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Enhancing Value Perception in the Japanese EFL Classroom

Raffini (1996) has proposed five psychoacademic needs (autonomy, competence, self-esteem, belonging/relatedness, and fun and enjoyment) the satisfaction of which "fuels" intrinsic motivation in an educational setting. However, the repeated failure to have these needs met may result in students forming entrenched self-defeating beliefs about language learning, learning in general, and themselves as learners, resulting in a lack of value perception in a course and/or activity that a student may be required to engage. Thus, even with an attempt by a teacher to satisfy these needs, a student's previously entrenched self-defeating beliefs may prevent her/him from perceiving value in the course or activity. Hence, what is necessary in order to reignite the motivational fire is a shift in beliefs and hence a shift in perceptions. How might teachers achieve such a seemingly difficult feat? This paper through the intertwining of anecdotal experiences and theory will demonstrate how teachers can affect positive change in the language classroom. Moreover, the anecdotal experiences are framed using the Kolb/Lewinian Experiential Learning Cycle, thus providing teachers with a means to investigate their own classrooms.

Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty.

- Albert Einstein

An Experience

Mr. Paine 1 is teaching English to a group of Japanese students in a required Japanese university English class. Many of the students are participating compliantly, yet they lack engagement in the task. Other students are obviously defiant, refusing to participate. A few students appear catatonic, staring blankly into space. To top it off, some students in this class are just outright nasty. Towards the end of this particular class, one of the students answers his cellular telephone in class and starts to speak. When Mr. Paine goes over to warn this student, the student responds in Japanese with a "shinê" (literally meaning, "die," but comparable to the F word in English).

What would you do in this situation?

Introduction

Albert Einstein's quote casts light on a very important role of teaching: that a lesson, course, or activity should actually be presented in such a way that students do indeed perceive it as a "valuable gift" - "and not as a hard duty." Yet perception is a tricky concept. Do perceptions lead to beliefs or do beliefs lead to perceptions? The following anecdote illustrates clearly that beliefs can indeed lead to perceptions - or in actuality can alter how we perceive reality:

When I first came to Japan approximately 14 years ago, I was teaching a private high school student the difference between "it is" and "they are." I asked him "What color is my shirt?" and he answered, "It is green." I asked him, "What color are my eyes?" and he answered, "They are blue." Since my eyes are brown, I was a bit surprised by his answer. I had him look very closely at my eyes but he still responded that they were blue. When I asked him in Japanese why he thought my eyes were blue, he responded that it was because I was an American and all Americans have blue eyes.

This student's belief that all Americans had blue eyes was strong enough to alter his perception of reality - a case of a misconception leading to a misperception. And while the above may be an extreme example, it might be said that to a certain extent we all do this. Our beliefs affect how we interpret and thus perceive reality. Hence, our beliefs can and do color our perception of reality: our conceptual map is not the territory of reality. In a similar manner, students' beliefs about themselves as learners, learning languages, and learning in general, will affect how they perceive our classrooms and themselves in it. Consequently, if there is a tendency for these beliefs to be negative, it is natural to expect their perceptions to be so also. Therefore, our goal as teachers should be to try to challenge students' self-defeating beliefs in order to shift possible negative perceptions into positive ones, i.e., to enhance their perception of value of what we have to offer them. While this may be easier said than done - "one's demolished self-concept is very hard to rebuild" (Dornyei 2001: 155) - it is not an utterly impossible task. Thus, the next question to ask here is "How does a teacher accomplish such a task?" The following story furnishes us with a simple analogy illustrating this process:

There once was a young man who had an old dog named Sandy. The young man had recently

become a vegetarian and he wanted to see if he could get his dog Sandy to eat carrots. However, if he just handed her the carrot, he quickly noticed that she would not eat it. Rather, by getting her to do a number of tricks and then giving her the carrot as a reward, she would eat it joyfully. From that day forward, this dog loved carrots.

Sandy had learned previously and had come to believe that to receive something of value (e.g., a biscuit or another snack), that she had to work for it - and the boy had used this concept to alter her perception of the carrot. If the carrot was just given to her, it was, in turn, not perceived as valuable. However, if that dog had to work in order to receive that carrot, then - in her eyes - it shifted to something perceived as containing inherent value.

In the same way, it is important for teachers - who seek deep learning engagement from students - to be able to enhance their students' perception of value in what the teacher is trying to offer them. In other words, in order to engage students in an activity, they must first perceive value in the activity itself. Moreover, students need to perceive value in attending a course as a whole in order to participate actively and enthusiastically in that course - and in some cases, to attend at all!

Perceived Value

While there are hundreds of research studies on motivation in language learning (for a complete discussion and comprehensive review of the literature, see Dörnyei 2001), there is virtually nil on the topic of perceived value. Thus, this paper seeks to draw attention to the element of value perception and thus position its importance in the motivation paradigm. While most references to this topic are concerned with business and marketing, Williams and Burden (1997) do, however, state the following:

An overriding principle that seems to have received too little attention in the debate about motivation is the perceived value of the activity to the individual performing it. The greater the value that individuals attach to the accomplishment of or involvement in an activity, the more highly motivated they will be both to engage in it initially, and later to put sustained effort into succeeding in the activity. This would appear to be true whether they are influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic reasons. (Williams and Burden 1997: 125)

An excellent teacher may have designed a five-star course for his or her students; and yet if those students do not perceive value in that course, they will not participate enthusiastically-or worse, they may not participate at all. In other situations, students may perceive value in the course taken as a whole, but may not appreciate the value of certain individual activities.

Many teachers that arrive in Japan out of graduate school bring with them a slew of great theories, techniques, and ideas, which they are excited to use in their new university positions. At the same time, many students come to Japanese universities after many years of arduous studies in what has come to be known as "Examination Hell." Many of these students are often "burnt-out" from studying and are looking forward to (what they believe is) their hard-earned, four-year moratorium

(Gittlesohn 1989, Stronach 1988, Sugimoto 1997), clearly presenting a challenging obstacle for our new teacher (and possibly some of the older ones too). So what is the well-intentioned and motivated teacher to do to reconcile the differences between these two opposing forces (the desire to teach and the resistance to learn)? End a ninety-minute class within the first twenty minutes after throwing up his or her hands in utter frustration and contempt for the students? (I have seen many teachers resort to this.) Or perhaps attempt to use a bit of reverse psychology?

The Japanese Higher Educational Context

The majority of Japanese students study English for a total of six years in junior high school and high school; and then if they go to university, usually for four more years. However, the mode of instruction is still predominantly grammar-translation with a good amount of time devoted to rote-memorization. For many students the motivation to study English is directed towards passing difficult entrance examinations that will hopefully propel them into a highly ranked university. It is said that once many of these students enter university, very little studying takes place with the university becoming no more than a leisure land or moratorium where students can take a break before entering the workforce ² (Hane 1996; Gittlesohn 1989; Stronach 1988; Sugimoto 1997).

What this equates to in the EFL class (though depending greatly on the university and the students majors) is that many students will adopt negative attitudes and hence a natural resistance towards the learning of English (not to mention their other subjects). Moreover, this resistance in general might be attributed to the lack of perception of value they have towards learning in a classroom setting.

Some Key Concepts

In order for the teacher to be able to engage their students in the learning process and enhance the value perception the students have of their courses, it is necessary for them to grasp some key concepts stemming from educational psychology. The key concepts introduced here are Empowerment and Engagement, Learned Helplessness, Compliance and Defiance, Resistance, Reciprocity, Control, Intrinsic Motivation, and Psychoacademic Needs.

Empowerment and Engagement

If we look at very young children engaged in the learning process, one thing that becomes salient is the fact that it is an extremely empowering process for them. Every time they learn something new, it empowers them to do so much more. Thus, it might be said that this feeling of empowerment that the child experiences is also highly motivating and propels him or her to learn an extreme amount of material in a very short time period. Another salient feature of this learning process for young children is that they have a feeling of control over it - and this feeling of control is often supported and facilitated by a parent or caregiver.

The learner is active - that is, 'a full participant in the activities, intellectually and emotionally engaged with the content and the teacher, making decisions, exploring and experimenting, exercising personal power. (Hewett and Nind, 1998, p. 89)

(Collins, Harkin & Nind 2002: 23)

Yet, what usually happens when a child enters school is that this control becomes subordinated to the teacher. And the child instead of being engaged in the learning process rather becomes focused on seeking the teacher's and/or the child's peers' approval, and avoiding embarrassing mistakes (Holt 1982). This results in the child (more often than not) becoming anxious and afraid. And "fear destroys intelligence" (Holt 1982: 92). Thus, his or her feelings of control are diminished and what was originally a sense of empowerment becomes its opposite: a sense of disempowerment. The child becomes disengaged and for many, the effect of this is to give up trying: to become helpless.

Learned Helplessness

The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology defines Learned Helplessness as "an apathetic attitude stemming from the conviction that one's actions do not have the power to affect one's situation" (2001: 1). Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, originally found that rats, upon repeated exposure to unavoidable electric shocks, became "unable to act in subsequent situations where avoidance or escape was possible" (2001: 1). In extending these findings to the human population, Seligman found that one's lack of control over his or her environment also undermines his or her "motivation to initiate responses" (2001: 1). Thus, one can expect an educational system that offers students very little choice or control over their own learning (or lives) to, in effect, teach these very students to become helpless and powerless - or in other words, to give them an it-can't-be-helped mentality. Thus, the belief of these students in their own powerlessness not only undermines their ability to act in a learning situation, but also color how they perceive that learning situation.

Compliance and Defiance: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Reactions to teacher control include compliance and defiance:

To the extent that a behavior is not autonomous it is controlled, and there are two types of controlled behavior. The first type is compliance, and it is compliance that authoritarian solutions hope to accomplish. Compliance means doing what you are told to do because you are told to do it.... The other response to control is defiance, which means to do the opposite of what you are expected to do just because you are expected to do it. Compliance and defiance exist in an unstable partnership representing the complementary responses to control. Where there is one, there is also the tendency for the other, even though one or the other is typically dominant within an individual. (Deci 1995: 3)

Often, students who comply get good grades while those that defy get the bad ones.

Resistance

Both of these reactions to control can be viewed as resistance to, and thus, a disengagement from the learning process. When students do not readily reciprocate what the teacher is trying to offer them, they are being resistant, and in resisting here we are implying either a passive resistance

(compliance) or active resistance (defiance). In effect, the students are not engaged in the learning process via their own volition.

Consequently, it can be expected that many students who have been force-fed English (especially through grammar-translation and rote memorization) for at least six years may indeed develop distaste for learning languages.

The notion of learners as resisters sees learners as people who do not want to learn but only do so because they are made to. Such a view has given rise to the commonly associated assumption that force or punishment is the most appropriate way of overcoming such resistance in the classroom. (Williams and Burden 1997: 68)

In the Japanese educational context, it might not be so much that many of the students are inherently resisters per se, but rather that the system creates resistance in many of its students.

*An alternative view, of course, is that children begin school full of desire to learn, but gradually, sometimes even rapidly, lose such desire as a result of their learning experiences (Holt 1964). The psychologist and educator William Glasser expressed this point particularly well in his book *Schools Without Failure: "Very few children come to school failures, none come labeled as failures. It is school and school alone which pins the label of failure on children" (Gasser 1969:26). (Williams and Burden 1997: 68)**

It might be concluded that the system creates apathy, and hence resistance in the classroom. Some insight into this process can be gleaned from the following warning offered by Raffini:

We can coerce students into memorizing their spelling lists with gold stars or a threat of staying after school, but their attention will be focused on earning stars or avoiding the punishment, rather than learning the value [italics added] and benefits of this activity." (Raffini 1996: 1)

In effect, when a student's attention is focused on an objective outside the activity itself (e.g. passing an entrance examination), it is then difficult for that student to attend to or perceive the value inherent in that particular activity.

Reciprocity

The opposite of resistance is reciprocity ³, in that learners reciprocate what the teacher is trying to offer:

There is an emphasis on reciprocation, that is, the importance of the learner reciprocating the intentions of the mediator or teacher. This means that the learner is ready and willing to carry out the task presented, and that there is an agreement as to what should be done and why. (Williams and Burden 1997: 68)

Therefore, how does the teacher go about reengaging students in the learning process and moving them from resistance to reciprocity? Naturally, it is necessary to make them feel once again that they have control over the learning process. Moreover, teachers need to understand what characterizes of an optimal learning situation. What is it that fuels motivation and furthermore what can be done to reignite that fuel? Because as we have seen above, Seligman's rats became unable to act, even when acting would have prevented the electric shocks.

The Relinquishing of Control

If teachers seriously seek to have optimal learning engagement in their classrooms, it is necessary for them to relinquish some of their control. The best way to accomplish this is by offering their students more choices. Paradoxically, by relinquishing some of this control the teacher can actually not only increase the initiative of the students but his or her own control in the classroom:

Using a set of sequentially arranged pictures, I was eliciting a story about them from the class. The students were expected to limit themselves to English that they could fully control. In this, I was following the theory that incorrect usages would establish themselves as habits. The story was rehearsed orally, and then used as a dictation exercise. One student, however, flatly refused to follow this procedure. He would have nothing to do with the rather ho-hum little narrative that the rest of us were laboring over. I sensed that if I insisted that he participate, it would lead to class disruption far out of proportion to "John and Mary's Beach Picnic." So I suggested that he create his own story. The effect was amazing. His attitude shifted from withdrawal to intense involvement, which resulted in an imaginative, spicy version of the story that amused all of us. (Stevick 1980: 20)

Thus, the teacher, by offering the student some choice and control over the activity, was able to shift the student's reaction from resistance to reciprocity (or "withdrawal to intense involvement").

Intrinsic Motivation and Psychoacademic Needs

Intrinsic motivation is defined by Raffini as "choosing to do an activity for no compelling reason, beyond the satisfaction derived from the activity itself-it's what motivates us to do something when we don't have to do anything" (1996: 3). In identifying what fuels intrinsic motivation Raffini has established five psychoacademic needs: (1) the need for autonomy, (2) the need for competence, (3) the need for belonging and relatedness, (4) the need for self-esteem, and (5) the need for involvement and enjoyment. Therefore, by fulfilling these needs, it should be possible for a teacher to reignite the fire of academic desire and turn resistance into reciprocity in the classroom.

For our helpless students, the satisfaction of the need for autonomy is the spark that should reignite the motivational flame, which could then continue to be fueled by the satisfaction of the other psychoacademic needs. The best way to achieve this is by giving students choices when possible, opposed to telling them what to do. ⁵ Through the satisfaction of this need, students learn to take responsibility for their actions. Moreover, they learn to make their own decisions and stand on their own feet as opposed to obeying others and/or conforming to the desires of others. It is about

"gaining power and control over their lives" (Raffini 1995: 5) and can thus be seen as a cornerstone to fostering empowerment and the democratic process in society.

The need for competence is satisfied when a student feels both challenged and successful. Thus, if a task is too difficult the result will be frustration and if the task is too easy the result will be boredom. Therefore, the difficulty level of the activity presented by the teacher needs to be adjusted so that the student will gain a sense of accomplishment.

The need for belonging and relatedness is met when the teacher fosters an emotionally secure and cooperative atmosphere as opposed to one that is emotionally alienating and competitive. A teacher can do this first by adopting an attitude that respects all the students as individuals via genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers) and secondly by giving the students ample opportunities to interact with and learn from their peers in the classroom.

The need for self-esteem is nurtured when students feel good about and see themselves as valued members of the classroom community. As above, the teacher needs to adopt an attitude of genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard towards the students.

Finally, the need for involvement and enjoyment is nourished when teachers make learning in their classrooms enjoyable and interesting. This can be achieved by way of the telling of jokes and anecdotes, the use of games, and the introduction of variety in the classroom. When students are having fun, they relax and learn better.

Mr. Paine's Experience 5 Continued

The Reflection

During the summer break, Mr. Paine reflected deeply on this experience in particular and on apathy in learning in general.

The Conceptualization

Through reflecting on this experience and drawing generalizations from other experiences he concluded as follows: "If students do not initially perceive value in the lesson, there is no way that I can prompt them to participate actively and enthusiastically in my class - no matter what I do."

The Experiment

Therefore, on the first day of the following semester, he went into the classroom and told the students the following:

I, as a teacher, do not want to teach students who do not want to learn and who will not participate in class. I know that some students do want to learn and do want to participate. However, the ones that don't are interfering with the ones that do. It is for this reason that I am giving each and everyone of you the option of not having to attend class and just taking the final examination at the end of the semester, which will be taken straight from the book. All you have to do is study this

book and I will base your grade strictly on the score you receive on the final examination. I am not angry. I just don't want to teach students that don't want to learn. It's plain and simple. Otherwise, it is just tiring for me!

He then asked each student one-by-one what he or she wanted to do (part of the deal was that they had to tell him then), and to his surprise, all of the students responded that they wanted to continue attending the class. From that that day on, the students' attitudes changed and the rest of the course went well. Perhaps, because the students no longer viewed the class as something they had to attend, but rather "chose" to attend, he was thus able to enhance their perceived value for the course.

Summary and Conclusion

In the above scenario, students were given an ultimate choice as to whether or not to take the class or to study on their own. ⁶ All of the students chose to take the class, which seems to have resulted in (1) a change in attitude towards the course, and (2) a change in behavior within the classroom. With regards to choice and the need for autonomy, Raffini states the following:

Individuals seek a quality of human functioning that has at its core the desire to determine their own behavior; they have an innate need to feel autonomous and to have control over their lives. This need for self-determination is satisfied when individuals are free to behave of their own volition-to behave in activities because they want to, not because they have to. At its core is the freedom to choose and have choices, rather than being forced or coerced to behave according to the desires of another. (1996: 3-4)

By giving the students a choice and hence some control, Mr. Paine was able to enhance the students' perception of value in taking his course. While his measures might be viewed as extreme, on the other hand it can also be said that extreme circumstances sometimes warrant extreme measures. This was a risk that Mr. Paine felt worth taking in using this technique ⁷. Mr. Paine felt that his teaching style and curriculum choice had been set to meet the students' other psychoacademic needs (self-esteem, self-competence, belonging and relatedness, and fun and enjoyment), yet it was by giving them the ultimate choice and satisfying their need for autonomy that he was able initially spark the motivational flame which thus continued to burn fueled by the satisfaction of the other psychoacademic needs. Thus, in doing so the perception of value was enhanced and maintained throughout the course.

This paper has focused on enhancing the perception of value of learning in the language classroom, and the role this plays in increasing motivation and enthusiasm for learning. The Experiential Learning Cycle was thus used to frame the experience in one language classroom, where the teacher sought to increase the level of perceived value his students had in his particular class. In this classroom experience, where students for the most part lacked a desire for learning the language as a whole, the teacher was able to increase the perception of value his students had of his course, and thus motivation, by initially satisfying the students' need for autonomy and control over

their own learning. Nonetheless, in order to sustain student motivation in such a class (and throughout life), the students' other psychoacademic needs (self-esteem, self-competence, belonging and relatedness, and fun and enjoyment) must also be met and maintained. It should thus be emphasized that what is essential here is that in meeting these needs students come to perceive themselves and the learning situation as containing the above elements. For if they do not, they may remain like the helpless rats in a cage.

End Notes

1. Mr. Paine here is a pseudonym.
2. This might be starting to change as Japan faces increasing unemployment and other economic problems.
3. Reciprocity is a major feature of Feuerstein's Theory of Mediation, which sees students' learning experiences, and hence progress, as mediated by significant others in several developmental domains: cognitive, emotional, and social. For a more complete description of his theory see Williams and Burden (1997).
4. I know of one teacher who (mistakenly in my opinion) imposed an all-English policy on his class and then complained of what he called the Zone of English (ZOE). He would walk around the classroom and as he came within a certain distance of his students they would switch from using Japanese to English (compliance). Once they were again out of his zone, they would switch again back to using Japanese (defiance). An alternative to this approach is to ask the students at the beginning of class to write down their goal for using English for that day and at the end of class to write down how much they actually spoke.
5. Here the Lewinian Experiential Learning Cycle (see Kolb 1984) is used to frame Mr. Paine's classroom experience and to illustrate the concept of perceived value. While not the subject of this paper, an understanding of Experiential Learning Theory is an extremely useful tool for teachers to use in researching their own classrooms and the natural learning process. In Experiential Learning Theory, one initially has an experience, reflects on that experience, form concepts based on that reflection, and finally tests the concepts via experimentation. This is repeated in a continuous spiral leading to higher degrees of complexity. Kolb in his book, *Experiential Learning*, describes the Lewinian Experiential Learning Model:

In the techniques of action research and the laboratory method, learning, change, and growth are seen to be facilitated best by an integrated process that begins with here-and-now experience followed by collection of data and observations about that experience. The data are then analyzed and the conclusions of this analysis are fed back to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behavior and choice of new experiences. Learning is thus conceived as a four-stage cycle.... Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a "theory" from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences. (1984: 21)

6. Some people may argue that this goes against the rules established by Japan's Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture. However, they fail to recognize that rules in Japan are as

much governed by the social constructs of omote and ura (on the surface and underneath the surface) and are moreover often bent to meet the contextual demands.

7. Technique as used here is in line with Brown's definition (1994: 160) as "any of a wide variety of exercises, activities, or devices used in the language classroom for realizing lesson objectives."

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