

Japanese Language Acquisition through writing Motivational Text inside and outside the classroom

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1 Background and aims: writing skills development through intrinsic motivation

This paper discusses students' writing skills development in a Japanese language classroom which focused on writing a personal report on their future dreams. The initial aim of this research was to get a better understanding of the language acquisition process associated with writing a motivational text as a part of a report; however, we decided to focus on writing skills development, as all of the qualitative data that we collected could successfully demonstrate the process through which the students developed their writing skills. At the same time, the data was not adequate to provide comprehensive analysis for language acquisition itself. The use of the word *development* is intentional: in this research, writing skills are perceived as a process that can be developed, rather than learned or taught. In these terms, writing skills development refers to an increase of communicative language competence in written production, as defined by the descriptors of CEFR (CoE 2018).

We decided to study a Japanese classroom in an Italian university¹, based on the teaching approach developed by Hosokawa (2004), which is called *Kangaeru Tame no Nihongo*. This approach aims to make students reach awareness about their life choices. At the end of the course, students deliver a text of approximately ten pages that is called *report*, which is composed of three parts: motivational text, dialogue report and conclusion. During the whole production process, students were prompted to dig deeper in their motivation and on what they actually intend to say through interaction with peers as well as facilitators, a group of external students and teachers who had participated in a similar course before or who were consolidating their teaching practices. The activities² held in the classroom were later used by the students to re-elaborate and to extend their report. Although usually, the number of students drops significantly throughout the courses of Japanese language in this university, in this case the number only decreased from 61 to 48. Thus, due to the large number of students, the professor in charge decided to split the class into 11 groups each with 1 or 2 *facilitators* (13 in total). It is also significant to state that although the class was composed of students of the last year of the bachelor's degree in Japanese Studies (approximate requirements for the class: N3, 700 kanji or B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), not all of them had already passed all previous Japanese language exams at the time of the course. Therefore it should be considered the broad diversity between learners when reading of this case study.

1.1 Writing proficiency and affective filter

According to the stimulus appraisal model theorised by Schumann, ‘emotion underlies most, if not all cognition’ and ‘variable success in second language acquisition (SLA) is emotionally driven’ (Schumann 1999). Hence, we hypothesised that in order to develop writing skills better, students ought to be motivated and have a lowered affective filter. In our case study, it was possible to assume that every new input that students actively received could have been converted into comprehensible input, due to the emotional involvement provided by dealing with the topic of their reports, eventually resulting in language acquisition and writing skills development (Scherer 1984; Krashen 1982). Then, concerning motivation in the students’ language learning journey, we used the Deci and Ryan framework of intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985) to support our hypothesis. Students might have been highly motivated because they were working on personal and contemplative topic. Finally, we used the guideline proposed by the Venetian school of language education for communicative competence to understand their progress in terms of writing skills (Balboni 2015).

2 Data collection and content analysis

We chose to analyse three students as case-studies. They were selected on the basis of their group (each student was in a different group where we participated as facilitators), their motivations and on proactiveness. The primary data come from students’ writings on Moodle³, transcriptions of the recordings of each lesson, and an online questionnaire⁴ (submitted to the 3 students one month after the end of the course). We then proceeded to with comparative content analysis to understand whether their writing skills had developed. We chose some of the passages of the *report* that students voluntarily rewrote, and we compared them with each version.

We found that students became able to write longer and easier to understand paragraphs. Moreover, through the questionnaire, the students reported that writing assignments promoted active learning in their spare time, which has led them to discover new vocabularies. Students largely became autonomous and able to express themselves concretely; for example, they learnt how to convey significant events of their lives, so that they could explain to other students their views on different topics. We also found that emotional involvement was fundamental as assumed in the beginning of the research. We think that two out of three students in our sample were able to develop their writing skills through their participation in the group and especially under their facilitator’s support, as showed by intriguing questions and continuous feedback both online and in-class.

3 Conclusion

Through the questionnaire, we found that students felt empowered by being responsible for their task management. Empowerment led them to have more autonomy in the learning process, which is one of the critical aspects of current language education research, as the present symposium’s call for paper itself states⁵. Facilitators’ role was fundamental in this environment; due to students’ answer to the questionnaire, we think that the class was considered a *safe speaking environment*. As Kubanyiova suggests, a safe speaking environment ‘engages students’ identities, future visions and hopes through the design of immersive tasks’ (2018:2). Although this paper is limited, the research

already showed interesting pedagogical implications. The introduction of facilitators managed to bridge the gap caused by a large number of students in the universities' classrooms and the vertical relationship that is often present between professor and students.

We suggest further research on the context of this teaching approach, due to the presence of many more factors that influence students' behaviour. In fact, the year before in a different course, but with the same teaching approach, Alessandrini obtained conflicting results regarding students' consensus, hence their collaborative effort (2019). Lastly, a methodological study of second language acquisition is required to understand the progression of linguistic competence through this approach.

¹ The activities were carried out at Ca' Foscari University of Venice from February to May during the academic year 2018-19 for 15 classes. The exam was held in June.

² To reach a better understanding of the activities that took place during the course, see Hosokawa (2004) or Alessandrini (2019).

³ We quote here one interaction that we analysed. Due to page limit, we are unable to attach more data.

Student (4/20/2019): 時々アニメを見ながら、言葉を翻訳しますので、兄は全然分かりません。

Facilitator (5/15/2019): お兄さんは、何が分かりませんか?たいへんかもしれないけど、すごくいいレポートだからあともう少し、がんばってみてね。わからないところは、言ってね。

Student (5/15/2019): 時々、アニメを見ながら、アニメをストップして、アニメの文章を翻訳します。理由は翻訳が違いで、兄に正しい翻訳を説明したいです。楽しい時間だったと思います。

Facilitator (5/15/2019): この文は少しだけわかりにくいみたい。翻訳が何と違う?

Student (5/18/2019): 時々、アニメを見ながら、アニメをストップして、アニメの文章を翻訳します。理由は翻訳者の翻訳がいつも正しくないと思います。多分、編集者がその間違いを注目しなかったんです。例えば、「目を覚めさせました」の文章は、イタリア語で文字通り「起きさせました・Mi hai svegliato」を翻訳します。ですが、時々アニメでその文章の分かりは違いんです。文章の意味は「今、私は正しい事件を分かって、真実を知っています。Mi hai fatto aprire gli occhi」ということです。それから兄に正しい翻訳を説明します。きっと、私の翻訳はいつも正しくないですが、然し私の観点を分け合いたいです。

⁴ A more in-depth analysis of the questionnaire can be found in Ligabue (2019), as well as 3 more students' responses who answered it later.

⁵ 'the Learner Autonomy Paradigm becomes the centre of the pedagogical and didactic universe' from <https://www.eaje.eu/en/symposium/46>

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