

Roles of Learning Resources in Multilevel Verbal communication class:

Focusing on Japanese Volunteers

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Interaction between Japanese language students and native speaker of Japanese has gained great attention in teaching Japanese as a foreign language. The significance of student and native speaker interaction aside from teacher instruction has been pointed out. Previous research regarding continual participation of native speakers has been conducted on monitoring activities (Kanekubo 1996) and visitor session (Nakai 2003), however, practical research on the roles of Japanese volunteers is still lacking.

This paper examines the effects of human resources in language learning by focusing on Japanese volunteers. Observations were made during two multilevel verbal communication classes conducted at a Japanese university. The classes included topics such as learning speech sounds, conversation, and presentation. The purposes of having Japanese volunteers in the classes were to 1) address of individual students' needs, 2) offer evaluation and oral variation of expressions learned in the classroom, and 3) provide networking opportunities.

The students were intermediate or advanced level, coming from various countries such as the United States, Korea, China, France and Thailand. Japanese volunteers belonging to the same university also participated. Each class had 4~5 volunteers, one per a group of 2~4 students. Different groups were formed for different activities.

The University web-site provided Japanese volunteers with information regarding volunteering and enrollment. The list of volunteers was shared with all the Japanese language instructors. 150 volunteers registered for the spring term of 2006. These volunteers were not expected to have specialized in Japanese language instruction. The selection of volunteers for the verbal communication classes was done on the basis of their availability, and on the condition of regular attendance.

In regards to the importance of interaction of human resources, most of the class hours were spent in group activities involving the Japanese volunteers. They gave the students natural input to supplement the textbook and handouts from the teacher. They

became partners for fluent communication, monitored the student's expressions, and gave students feedback and advice. Teacher feedback for individuals was mainly done by recording student's expressions and using comment sheets.

The main aim of the classes was to change the students understanding of learning verbal communication. Students expect to be taught, but these classes promote the attitude of learning from one's environment. The objectives of the classes were to 1) obtain knowledge of speaking (in phonetic and discourse level), 2) gain awareness of problematic issues in speaking and how to deal with them via various resources, 3) practice speaking, and 4) decrease anxiety and strain while speaking in Japanese.

A written survey given to the students revealed the significance of the role of Japanese volunteers in achieving all the above mentioned goals of the class. The Japanese volunteers were unexpectedly highly valued as a way to obtain knowledge. The students attached importance to forming friendships. The Japanese volunteers filled the roles of instructor, facilitator, resource person, model, native speaker of the target language, and co-learner during the class activities. The survey results demonstrate that the Japanese volunteers gave qualitative support to the students. These volunteers were also helpful in providing quantitative, frequent, immediate, and individualized communication.

Some unsuitable interaction between the Japanese volunteers and the students did occur. Examples are too much chatting and inappropriate feedback or explanations. A survey given to the Japanese volunteers showed that they mostly understood teacher intention, but their perceived obligation to clarify classroom instruction and explanations was greater than teacher expectation. They thought praising the students' efforts was important, however, many students did not share the same view.

Teacher should do the following to appropriately utilize Japanese volunteers: 1) clarify teacher expectations of Japanese volunteers, 2) moderate interaction between students and Japanese volunteers, 3) minimize the burden imposed on Japanese volunteers, 4) make the most of each Japanese volunteers specific characteristics, 5) help students be aware of available support they can gain by taking the initiative, and 6) keep a manageable the class size and seating arrangement. Teachers should also recognize the importance of Japanese volunteers' role in the class and ensure that Japanese volunteers participate regularly.

Other areas to investigate in the future are: Japanese volunteers in various classes, peer-learning, and other aspects of roles of human resources such as counselor.

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