that body of knowledge. They have defined the content as the lexicon, syntax, morphology, and phonology of language – or as the notions and functions” (Tedick and Walker 94: 305). This means that foreign language textbooks are teacher-driven, and grammar-based. However, in an alternative communicative framework, “grammar and structure emerges *naturally* out of a real need for communication... In other words, grammar and structure are not the goals of instruction, but rather essential tools toward achieving other, more important goals – language use in social contexts and intercultural communication” (Tedick and Walker 94: 306). Unfortunately, since the communicative features of language are more difficult to evaluate and quantify, tests and evaluations tend to instead focus on the “notions and functions” of language.

### *C. “Collaborative learning” in theory, not in practice.*

Teachers are exposed to theories on collaborative learning, or about how students’ independence and autonomy are important, especially in the context of a foreign language classroom. But rarely do they *experience* collaborative, independent learning themselves, especially during teacher training. This leaves many teachers unable to immediately understand or respond to the pitfalls of collaborative or independent learning, especially the fact that many students feel lost or confused in the absence of clear guidelines about what to do and how to do it (Wilhelm 97).

In sum, although there are myriad problems infesting foreign language classrooms throughout the United States, including self-defeating beliefs about language learning, a reliance on ineffective learning strategies, and the consistently poor preparation of language teachers, there's still some hope – there's always hope. Motivation to learn a foreign language, and in turn the effort invested into learning that language, can carry students through years of conjugating verbs in French or memorizing kanji compounds in Japanese. Now, the challenges that face foreign language teachers are clear: How can we encourage intrinsic, integrative motivation? How can we motivate students to invest themselves in labor-intensive yet efficient learning strategies? How can we fairly and honestly evaluate communicative competence? How can we make the study of culture relevant and interesting to our students' own lives? If we succeed in doing so, can we create a generation of foreign language speakers that will change the dominant beliefs about the “uselessness” of foreign languages in our society?

In the final section of my project, I will attempt to answer these questions in the context of a secondary-level Japanese foreign language classroom.

*nihongo no jugy\_ wo aisuru y\_ ni*

To Love Japanese Class: Revitalizing Foreign Language Education  
as applied to the Secondary Japanese Classroom

PART TWO: Reform Composition

by Elena Kamenetzky

Educational Studies Seminar  
Professor Ruthanne Kurth-Schai  
13th December 2004

In this section of my project, I will attempt to apply some *solutions* to the previously-described problems in the setting of a secondary-level Japanese classroom. Unlike the previous section, which started at a macro level (describing broad attitudes and beliefs that permeate society) and ended at the micro level (describing how those beliefs translate to practices in the classroom), this section will go in the opposite direction – starting with the individual classroom, and then moving beyond into broader social implications.

## **I. Motivation and Learning in the Classroom**

Japanese is a difficult language to learn! Japanese grammar is almost wholly unrelated to English, the Japanese writing systems are confusing and intimidating to students, and Japanese is one of those lucky languages blessed with an obscenely, ridiculously large lexicon. How, then, is a teacher to impart necessary grammar and literacy knowledge upon his or her students, without turning the Japanese classroom into a dull routine of rote memorization, repetition, and drilling? In this section I will discuss some practices that teachers can use to engage and motivate students, while at the same time developing authentic communicative competence *without* sacrificing grammar and literacy. Some of the following suggestions will be specific to Japanese, but some won't. And of course, not all of them will work in every classroom or with every teacher. But I put my faith and trust in individual teachers to determine which ideas might work best for them and their students.

### *A. Practice and Drilling, Revisited*

It's no secret that practice makes perfect. Students who wish to become competent Japanese speakers must endure hours, days, years of speaking practice. However, there's some confusion as to how speaking practice is best handled in the classroom. Proponents of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method argue that everyday situations and roleplaying should be stressed, with formal grammar instruction downplayed, which most teachers interpret to mean as having little or no grammar instruction in the

classroom at all (Sato and Kleinsasser 99). On the other hand, the more traditional method of grammar drills and grammar instruction, usually at the expense of roleplaying, dialogue, or practice in everyday situations, leaves students ill-prepared to actually communicate with anybody who speaks Japanese.

In the Japanese classroom, grammar is indispensable, especially with regards to the complicated *particle* system that constitutes the majority of formal grammar. Students who only learn dialogue and roleplaying often do not understand the grammatical particles in Japanese or how they relate to vocabulary words and parts of a sentence, which becomes a profound detriment when it comes time for students to read Japanese texts. It *may* be possible for students to get by *speaking* Japanese (especially informal Japanese) with lacking or even incorrect particles; it is *impossible* for students to *read* Japanese without sufficient knowledge of particles. Studies of students of Japanese have shown that “in addition to having more extensive vocabulary knowledge, proficient readers were more competent in the use of grammatical particles which serve to signal syntactical relationships within the text” (Everson and Kuriya 98: 3).

Thus, grammar instruction must be included in speaking, roleplaying, and dialogue – somehow. The solution would seem to be to teach students pattern sentences that can be worked into dialogues and roleplaying, and *then* to analyze the grammar behind these constructions after students are comfortable using them in speech. For example, one practice that I’ve observed in a Japanese classroom goes something like this: The teacher models a sentence for the class, such as *Kiko-san wa seintop\_ru ni ikimasu* ‘Kiko-san goes to St. Paul’. Next she models variations on the sentence by asking questions of the class, such as *Kiko-san wa seintop\_ru ni ikimasuka* ‘Does Kiko-san go to St. Paul?’, *Kiko-san wa doko ni ikimasuka* ‘Where does Kiko-san go?’, and *Dare ga seintop\_ru ni ikimasuka* ‘Who goes to St. Paul?’, all the while gauging if the class can accurately respond to these questions. If the class can’t respond, the teacher pauses to explain a part of the sentence. If the entire class responds in a way that shows that they understand the sentence, the teacher moves on to a more complex variation. Next, the teachers asks students to tell stories or engage in dialogues that use the pattern sentences, but in an original context (and hence with different vocabulary words). When

students respond to and use variations on a pattern, they can understand what's *fixed* and what *isn't*, and hence better grasp the underlying grammatical patterns.

A combination of speaking practice and grammar instruction doesn't have to be boring, either – it can be fun! Objects such as stuffed animals and toys can be manipulated when teaching any pattern. For example, students can be taught how adjectives modify nouns by being asked to choose “the *red* ball” or “the *green* ball” from among several<sup>1</sup>. In one class that I've observed, the teacher used stuffed animal characters to teach her students commands, i.e., “throw the monkey,” “feed the monkey,” “where's the elephant?”, etc. These activities may seem simple and almost juvenile, but students – especially high school students – love them. My personal observations have shown me that even in a class of thirty-some high school freshmen, everyone is suddenly alert, paying attention, and *learning something* the moment that the teacher pulls out her stuffed animals.

### *B. Memory and Total Physical Response*

Speaking of playing with balls and stuffed animals, that brings me nicely into my next topic. Memorizing vocabulary words and written characters is often the bane of any Japanese student. One method of classroom-based “memorization” drills, however, called the Total Physical Response approach, emphasizes students' active, physical engagement in the process of memorizing grammar and vocabulary (i.e., see Richard-Amato 88). TPI activities include foreign-language versions of “Simon Says” (a great way to teach the imperative verb form), having students act out stories and skits, and using “air pencils” (that is, fingers) to write new kanji characters in the air. It is much easier for students to remember the imperatives *tatte* ‘stand’ and *suwate* ‘sit’ if they are actually standing up and sitting down as they hear it or practice saying it. Memory and retention is strengthened when students associate physical action with new vocabulary items. In more advanced stages of Japanese study, however, students will need to engage in a meaningful *sequence* of events, as opposed to just isolated activities, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> There are two different types of adjective in Japanese, both of which have different forms when modifying a noun. *Akai* (‘red’) is in one class but *midori* (‘green’) is in the second class.

retain what they learn. For example, more advanced Japanese students can perform skits or plays, or follow the steps of a recipe (Richard-Amato 88).

Another engaging way to actively enhance memory is the use of rhythm, particularly in chants and songs. This is especially true for Japanese, a C-V, syllabic language that was practically made for rapping. Particularly, I've seen the Japanese version of "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" used as an unforgettable way to teach body parts. Rhythmic Japanese tongue-twisters are also a lot of fun. Arthur Koestler writes:

Rhythm and rhyme, assonance and pun are not artificial creations, but vestigial echoes of primitive phases in the development of language, and of the even more primitive pulsations of living matter; hence our particular receptiveness for messages which arrive in rhythmic pattern.

Koestler, 1964 as quoted in Richard-Amato 88: 112.

Unfortunately, activities such as physical games, object manipulation, song, and rhyme are often discouraged in foreign-language classrooms. Indeed, a study by Rebecca Oxford and Martha Nyikos showed that some high school and college students view such activities with almost disdain, many considering them to be "too gimmicky." These techniques are enormously helpful in terms of memorization, however, and enthusiastic teachers can encourage the use of "memory techniques, including color-coding, drawing pictures of new words to encode them visually, and acting out words."

In many classrooms such activities are given only marginal or are actively discouraged by teachers and students alike as substandard substitutes to 'pure learning'... These strategies are potentially helpful because they make learning concrete and link new information with information already stored in memory; but in academic settings... they are seen as unworthy of serious attention. A similarly negative attitude was shown [in our study] toward playing foreign language games and singing songs.

Oxford and Nyikos 93: 20.

If a teacher is enthusiastic about these techniques, however, and if students can eventually realize the benefits of using them, they will be able to overcome these prejudicial beliefs.

### *C. Natural Situations*

In order to foster the development of authentic communicative competence, Japanese students need practice using “everyday” Japanese in everyday situations. Hence, the Japanese teacher can structure dialogue, skit, and roleplaying activities around themed situations – such as self-introductions, eating at a restaurant, shopping, riding the subway, asking for directions, etc. However, even in these contexts, grammar instruction and reading/writing do not necessarily have to be sacrificed, as they often are in most “natural approach” or CLT Japanese classrooms (Sato and Kleinsasser 99). Students can practice essential reading skills by learning to read bus timetables or subway maps; students can practice grammar skills by *producing* activities for other students. For example, students could work in groups to create scavenger hunts for other groups; each group would have to provide directions and clues in *correct* Japanese for other groups to follow. Either way, what’s important to emphasize is that reading, writing, and grammar – especially particle grammar – can be incorporated, explicitly, into natural dialogues without being intrusive or detrimental.

### *D. Group Work and Social Collaboration*

Any classroom that emphasizes dialogue, roleplay, and group projects will likely benefit greatly from a social learning environment. However, just because students are told to do group work, doesn’t mean that any sort of comparative benefits over individual work will automatically result.

In group work, a group must develop “group cohesiveness” in order for students to receive the real benefits. Group cohesiveness decreases student anxiety, increases confidence, and increases performance (Dornyei 97). But it’s simply not enough for teachers to group students together, assign them a task, and expect them to get along. The teacher never has complete control over group dynamics in the classroom, but there are things that he or she can do to encourage strong bonds of group cohesiveness. Factors shown to increase group cohesiveness include having a common goal (i.e., a task to perform), friendly intergroup competition (which has been found to bring together

members of small groups), and “groups legends” (such as giving the group a name or creating a history together). However, the most important factor in group cohesiveness is the presence – or lack – of a strong, democratic group leader (Dornyei 97). A good group leader allows for discussion, input, and shared responsibility among the group members, while at the same time facilitating the direction of activities and discussion.

Unfortunately, as we’re all too aware, “good leadership skills” are not something that a teacher, any teacher, can just hand out to his or her students. Nor can they necessarily be taught, especially not within the limited time constraints of a foreign language classroom. But they can be modeled, observed, and practiced. A teacher who encourages lots of group work in his or her classroom will be faced with the inevitable fact that sometimes groups won’t cooperate – and sometimes things don’t turn out so great. But practice and trial-and-error help, they really do. And most students, especially high school students, are smart enough to observe for themselves what makes a good group leader and what doesn’t.

#### *E. Culture, Contact, and Motivation*

*Integrative motivation*, the motivation to “integrate” oneself with the target language and culture, is positively correlated with success in the foreign language classroom. In fact, it is a profound, personal, intrinsic drive – a love for a language and a culture – that many students attest is the only reason that they drudge through years of hard work memorizing kanji and practicing their *keigo*. Integrative motivation is also the key factor that determines whether students will put effort into studying and practicing *outside the classroom*, another determiner of eventual success. How, then, is a teacher to encourage interest in Japanese culture?

First, perhaps, we ought to start with a more basic question – what is culture? *Culture* can be understood on two levels. The first is *formal culture* (or objective culture), consisting of concrete, listable, tangible phenomenon, such as institutions (political, economic, educational, etc.), historical events, art, theater, literature, and the sciences. The second is *everyday culture* (or subjective culture), consisting of daily living and behavioral patterns. The goal for most foreign language students is to become

*knowledgable* in formal culture, but *fluent* in everyday culture, which would include “recognizing and explaining everyday *active* cultural patterns such as eating, shopping, greeting people, etc; everyday *passive* patterns such as social stratification, marriage, work, etc; and acting appropriately in common everyday situations” (Bennet, Bennet, and Allen 2003: 243, emphasis theirs). A deeper understanding of everyday culture is what the literature likes to refer to as “deep culture learning.”

When compared to American culture<sup>2</sup>, Japanese culture is riddled with both small, everyday differences (they eat seaweed for breakfast!) as well as deeper, more profound differences (such as an almost wholly different conception of “the self”). Where is a teacher to begin? It might be prudent to start in earlier levels with differences that could be labeled “non-threatening,” for example, discussions about broad trends in history, unique Japanese forms of the arts, Japanese food, and courtesy patterns in everyday life. A teacher can emphasize similarities between Japanese and Americans while at the same time describing differences. Comparisons and contrasts are useful at this stage – it engages and motivates students to not only learn more about a foreign culture, but to be able to think and reflect on their own as well, thus making the process more personal. But specifically because the process is somewhat personal, that’s why it’s a good idea to start with the not-so-deep, somewhat non-threatening material.

The danger in staying in this stage, however, is that eventually students seem to reach a stage in which they think “maybe there are some surface-level differences between Japanese and Americans, but deep down we’re really all the same,” thus projecting profoundly personal and often ethnocentric values and beliefs upon the Japanese (Bennet, Bennet, and Allen 2003). At this point, it would be time to de-emphasize comparisons and cross-cultural similarities, and to present a more challenging and deep analysis of Japanese culture. But how can a teacher get across the idea that there are sometimes *profound* differences between Japanese and American culture? One useful activity is the Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation (DIE) exercise,

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<sup>2</sup> For simplicity’s sake, let’s just ignore the fact that there is no such thing as a monolithic “American” culture for now. In fact, there’s no such thing as a monolithic “Japanese” culture, either, but most FL students may not be ready to recognize or critique that fact until they’ve already been introduced to what IS understood as “Japanese culture.” Students have to know what to critique and question before they can critique and question it. However, questioning the generalizations and stereotypes inherent in “Japanese culture” can be a very fruitful and engaging activity for more advanced classes of students.

developed by Janet and Milton Bennet, available on the website [www.intercultural.org](http://www.intercultural.org). This exercise demonstrates to students that between and among themselves, it is possible for profoundly different ways of thinking and worldviews to exist. Another fascinating text that's specific to US-Japan differences and is wholly appropriate for high school students is Haru Yamada's *Different Games, Different Rules: Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). The book describes differences between Japanese and American notions of the self, power, politeness, and communication style, illustrated throughout with sometimes hilarious personal anecdotes.

That's all well and good for teaching *about* culture, but how can a teacher bring authentic culture into the classroom? First of all, traditional, tried-and-true ideas never fail: students love food, students love movies, and some Japanese students may especially love anime. Teachers can draw upon community resources, such as inviting native Japanese speakers to talk to the class, or having students work with the local Japanese population to organize events and activities for the whole community. But before I go farther into this section, a brief aside:

In my Issue Assessment, I (and some researchers that I quoted) lamented the fact that teachers rarely *ask* students about their motivations for taking a foreign language, or even worse, tend to assume specific motivations, and then force what may be uninteresting or irrelevant material upon students, because they assume that students will find it motivating. Thus, it is essential for teachers to understand the motivations of their students. Teachers shouldn't be afraid to ask students point-blank why they are taking Japanese, or even to hand out small surveys to that effect. In fact, teachers should be regularly re-asking the same question to students as they progress through successive years of Japanese, since motivations change over time. Of course, not every student will have the same motivation, and some students may only offer up "because my friends are taking it" or "because I have to." But there will always be *something* there for teachers to work with, and a teacher should be able to tailor activities, especially culture-related activities, to the various responses that he or she solicits from students.

So let's say, for example, that several students in a Japanese class say that they are taking Japanese because they are interested in anime and manga. (In fact, this has

recently become the *prime* motivation for the majority of students taking Japanese in the U.S., as Parker 2004 attests.) Thus, at earlier levels, the teacher can use Japanese anime (probably shown with subtitles) to introduce culture and history into the classroom. There are many outstanding examples of Japanese animated movies drenched in themes just begging for discussion – for example, *Princess Mononoke*, with its depiction of Ainu<sup>3</sup> characters, and the historical tension between traditional ways of life versus the wave of modernity that engulfed Japan in the nineteenth century; *Millenium Actress*, dripping with World War II history and vividly illustrating roles and images of women throughout Japanese history; and *Barefoot Gen*, with its stark images of the devastation of the atomic bomb. Many Japanese TV dramas and teenage soap operas are also valuable as depictions of the details of everyday life in Japan. Also, in a class full of manga fans, the teacher can utilize authentic Japanese manga as reading materials. Children’s manga is rarely too difficult for more advanced learners to handle, and having pictures to accompany the text eases the strain of reading.

Most importantly, perhaps, in terms of motivation, the teacher can have students help choose which cultural activities and materials they use. The teacher can ask students to suggest movies to watch or manga to read, or can ask students to choose among options. “[S]tudent self-selection of reading materials may ensure high motivation and an appropriate difficulty level” (Wesche and Paribakht 2000).

Allowing choice and autonomy in the classroom is essential in terms of motivation. Teachers should encourage open-ended activities (such as “create a skit” with only a few specific requirements in terms of content or structure). Encouraging students’ self-direction and self-responsibility is an intrinsic good, and not just in terms of motivation. However, many students, especially younger students, need *some* modeling and structure, or else they feel lost (Wilhelm 97). Thus, the teacher should be careful to work choice into structure; for example, if there is to be a task assigned that requires students to write a short story in Japanese, the teacher can provide examples of previous students’ work, provide grading guidelines (such as “use xxx structure” or “make your characters have a problem, then solve it”), and even provide helpful hints (as in “try to

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<sup>3</sup> The Ainu are a group of indigenous people who live on the northern islands of Japan. They are not considered to be “Japanese” but rather ethnically distinct.

stick to words that you already know”). But other than that, students can have free reign to let their imaginations take them wherever, thus making the story *their own*, and thus having more motivation to put effort into the story. There is a positive correlation between a student’s sense of being controlled by an outside, authoritative force and a decrease in motivation, but on the other hand, “to the extent that teachers support autonomy and provide informative feedback, the student’s sense of self-determination and enjoyment can be enhanced” (Noels et al. 99: 30).

Teachers can increase motivation and engagement by including activities that allow students to express themselves personally, or to find out more information about their friends and classmates. For example, the self-introduction speech is one of the first things that Japanese students learn and an essential part of interaction among Japanese speakers. Students can also practice asking questions by interviewing other members of the class, or by administering surveys (i.e., “what’s your favorite type of movie?”) and sharing results with the class. Another popular activity, one that I’ve seen used in Japanese classes before, is to ask students to make a collage out of newspaper and magazine photos, each image chosen to represent a specific piece of personal information that they want to share, and then having students explain their collages to each other in small groups, or in front of the whole class. For a great source of personally engaging foreign language activities, I recommend Gertrude Moskowitz’s *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*. Moskowitz writes,

When given the opportunity to talk about themselves in personally relevant ways, students tend to become much more motivated. The result is that they want to be able to express their feelings and ideas more in the target language. They *want* to communicate. When this happens, growth becomes a reciprocal process: enhancing personal growth enhances growth in the foreign language.

Moskowitz 78: 4.

However, with any activity that involves sharing personal information in the classroom, it is important for the teacher to establish some ground rules. For example, students must have the right to be heard, and the right to be respected - no insults or put-downs allowed! (Moskowitz 78).

Finally, perhaps, there’s nothing wrong with a teacher encouraging a little bit of extrinsic (or instrumental) motivation as well. As mentioned in the previous Issue Assessment, small proximal goals and rewards can help boost students’ self-confidence.

There is nothing wrong with developing instrumental motivation, “by discussing [with students] the role L2 plays in the world and its potential usefulness both for themselves and for their community” (Dornyei 94: 281).

Above all, however, in order to increase and sustain motivation, teachers must model a positive attitude toward the language and culture being studied. “Teachers can inculcate the belief that success is not only possible but probable, as long as there is a high level of effort... Teachers can provide evidence that the benefits of L2 learning are truly worth the costs” (Oxford and Shearin 94: 24).

#### *F. Decreasing FL Anxiety*

As long as we’re discussing an affective topic like motivation, it might help to discuss the equally important goal of decreasing FL anxiety as well. As was mentioned in the Issue Assessment, many students confess that foreign languages are their most stressful, anxiety-inducing subjects. What can a teacher do to decrease the anxiety that naturally arises when students are asked to perform socially?

Most FL anxiety derives from students having to perform in front of others, and studies have found that anxiety increases when students have to speak in front of the entire class; anxiety is lessened when students have to perform or interact in small groups (Young 91). Teachers can help accustom students to speaking in front of others by emphasizing pair and small-group work at first, and reserving less difficult (or more familiar, comfortable) tasks for performing in front of the large group.

Teachers can create a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom by acknowledging that students have fears and asking them to share them. For example, a teacher can ask students to volunteer their fears about learning a foreign language, and write those fears on the board, so that other students will see that they are not alone in harboring these anxieties (Young 91).

Teachers can also confront students’ beliefs about learning a foreign language, beliefs that may lead to increased levels of stress. For example, many students harbor the belief that they can become fluent in a foreign language after only two years of study, or

believe that pronunciation is the most important aspect of communication in a foreign language. When after two years of studying Japanese they still can't read a newspaper or speak without an accent, anxiety results. Teachers should "discuss with their students reasonable commitments for successful language learning and the value of some language ability if it is less than fluent... [A]s students's beliefs about language learning can be based on limited knowledge and/or experience, the teacher's most effective course may be to confront erroneous beliefs with new information. In some cases, students may never have had their views about language learning challenged" (Horwitz 88: 292). It is especially important for Japanese teachers to be frank about the time scale for learning Japanese. The most important piece of advice I ever got from one of my Japanese teachers was, "*Don't* compare yourself to your friends who are studying Spanish, French, or German." Merely hearing as much lifted an enormous burden off my shoulders – I only wish that someone had told me that earlier in my academic career!

Another important consideration for lowering FL anxiety is the way that error correction is handled in the classroom. Errors are a natural part of the language learning process. Students who have their each and every single error corrected by the instructor, or even worse, corrected harshly, tend to be more anxious (and thus even more error-prone) than students who are allowed to speak in a more relaxed classroom. Students are easily intimidated by teachers correcting their errors; but at the same time, error correction is a necessity – it would be unfeasible to create a FL classroom in which errors were never corrected. So how is a teacher to go about error correction?

The first and simplest way is to be friendly and suggestive, rather than critical and harsh. How much or how little error correction is accomplished in the classroom does not have as much bearing on students' anxiety as the *manner in which* teachers handle error correction (Young 91).

Likewise, teachers can use *modeling* as a fairly non-critical method of error correction. The teacher can answer incorrectly-phrased queries with grammatically correct answers that repeat part of the original question, etc. However, modeling has not yet been proven a wholly effective approach to error correction, and it does come with its share of caveats. "If modeling is to work, students must learn to listen carefully and strategically" (Young 91: 432).

Also, when grading written or spoken student work, teachers can assign equal weight (probably “points”) to both *accuracy* (as in, grammatical and lexical accuracy) and *successful communication* (getting the message across). If students are made aware of this grading system, they will understand that what they say and how they say it are both important; but, on the other hand, there’s also some breathing space for students to be a bit less anxious about particles and memorizing the correct kanji compound for ‘spatula’. This half-and-half grading system tends to lead to a reduction in student anxiety (Young 91).

Finally, to reduce the anxiety inherent in testing, it’s important that teachers practice and model not necessarily the *content* that will appear on tests, but also *test item-types* as well. This is especially important if evaluation is to measure authentic communicative competence; if the final test in a semester will be an oral interview, the teacher can guide students through practice sessions that model the eventual “test” interview, so that they are more aware of what to expect. Even more simply, if there will be fill-in-the-blank questions on a written test, it’s important for the teacher to give students experience answering fill-in-the-blank questions in class. Practicing test item types leads to students being able to understand how they are expected to perform, which reduces anxiety enormously (Young 91).

Finally, if otherwise bright and academically competent students continue to experience frustration and stress in the foreign language classroom, they may be candidates for screening for undiagnosed L1 deficiencies, as Sparks and Ganschow (1996) have suggested. Refer back to section I-H of the Issue Assessment for more information.

### *G. Conquering the Kanji Beast*

Fortunately, contrary to popular belief, an English-speaking student can learn to read and write Japanese *without* “starting all over again,” as most students and parents believe is necessary when learning a language with a non-Roman writing system. Simply put, literacy transfers; a student who knows how to read in one language can learn to read in a second language *without* having to struggle with a whole different concept of what

reading is or how it works, *even if* the two languages in question have completely different writing systems. For example, a study discovered that students who were native Mandarin Chinese speakers, learning to read in Mandarin, could transfer their general ability to grasp the relationship between symbols, sound, and meaning over to their exercises in English literacy (Gregory 1996). The most difficult part of learning to read is being able to wrap one's head around the concept that symbols on a page can represent sounds in a language. "Theoretically, the ability to use what is already known in reading one language to approach another should mean that bilingual readers do not have to start over when they approach reading in another language" (García 2002: 3). Students can use basic cognitive skills like sounding out words, decoding new words from context, skimming, and summarizing, when learning how to read a second language. Often, the biggest stumbling block for students learning to read a second language is coming across unknown vocabulary, not, as some believe, an inherent problem with understanding the concept of reading a different writing system at all (García 2002: 7).

Thus, literate students already have some advantage when learning to read and write Japanese. However, that doesn't mitigate the fact that Japanese, due to its unique writing system, is notoriously difficult for students to learn. Ask any Japanese student what part of their studies they fear, dread, or loathe the most, and the answer will almost universally be the same – kanji!<sup>4</sup> Michael Everson and Yasumi Kuriya, describing the results of a study that asked Japanese students to read an authentic Japanese newspaper article, write:

With reference to kanji, our interpretation is that many... learners have developed an adversarial relationship with this script. That is, dealing with and learning kanji, is continually highlighted... as being the most labor-intensive endeavor associated with learning Japanese. Moreover, strings of kanji interspersed throughout the text were encountered with invariable dismay by many of these readers, and seemed to be very defeating and de-motivating for them.

Everson and Kuriya 98: 13.

My own experience as a Japanese student has unfortunately led me to feel very much the same way, and I can attest that the same is true for many of my friends in Japanese classes as well!

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<sup>4</sup> Not counting the Roman alphabet, there are three ways to write Japanese. Two are syllabic systems, *hiragana* and *katakana*, that students of Japanese can master (without much pain or suffering) before their first year of study is complete. The third is *kanji*, a system of logographic characters originally borrowed from Chinese.

Kanji are difficult for students of Japanese, for multiple reasons. First, kanji are visually complex, some of which may consist of as many as twenty or thirty individual “strokes” (lines). Second, each individual kanji character can have multiple meanings and readings (“readings” meaning pronunciation). Third and finally, it is often cited that a student should be able to recognize about 2000 kanji to function as a literate reader of Japanese, since the 2000 most frequently used kanji characters make up 98% of the kanji characters used in newspapers and magazines (Yamashita and Maru 2000). Obviously, learning 2000 complex, variant characters is much more difficult than learning a simple alphabet, or even a more complex syllabary.

Indeed, students who read in Japanese tend to rely on bottom-up strategies (analyzing word components and particles, in other words, the minutia of each sentence) for reading comprehension, as opposed to top-down strategies (evaluating and reacting to the message of the entire text, as most educated readers do when reading in their own native language). This phenomenon, also documented among learners of Chinese as a foreign language, is “perhaps testifying to the processing demands made of students learning to read in languages using non-Roman orthographies” (Everson and Kuriya 98: 12).

Thus, simply put, students have a lot of kanji to memorize. The problem is, without proper guidance and teacher-supported strategies, students may not be able to handle the sheer overwhelming burden of kanji memorization alone.

Most likely, without proper guidance the native speaker of English opts for rote learning with flash cards or writing kanji out repeatedly. Very quickly, however, such a strategy proves ineffective and even torturous because the amount and complexity of information to be mastered cannot be handled solely by rote learning. Psycholinguistic studies have demonstrated that learning unorganized, random entities is difficult... Learning hundreds of kanji by rote makes them seem like an endless stream of such entities, because without proper guidance the characters are nothing but complex, seemingly arbitrary combinations of bars and boxes, and their correspondences with meanings and readings are random... [A] task too big and complex quickly gives learners a sense of “loss of control,” which significantly hinders learning.

Yamashita and Maru 2000: 160.

Therefore, the Japanese teacher must incorporate meaningful and tangible schemata into the teaching of kanji. There are two effective ways of doing so, the first and most common of which is to teach kanji in “themed” vocabulary clusters, such as “weather” or “shopping” themes. “Unauthentic texts can play a role here in controlling

the rate that new kanji are introduced, as well as making sure that old ones are constantly reviewed. Moreover, lessons can be organized around themes whereby students read a variety of texts that center on one topic, thus ensuring that selected kanji are repeated for the students in several related readings” (Everson and Kuriya 98: 16).

The second method of adding meaning to kanji would be to focus on teaching kanji in tandem with teaching knowledge about the compositional characteristics of the characters. Kanji can be grouped into categories such as *pictographs* (characters that are “pictures” of what they represent), *katakana composites* (characters that can be broken down into syllabic *katakana* components, which beginning students learn early on), *semantic-phonetics* (characters that consist of two parts, one of which denotes meaning, the other pronunciation), and *semantic composites* (characters that consist of two units of meaning that can be combined to create a new meaning; for example, if you squish together the character [deleted for web formatting] ‘person’ and the character [deleted for web formatting] ‘tree’, you get [deleted for web formatting] ‘to rest’, or a person resting beside or beneath a tree).<sup>5</sup> Teaching students the structure, form, and origin of kanji characters will help them better learn and retain larger kanji vocabularies.

If students are taught kanji with appropriate compositional features, each character is introduced not as arbitrary combinations of curves and straight lines, but as a combination of meaningful units. Therefore the material is presented to learners as a more manageable concept than it would be without such guidance. Also, by directing student’s attention to compositional features, over a period of time teachers can train students to develop an eye for analyzing characters that may be useful in learning new characters and ultimately help students become independent learners.

Yamashita and Maru 2000: 162.

A study by Yamashita and Maru found that Japanese students rated pictographs as the easiest kanji to learn and retain, followed by katakana composites. Pictographic and katakana composites are usually taught first in the course of Japanese studies, and for good reason. Students also tend to find semantic composites easy, because “the idea that a meaning represented by the whole character derives from an integration of the meanings of the components might have given these students a sense of meaningfulness in learning the character. Oral feedback from some students after the questionnaire session suggested that the association of components with meaning may have also been

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<sup>5</sup> This is Yamashita and Maru’s grouping, created for the purpose of their study; I have seen different systems of categorization used in other sources, but for the purpose of this paper, I rather like Yamahita and Maru’s system, so I think I’ll just repeat it here.

perceived as interesting” (Yamashita and Maru 2000: 168). Of course, it’s practically intuitive that *meaningful* understanding of a kanji character would be more memorable than rote memorization of an arbitrary connection between form and meaning. Finally, semantic-phonetics were ranked by students in the experiment as the most difficult. Now, I didn’t actually participate in this study, but I can attest personally that my experience after years of studying Japanese has led me to feel very much the same way. Pictograph kanji are the easiest for me, followed by katakana composites; and finally, kanji that derive meanings from their constituent elements are easier for me to remember than kanji that are composed of “meaning” and “pronunciation” units, especially since I keep forgetting what the pronunciation units are supposed to signify.

Thus, a suggested order and method of teaching kanji emerges from the results of this and other similar studies. “[B]eginning students perceive as easy to learn those compositional features that they can identify with already existing concepts” such as pictures of the world, or katakana characters that they’ve already learned (Yamashita and Maru 2000: 169). Pictographic kanji are usually taught first, since they are the easiest for students to grasp - [deleted for web formatting] is ‘mountain’, [deleted for web formatting] is ‘fire’, [deleted for web formatting] is ‘leg’, [deleted for web formatting] is ‘mouth’, etc. A common method of teaching pictographic kanji is to show first an image of what the kanji signifies, and then show a series of progressive illustrations that reveal how a realistic picture can evolve into the more abstract, simplified form of the kanji character.

Therefore, from pictographic kanji to katakana composites, a natural progression of teaching order emerges.

When presented with the original picture and the kanji that derived from it for such a character, learners can be expected to realize that kanji are meaningful units created on the basis of reasoning. Then, by gradually moving to katakana composites and semantic composites, a teacher can start teaching students that there are several aspects of the makeup of kanji that require attention when learning. As the students learn a number of characters in this way, they should be able to develop an eye for details when learning the makeup of a newly introduced character, and this should prepare them for more difficult characters with less salient compositional features.

Yamashita and Maru 2000: 170.

A few caveats about this method, however, bear mentioning.

Explicit teaching of compositional features may not make much difference for a learner who has an eye for detail and who is more written-language oriented to begin with. Likewise, advanced learners may have already established their own ways of learning

kanji and therefore may not respond as readily as learners in the beginning level. On the other hand, pointing out the makeup of a kanji may be effective in fostering the

acquisition of kanji regardless of level as long as the learners are willing to utilize such information.

Yamashita and Maru 2000: 171.

Thus, it's important to use a variety of approaches when teaching kanji, including "theme" approaches *and* approaches that emphasize compositional features, simply because of the fact that each and every student in the classroom will respond differently to any method.

#### *H. Reading for Content and Vocabulary*

In my Issue Assessment, I described the advantages and pitfalls of both reading for *content* and reading for *translation*, the former of which promotes general reading comprehension but at the expense of new vocabulary acquisition, the latter of which may help with new vocabulary but does not develop comprehension skills that can transfer across contexts. The solution, then, would seem to be using a combination of these two methods – particularly, reading authentic texts for comprehension but then also using vocabulary exercises to practice key words from the text, a method forwarded by Marjorie Wesche and T. Sima Paribakht.

Research has also indicated that whereas reliance on reading for L2 vocabulary development may lead to the ability to recognize a large number of words in context, it is not likely to ensure development of the complex knowledge of these words which underlies the ability to use them correctly in a productive mode... L2 reading plus related vocabulary activities might be one appropriate way to direct and enhance the effects of incidental learning from reading.

Wesche and Paribakht 2000: 197.

A study by Wesche and Paribakht found that a group of students who used both reading and related vocabulary exercise in tandem made significant gains in vocabulary knowledge when compared to a group of students who used reading only (Wesche and Paribakht 2000). Examples of "vocabulary exercises" included matching a word with a synonym, recognizing the meaning of the word from among multiple-choice answers, fill-in-the-blank sentences, and answering a question using the target word. Sure, these sound like "traditional," boring vocabulary drills. And they are. But remember, techniques mentioned in previous sections of this paper can be used to make even

vocabulary drilling more fun and engaging – such as physical activity or the manipulation of objects, etc. The point is, however, that in order to make vocabulary stick, a certain amount of drilling is necessary and inevitable.

Even with careful text selection to ensure repeated presentation of words of interest (as in thematic or discipline-related language teaching), many important words will not be learned incidentally, or they may be inaccurately learned, or, at best, learned only to a recognition level in context. Text-based vocabulary activities... can, within a limited instructional period, provide cumulative and varied exposures to target words that lead to more predictable and effective retention.

Wesche and Paribakht 2000: 208.

For true vocabulary retention, it is essential for students to be able to encounter vocabulary words in a variety of contexts. “[V]aried and multiple encounters with given words that highlight different lexical features, promoting elaboration and strengthening of different aspects of word knowledge... In vocabulary acquisition through reading, word knowledge appears to be elaborated gradually through multiple exposures to words in varied contexts” (Wesche and Paribakht 2000: 196-197). Since it may be unfeasible for a teacher with limited time and resources to present multiple texts to his or her students merely for the purpose of creating “multiple encounters” with a specific set of words, however, it might save time (and perhaps be easier on the students) to combine *one* carefully-selected text with multiple related vocabulary exercises, in order to accomplish this purpose.

One final note about reading: When selecting texts for the class, especially authentic texts, it is important for teachers to consider whether their students have prior knowledge about the subject material of the texts, or not. “[F]amiliar materials provide an opportunity for readers to deduce unknown vocabulary and syntax from the source itself. This is especially significant in light of the observation that in some less-commonly taught language classrooms, there has been a tendency to use authentic materials that are topically and/or culturally opaque to the Western learner, thus adding another degree of difficulty to the text comprehension process” (Everson and Kuriya 98: 14). For example, in a study conducted by Everson and Kuriya, students were given an authentic Japanese newspaper article to read. This article compared and contrasted Barbie, the popular American doll, with Rika-chan, a similarly popular doll in Japan. Unfortunately, students who did not already know that Rika-chan was a Japanese doll were confused by the article, since to an inexperienced reader, the article made it sound

like Rika-chan was a real person! Everson and Kuriya go on to recommend that in the JFL classroom, reading materials that deal with familiar topics, or that establish background knowledge, would be perfectly appropriate.

## **II. Making the Case for Foreign Languages**

In today's basic-skills and standard-obsessed world, where does foreign language play a role in schools that are already strapped for resources and struggling to get students to pass high-stakes tests of math and English literacy? That's a difficult question that would be hard to answer without fiatting a change of societal attitudes as a whole – specifically, the attitude that foreign languages aren't necessary, that the rest of the world can just speak English, and that learning a foreign language just isn't worth the time and effort.

There isn't much that one individual teacher, or even a group of teachers, can do to change this attitude. But they can always start at the micro-level: in their own classroom. Using motivating techniques, encouraging cultural integration, and showing enthusiasm and love for a foreign language is the best that teachers can do to ensure that our next generation of leaders and decision-makers understand and appreciate the value of learning another language.

On the other hand, however, it might not be a bad idea for teachers to be armed with “defenses” of their subject area and profession that conform to the demands of educational institutions today. For example, foreign language teachers can attempt to integrate other content areas into their lessons, such as teaching how to multiply and divide fractions in Japanese. However, due to the unfortunate fact that it takes much longer to develop any sort of proficiency in Japanese as compared to European languages, there is not as much potential for this cross-over method in Japanese as compared to, say, in French or Spanish, especially at the high school level. But even Japanese teachers can point out that taking another language, *any* language, helps students improve in other, seemingly unrelated subject matters as well. Research has long supported this claim. For example, elementary students who study a foreign language show improved scores on English reading, math, and language arts tests when compared to students who do not (Armstrong and Rogers 97). Even high school students

with two or more years of foreign language study show significant improvements on English achievement tests when compared to students who have not studied a foreign language (Bastian 79). This holds true for major standardized tests such as the ACT (Olsen and Brown 92) and the SAT (NCDPI 2002).

In the end, however, I never really intended for the scope of this paper to extend much beyond an individual classroom, although I still feel that there are problems in terms of broad societal attitudes that need to be addressed. I feel the best way to do this is for each teacher, every teacher to be an enthusiastic model of how to love and learn a foreign language. That, more than anything else, can help students in turn love and learn the language that they study, even if that language *is* Japanese, and even if they have to memorize thousands of kanji characters to learn it – at least then, memorizing kanji can become a labor of love.