

Collection of Student Articles as a Case-study for the Acquisition of Discourse: Competence and Written Production in the Field of Japanese Language and Culture

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Abstract

The paper examines the application of David Little's Theory of Learner Autonomy in the raising of the level of efficiency in the process of teaching Japanese language and culture within the program of Japanese Language and Culture Studies at University of Belgrade. Originally, the autonomous learning paradigm is described only within the field of foreign language acquisition, and our contribution is that we apply its principles to the field of acquiring knowledge about culture as well. Furthermore, we propose to demonstrate how the knowledge acquired by learning about Japanese culture following the principles of Learner Autonomy achieves a deepening of students' general understanding, and also promotes and encourages their efforts in mastering the Japanese language in its different spheres of use. Correlating language and culture studies brings about an advance in the acquisition of the Japanese language, enabling the students to become aware of and comprehend the central position of their personal effort in the process of acquiring language skills. The results presented in this paper could serve as a useful model for the possible applications of cultural awareness in the raising of the level of foreign language acquisition.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Japanese Studies, discourse competence, written production, methodology

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the Collection of Student Articles as a case-study for the acquisition of discourse competence and written production in the field of Japanese language and culture, as well as a tool for the application of the autonomous learner paradigm in the field of culture studies, that is, a tool for connecting language and culture studies. The Collection (Markovic & Trickovic (ed.) 2013a) consists of 18 student articles and one article by the project organizers, on the topic of the methodology applied. The student articles are on the following subjects: Kimono, Japanese holidays, Kanji, Japanese horror films etc.

In this article we use the term *autonomous learner* with the meaning of a learner who has the ability to act autonomously in the process of supporting their own language learning; that is, to act independently but not simply on their own. The idea of the autonomous learner is now integrated in most language learning textbooks, but in practice it is often disguised under concepts such as 'Independent learning' or 'Critical thinking' or similar (Little 2007: p.14). In his explanation of *the*

autonomous learner concept during his lectures in Belgrade (as well as in some of his papers (Little 2007, 2009b etc.)), Professor David Little, emphasized that the autonomous language learner is independent not only in the sense of doing things on his own and for himself, but is also involved in the process of learning by setting his own new goals in second language acquisition (Little 2009a). We tried to implement this idea within the syllabus of Japanese Language and Culture Studies at the bachelor, master and doctoral level at the University of Belgrade.

Discourse competence is taken to be ‘the ability of a user/learner to construct sentences and arrange them in a sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language’ (*A Guide for Users*: p.32). At the B2 level *written production* is described as the ability of the user to ‘write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects’ they are interested in, and the ability to ‘write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view’ (*ELP*).

In this article firstly we will provide a short overview of the process of modernization of education practices in Serbia. Secondly, we will describe the circumstances that led to the publication of the Collection of Student Articles and the methodology applied. Finally, we will focus on the benefits that not only our students, but students in general can enjoy through the introduction of this methodology in their academic environment.

2 Modernization of Education in Serbia – The Position of Culture in Language Learning

After a long period of isolation that lasted more than ten years, during which the former Yugoslavia broke up, higher education in general in Serbia suffered from the lack of material and economic resources, which caused among other things a shortage of information concerning new trends and achievements in the scientific community. However, in 2000 the process of regeneration began and in conjunction with the Bologna reform that was undertaken at the level of the entire University of Belgrade we have now witnessed the re-emergence of the University of Belgrade as part of the international academic community.

In order to modernize language learning at the Faculty of Philology, the Faculty organized a series of lectures and seminars by leading professors in the field, such as David Little. At the seminars Professor David Little attempted to assist the staff of the Faculty in the reorganization of the entire system of language education and the application of different modules and paths in higher education that students can select as well as to provide instruction to language teachers on the manner in which to implement the concepts from the CEFR in the classroom.

3 The Collection of Student Articles – Reason and Methods

Keeping in mind the traditional understanding of philological science at our Faculty, we found it necessary to apply the principles of the autonomous learner, originally applicable solely to language

learning, not only to the acquisition of language, but to culture studies as well, combining the two.

Our main question was how to connect language learning with learning about culture and how to simultaneously apply the autonomous learner paradigm to both. The logical conclusion reached was that this could be achieved by using the target language to learn about culture. However, a major problem arose in our case, where the students were at the A1 level or lower of the target language. Therefore, we decided to have students write articles in their mother tongue on various topics regarding Japanese language or culture.

The second problem we had was the inadequate or insufficient training of the students in the area of academic writing in their mother tongue. At the undergraduate level students have numerous opportunities to write essays as part of the prerequisites for different exams and we decided to use this as a way of proactively fostering more effective written production in a foreign language when, eventually, other elements such as grammatical and lexical knowledge develop.

The students at the beginner level of Japanese language at our University were asked to select a subject in the field of either Japanese language or Japanese culture and to write a paper on it. The fact that the choice of topic was left to their own discretion¹ later proved to be extremely important for their motivation.² Our main aim was to assist them in learning how to collect, organize and present information, since the problem in the writing process was detected from interviews with students who revealed that they were not sure how to find and select important pieces of information about the chosen topic. Our inner belief was, and still is, that without learning how to do this, they would not be able to reflect about any other cognition and learning process, not to mention set targets in foreign language acquisition.

The methodology we implemented to lead them through the process was designed by us. The methodology itself is explained in detail in the article Markovic & Trickovic (2013b) added at the end of the Collection. The specific examples of every phase of the project, types of mistakes and the way of correcting them, coupled with the original impressions of the participants (some of them are translated here in the endnotes) are presented in the same paper. Our methodology involved dividing the whole process into three phases: the first – organizing the facts to be used in the article; the second – writing the paper and correcting it, in conjunction with learning how to recognize and correct mistakes; the third – assessing the skills acquired.

The first phase, in which the basic body of the text is formed, proved to be unexpectedly challenging. We were compelled to organize a series of interviews and discussions with the students. Students showed a lack of interest in writing and thought of it as a purely academic task with no practical applications. The interesting thing is that the same students were interested in learning to write essays in the foreign language they were studying, but could not grasp that the connection between the organization of thoughts, ideas and information and their physical arrangement in the text is a universal concept. They were also not aware of the importance of being able to write in the

prescribed way. This helped us a lot in subsequent years, as we were able to learn from these difficulties that the steps needed to organize the text in the first place would have to be explained extensively and plastically.

We also had to pay attention to the arrangement of information in the article. Even if they did not copy-paste directly, the students demonstrated a tendency to stick to the original organization of the pieces of information, which resulted in a patchwork of summaries of the works they had read. That is why we needed to show them how to critically read the text, and how to reorganize the information they collected. We did this by letting students physically divide different sets of pieces of information from the original source and arrange them by labels, creating what we called the ‘bone-structure of the text’. For example, if the topic was Japanese kimono, the different pieces of information about its tradition and history, or about its various forms, or about its design and so on had to be presented in a logical and organized way and ‘tradition’, ‘history’, ‘forms’ etc. became the subheadings or bones of the text containing information from various sources.

During the second phase of the project, the teacher directly led the student through correction. This mostly took the form of correspondence between the teacher and the student via email, using the option *Track Changes* in *Microsoft Word*. The correction process was done twice: the first time the basic structure of the paper was corrected, along with some fundamental logical inconsistencies and similar mistakes; and the second correction involved proofreading and finer alterations to the text. Errors were highlighted by the teacher. However, it was the students themselves who had to find solutions. This was the only way to ensure that they would comprehend where the problem lies.

In the third phase of the process, the students corrected the papers of their peers, in this way practically demonstrating that they had mastered the skill of recognizing mistakes in other people’s work, as well as showing the ability to replicate the method learned from the teacher. During this phase, students were urged to communicate amongst each other, not in their usual familiar way but as if they were talking to their future employers or other professionals. Their attention was directed to the linguistic and pragmatic methods and the way they were to give or receive criticism and discuss differing positions.

It became evident that this personalized method, in which mistakes are pointed out to the students, encouraging them to think about the specific ways in which they could be corrected, is far more useful than abstract theoretical discussion. Moreover, it turned out that the students were capable of understanding the theoretical explanations only after they had gone through the whole process of correction and evaluation of their own and someone else’s work. It was also apparent that the method which first explains a theory in detail, followed by its practical application is less efficient in this case. Thanks to this personalized approach the students developed the skill of critical reading, along with the ability to notice logical and language inconsistencies, which is crucial in their further academic improvement.

4 The Benefits of this Method

We believe that a teacher's role is to support the learners' autonomy by helping them learn how to play their part in the learning process in the most effective way.³ We think we, as teachers, should ask ourselves how we should present the conundrum, without providing the answer; how we should allow the students to discover the right way to conduct research, how to collect and organize pieces of information, how to comply with the requirements and how to produce original work in written or oral form. We should ask ourselves how we can be indirect so that our students can act directly and intuitively. The project presented here was all about these questions.

During this research project, which started in 2009 (Markovic & Trickovic 2009), students were encouraged to investigate Japanese language and culture, to deepen their understanding of them and to learn specific words related to their field of interest; further on, they were stimulated to communicate with each other in order to acquire a better awareness of the sociolinguistic aspects of the language; finally, they learnt how to write a paper, which is essential in their foreign language acquisition as soon as they approach the level B2 in written production. It is with this aim that the new methodology was introduced, and it was tested on several occasions by way of interviews and written comments.

Publishing the articles made the whole project even more action-oriented. This simultaneously created significant stimulus to the student's motivation,⁴ which is very fragile at the beginning of learning Japanese because of the slow pace of progress, due to the difficult writing system. At the same time, the students acted as real *social agents*, putting into use their language competence in real-life situations.⁵ The benefit of this undertaking was also that it provided our colleagues with a model for writing similar papers. Additionally, this Collection enriched the otherwise poor choice of literature on the subject of Japanese culture available in the Serbian language.

This enabled the students to be more strongly engaged with Japanese language and culture, along with providing a good basis for preparing them to be teachers of Japanese language, which has just recently started to be an elective subject in schools in Serbia. Even though the articles were written in the students' mother tongue, they learnt a lot about Japanese culture and language. They also learnt valuable vocabulary in Japanese related to the subject of their interest. By doing so, they prepared themselves for B2 written production requirements and now eagerly await the opportunity to produce similar papers in Japanese. This thirst for knowledge empowered them to set their personal target to new higher goal. Furthermore, the project demonstrated how the knowledge acquired by studying about Japan's culture, following the principles of learner autonomy, works to deepen students' understanding, to promote and encourage their personal effort in mastering the Japanese language in its different spheres of use.

¹ 'Knowledge is not seen as an end in itself but as the necessary basis for action. Skills and know-how are indispensable to bring knowledge into action. It is seen as an important aspect of language learning/teaching to enable learners to use language effectively in the active pursuit of skilled activities in which they have a keen interest' (*A Guide for Users*: p.27).

² Translation of the student's (Ognjen Simic) comment (from Markovic & Trickovic 2013b:p. 178):

'It was interesting because the theme was of our own choosing. I could write about something I was really interested in and about which I had already read a lot.'

³ '[Ability to learn] should be recognized as a learning objective, and methods for developing language learning ability should be developed and applied (cf. *Threshold Level 1990*, chapter 13)' (*A Guide for Users* : p.28)

⁴ Translation of the student's (Aleksandra Filipovic) comment (from Markovic & Trickovic 2013b: p. 177): 'I am very glad that you have paid so much attention to us, and pointed out our mistakes, both those fundamental and those minor. This writing was very useful, before the end of the academic year I have four more papers to write and now I have an idea how to write a serious article in general. And I like the idea it is going to be published, because that made me more motivated.'

⁵ 'Preparing people for active language use involves the full range of human capacities – the intellect, the emotions and the will as well as the exercise of practical skills. A complete view of language use and the language user must find a place for the whole person, but a whole person acting in a social context, as a 'social agent'. Of course, the use of this term does not mean reducing the full richness of the human personality to a dehumanized role-bearer, but rescues it from the complementary danger of individualistic, even solipsistic isolation.' (*A Guide for Users*: p.13)

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