

Targeted differentiation in a Japanese language course context

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Introduction

An action research project using differentiation strategies in Japanese classes was conducted at St Paul's Catholic College Manly, a Catholic comprehensive boys' school. Japanese is the only language offered at St Paul's Catholic College and all five classes in Year 8 study Japanese for one year. The Japanese course is taught by two experienced teachers who have each been employed at the school for more than 10 years. It had been noted by the teachers that the students were less receptive to teacher-centred instruction in recent years. This was evident in the more disruptive behaviours and less focussed work ethic during the teacher-led activities. The students were found to be agreeable and compliant as individuals but less so when part of a larger class group. In 2014, I commenced a Masters of Education. As part of this study I investigated factors that could be contributing to the decline in student acceptance of teacher-led instruction at the school.

Background

Learning a foreign language has not been seen as a vital part of the curriculum at St Paul's Catholic College. Business, sport, or ICT-based subjects tend to be the more popular elective courses, reflecting the employment and lifestyles of the parent body. Opportunities to use Japanese language usually take the form of leisure activities such as dining out at the many Japanese restaurants in the area or family skiing trips to Hokkaido. Opportunities to use language beyond such shallow experiences are rarely considered. This is in line with research by Pavy (2006), who noted that students regularly fail to see the relevance of their language learning beyond the classroom.

A second deterrent noted by Pavy (2006) with regards to language uptake is the lack of progress indicators in many classrooms. Students of Japanese at the school were simply not able to see the progress they were making, and parents were disappointed that their son could not translate for them after the 100 hours compulsory course in Year 8. In this context the work of the languages department was neither visible nor valued.

I was also influenced by post-graduate readings on motivational studies. Humans are naturally motivated to work harder and persist with tasks they feel they are good at or that they consider to have value. Self-determination theory is based on the premise that people will experience higher levels of motivation when they are in an environment that provides them with opportunities to feel competent, autonomous, and related to the group and its work (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The pedagogical choices that teachers make also affect the motivation of their students. I wanted more students to experience these feelings in Japanese classes on a regular basis and felt the teacher-centred approach was incongruent with this goal.

The third concept to influence the action research project design was social constructivism. Social constructivism implies that students will naturally learn from those around them (Vygotsky, 1978). This is best achieved when contact with a 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) is maximised and the content or task is set in the individual's zone of proximal

development (ZPD, the space where they cannot complete a task alone but can do so with scaffolding and support from an MKO; Churcher et al., 2014; Kingringer, 2002). I questioned whether the teacher-centred approach was able to meet such ZPD requirements.

Methodology & Project Implementation

If a student gets a concept and understands the content, then there is nothing worse than having to prove to the teacher that they know something in a way that is not challenging for them. They will see the task as pointless as it doesn't take them into their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Some students are more frustrated by this than others, and a disconnection with school is often felt more strongly by students who struggle to conform to the one-size-fits-all education model.

I designed a brief that aimed to reduce time in the classroom 'teaching' in a teacher-centred way, increase time connecting and communicating with individuals in the class, and increase opportunities for the students to make decisions about their learning, who they would work with, and how they would demonstrate their progress. As part of this I initiated an action research project called the Targets Project.

There are five Year 8 classes of Japanese at St Paul's Catholic College, taught by two teachers. One class (8Z) is streamed as a gifted and talented class, the other four classes (8V, 8W, 8X, and 8Y) are designated as mixed-ability classes. I implemented the Targets Project in the 8Y and 8Z classes. The other Japanese teacher continued to teach her classes in the standard way, but both teachers were involved in reflection and professional dialogue regarding the progress and engagement of their students. The resources and activities were common across all the classes, but the delivery was teacher-centred in the non-experimental groups.

The experiment went through three phases, each phase lasting for one unit of approximately 5 to 6 weeks. After each phase student feedback was sought via written feedback sheets at the end of the unit. The two teachers also discussed the perceived behaviour and engagement of the students and the perceived stress levels of both teachers using the two pedagogies (teacher-centred and student-centred targets).

Phase 1

The first phase of the project began with a moderate change to the current resources. The school was using a hard copy of the *Jblog* textbook (Campbell, 2014) and the matching student work booklets. Each student had access to his own laptop. The department wanted to experiment with how they could better facilitate learning and also provide the students with more visible indicators of their achievement in learning each unit. In particular, they wanted to cultivate more individual time with the teacher for each student and move away from the traditional teacher-centred model.

I created a targets sheet (Appendix 1) that simply listed all the tasks in the student workbook under the various topics in the chapter. Each task was numbered along with the main skill required to undertake it, for example, listening, reading, writing, speaking, and cultural understanding. Two additional columns were added for the students to write the date the task was completed and for the teacher to sign off the work.

The teacher would introduce the material briefly and refer students to the relevant pages in the textbook. The students were then able to choose from the tasks to provide evidence of their learning in each subtopic. As a student finished a task, he would ask the teacher to validate his

task. At this point the teacher would provide some quick personal feedback. It should be noted that even a 3-second, 'Excellent pronunciation, Tom' was more individual feedback than students would often receive in a regular lesson.

The speaking tasks were listed as the most popular activity in student feedback sheets at the end of the unit. The teachers discussed this and felt they were probably popular because they were relatively quick to complete, they were a task the students could do together, and because students felt an immediate sense of achievement. They also had a positive impact on developing rapport between teacher and students, as the students enjoyed having an audience for their efforts and achievements.

The students reported on the feedback sheets that they enjoyed the opportunity to choose to work either alone or in small groups. It was also a novel experience for the teachers to have students wanting them to come and see their work and competing for teacher attention. Under the previous teacher-centred model I was the one who had competed to get and maintain the students' attention, so this role reversal was a welcome and positive change. It was a little overwhelming at first until both student and teacher learned how to manage the signing off of tasks. The more mature students would keep working on subsequent tasks until the teacher could check them off. Less independent students would stop work and put their hand up until the teacher could approach them. Some guidelines were needed to manage this, such as setting target minimums for a lesson to encourage students to keep working, and to have the teacher move around checking off students in certain areas of the room at different times.

Another lesson from Phase 1 was the realisation that the student is in fact the person who knows best what will work on any given day for them. A teacher cannot realistically be expected to predict student learning preferences, as they often vary widely from day to day. They can, however, enable better student outcomes by providing a suitable range of activities for the student to choose from. Students are more successful when they are taught based on their own readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2004). Providing students with autonomy to choose amongst tasks allowed them to master the content by starting with the skill they felt most confident in, for example, listening.

Phase 2

Student feedback on the unit taught with targets sheets was encouraging, so I initiated a second phase with some modifications to the targets sheet (Appendix 2) and the delivery. Interestingly, despite the relatively large range of task choices provided, some students approached me with other ideas for demonstrating their learning. This led to the introduction of a section on the Phase 2 targets sheet called student-identified task. Students could propose a task and, with the teacher's approval, add it to their individual targets sheet. The new targets sheet now included the student-identified task section, as well as a column allocating points to each task in recognition that some tasks were more challenging or time consuming than others. This gave teachers the option of setting a goal such as completing a minimum of two tasks per section and with a total value of 25 points. Additional speaking tasks were also incorporated, due to their popularity.

Although the majority of the class preferred the student-centred learning style, the languages department also wanted to acknowledge the preference of students who needed a more gradual approach to self-directed learning. Some academic but passively inclined students who were successful in the teacher-centred environment were less happy with the changes. They were opposed to having to order the learning themselves, as they felt it was the teacher's job. A schedule of varied delivery was established across each fortnight, with two set days for teacher-

led work, two days for targets and one day for review or group-based work such as an activity called Amazing Races. Another issue was students sometimes forgetting to bring their targets sheet and materials needed to complete the targets. This was addressed in Phase 3.

Phase 3

Although the approach to learning seemed to be lifting student engagement and learning outcomes, there was still room for improvement. Phase 3 aimed to improve the logistics of the tasks by presenting the list of student tasks as a Google form rather than as a printed booklet. This also allowed sound files to be included as links accessible via Google Classroom. Presenting the material in this way also addressed the problem of students losing or forgetting their booklets, and had the additional benefit of reducing the marking load of the teachers (collecting booklets for marking at the end of every unit created periods of intense marking workload). By replacing hardcopy booklets with Google forms, many tasks could be self-marked (e.g., multiple-choice) and all marks were tallied automatically. The teachers could also begin marking as soon as a student had completed a task without waiting for the due date, allowing them some additional flexibility to manage their workload. Comments and marks could be held back and released manually by the teacher when appropriate. The department felt this was important progress as there is little point in developing an approach that is not sustainable by the teachers in the longer term. The insight into student work also allowed teachers to have a record of student effort every lesson and to recognise areas of misunderstanding that required reteaching.

Hattie (2012) has noted that feedback has one of the strongest impacts on student learning outcomes. The staff at St Paul's Catholic College recognised that this feedback was only effective if the students took the time to read it. Students were still strongly influenced by the mindset of 'marks matter, not comments'. It was felt that opportunities for growth and improvement were sometimes missed when the feedback comments were not read and reflected upon.

I decided to develop a mechanism for rewarding attention to feedback and named it the *Emperor Feedback System*. This was embedded into the targets infrastructure. The Emperor Feedback System operated in the following way: a code word was hidden in the feedback, for example, between sentences, when the student had impressed the teacher in some way. This allowed for differentiation, as what was impressive in one student might differ from another depending on the student's current position on the learning continuum for that unit. Values were also rewarded, such as challenging oneself to select harder tasks or demonstrating courage to choose a task no one else in the class attempted. When work was returned to the students, they were told they had two minutes to read all of the teacher feedback in silence. If at the end of the two minutes they believed they had received the code word, they would visit the teacher to receive a merit or Japanese lolly. The teacher did not keep a list of recipients so if a student failed to read the feedback carefully, they did not receive the reward. The code was changed each time and the students were not informed of the code to prevent them scanning for that word only. This was found to increase student engagement with the feedback and led to more considered choices by the students about which tasks they would select to provide evidence of their learning.

Discussion

One of the very worst uses of time is to do something very well that need not be done at all.
(Tracy, 2004, p.10)

Student reflections on the Target Project supported this idea. Although units where targets sheets were incorporated were ranked as more enjoyable than normal lessons by the student majority in both classes, the ratio was in fact higher in the so-called weaker mixed-ability class. The results were discussed with a third teacher who was not part of the experiment but is the leader of the Special Needs Support Team. That teacher aptly summarised the results by saying:

The streamed class are already good at the system. They know how to succeed at school regardless of what the teacher does. They fit in already. The change has the biggest impact on the mixed-ability kids because they are not already winning. They don't fit the one-size-fits-all education model. They have shorter attention spans to survive a teacher-centred lesson. They have more self-doubt in their ability to do a task. Targets gave them an opportunity to choose what works for them.

This insight was important as it went some way to explaining the responses of the students in the end-of-unit surveys. I had predicted that the streamed 8Z class would benefit most from the change and had been surprised by the degree of positive feedback from 8Y.

During the project the opportunities for student autonomy, for the development of feelings of competency and for better relations with the teacher were evident due to the change in pedagogy. While the content remained the same as in previous years, the change in delivery had a major impact. Individual student preference was revealed as some chose to work alone, some to work with friends, and others to lie down on the tatami mats and work on listening tasks in small groups. There were no set seats, groups, or order of tasks on these days.

The student feedback reflected an appreciation for the change, including such comments as:

- 'This method is less structured which means you can learn through methods you like, and is therefore more enjoyable.'
- 'I enjoyed it all as it was fun and new. It was cool as we could use our computers and had to figure it out ourselves.'
- 'I liked that there was a baseline of two tasks for each topic.'
- 'It was independent and put more trust in students. I didn't dislike anything.'
- 'I liked the independent work because we could all learn at our own pace. It was different every lesson.'

The quality of the student responses varied, and further preparation of the students on what was required and why would be beneficial. There was a problem with some students not completing the survey (21% in 8Y and 23% in 8Z) due to their participation in an off-site school event in Phase 2. The majority of responses were in favour of the design (74% in 8Y and 69% in 8Z in Phase 3) but some of the responses contained mixed responses (both positive and negative aspects in the one comment) or random comments that were not related to the design (e.g., can we make sushi next term?). This made it difficult for me to fully understand the students' perception of the learning experience.

Conclusion

The aim of the Targets Project was to investigate the impact on student motivation and behaviour of student-centred content delivery. I designed a brief that aimed to reduce time in the classroom 'teaching' in a teacher-centred way, increase time connecting and communicating with individuals in the class, and increase opportunities for the students to make decisions about their learning, who they would work with and how they would demonstrate their progress.

The targets were designed to make student progress in Japanese more visible to the students themselves and the significant others in their community, such as parents. It also allowed the teacher to move into a role of encouragement and support as opposed to a position of control and direction. The language teachers at St Paul's Catholic College believe that learning a language is a skill that should be made accessible to all students. This differentiation strategy enabled us to provide a gateway to language for a greater range of students.

Recommendations

Whilst it was perceived as a preferable delivery model for the majority of the students involved in the experiment, further phases are necessary to determine whether the increased motivation levels could be sustained in the longer term or were simply a product of being a novelty for the participants. Including the other Japanese teacher and her three classes would also be the next logical step to determine if the design was applicable to other settings and if it would produce similar results. It would also be worthwhile to spend more time explaining the benefits of the target design to the students who are likely to be uncomfortable with it, for example the academically successful but passively inclined students. They could be made aware of the benefits to them such as developing skills in independent learning that they could apply if they continue to tertiary level studies. More accurate collection of student feedback such as increasing the return rate and training the students to avoid mixed responses (both positive and negative aspects in the one comment) or random comments that were not related to the design would also improve the validity of the findings for future teachers trialling the design.

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APPENDIX 1
Phase 1 Targets Sheet

Topic : Festivals p42 textbook				
Task number	Skill	Task	Date completed	Logged task with teacher
1	Culture	Read p42 of the textbook and complete questions on page 2 of the workbook		
2	Culture	Read p42 of the textbook and check your understanding on the <u>Kahoot</u> game listed on page 2 of the workbook. <u>Screen shot your result and show the teacher.</u>		
Topic : Talking about where you are from & where you live p43, 44 & Extn p49				
3	Reading & Writing	Read p43 of the textbook and complete questions on page 3 of the workbook.		
4	Listening	Complete listening task 1 on page 4 of your workbook		
5	Reading & Writing	Read p43 of the textbook and complete questions on page 5 of the workbook.		
6	Listening	Complete listening task 2 on page 6 of your workbook		
7	Reading & Writing EXTN	Complete the genius question on page 6 of your workbook		
8	Reading & Writing	Complete the ski challenge on page 8 of your workbook		
9	Culture	Watch the <u>videoclip</u> listed on page 7 of your workbook and answer the questions that follow.		
10	Reading & Writing EXTN	Read p49 of the textbook and complete questions on page 9 of the workbook.		
11	Speaking	Demonstrate in a pair that you can ask someone where they live.		
12	Speaking	Demonstrate in a pair that you can tell someone where you live.		

APPENDIX 2
Phase 2 Targets Sheet

JB1 Chapter 5 Targets Project

Name : _____ Class : _____

Task number	Points	Skill	Task	Date completed	Logged task with teacher
Topic : Review work					
1	5	Speaking	Ask the teacher or assistant the 3 questions you plan to ask the Japanese student as part of your assessment task.		
2	2	Speaking	In pairs, have a student ask you the question you plan to have the Japanese student ask you as part of your assessment. Answer the question in Japanese.		
3	2	Speaking	In pairs, ask a friend the question they plan to have the Japanese student ask them as part of your assessment.		
4	5	Reading	In pairs demonstrate that you can read and translate all the zodiac animal flashcards.		
5	3	Reading	In pairs demonstrate that you can read and translate all the family member flashcards.		
Topic : Food p52-54 textbook					
6	2	Culture	Read p52-54 of the textbook and complete questions on page 2 of the workbook		
7	2	Culture	Read p52-54 of the textbook and check your understanding on the Kahoot game listed on page 2 of the workbook. Screen shot your result and show the teacher.		
8	2	Culture	Watch the videoclip listed on google drive regarding dining etiquette and answer the questions on page 3 under "Dining etiquette"		
9	2	Culture	Refer to page 54 and answer the questions on p3 about ekiben .		