The Use of a Participation Point System to Encourage More Proactive Learner Participation in Japanese University English Classes

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Key words: Participation points, motivation, communicative language Teaching, *meiwaku*, *iwareru*, *enryo*

Abstract

Japanese university learners of English are sometimes perceived to be reluctant to participate “proactively” in classes, in terms of answering and asking questions, giving opinions and volunteering for activities. This perceived reluctance is due in part to the effects of Japanese sociocultural norms, including *meiwaku* (not wanting to be an inconvenience to others), *iwareru* (not wanting to be spoken of by others) and *enryo* (self-restraint), as well as differences between typical Western and Japanese philosophies of education.

This paper explores the idea of adopting a participation point system (PPS) in order to encourage more proactive learning behaviors. It is argued that proactive learning is both necessary and desirable when considering the logistics of Japanese university classrooms, conditions established by Communicative Language Teaching, and expectations of Western English teachers.

Both the observations of the teacher-researcher in this study, and the results of a survey administered to the learners, suggest that the PPS described here is effective in encouraging a more proactive approach amongst learners in Japanese university English language classrooms, thereby leading to more exposure to genuine communication and further language learning opportunities. The results of the study are discussed, and recommendations for teaching practices are suggested.
概要

英語の授業への積極的な参加には、授業中の質問、質問への回答、意見の発表、そしてアクティビティへの参加等が考えられるが、日本人大学生は授業に積極的に参加することに消極的であるように見受けられる。この消極性は、「迷惑をかけてはならない」「言われる（言われてはならない？）」、「遠慮しなければならない」という日本の社会文化的規範の影響であると同時に、欧米と日本の教育理念の違いが原因であると考えられる。

本論文では、より積極的な学習態度の促進を目的として、「授業参加ポイント制度」(PPS)の導入について調査する。日本の大学における講義計画、コミュニケーション・ランゲージ・ティーチングに基づく条件、欧米出身の英語講師が持つ期待を考慮すると、積極的な学習態度は必要かつ望ましいと言える。

英語授業への PPS 導入について英語学習者の考えを明確にするため、回答者である英語学習者（n = 85）に対して調査票調査を実施し、特に、PPS に授業中の質問、質問への回答、意見の発表、そしてアクティビティへの参加を促進する効果があるかを検討した。

調査の結果、PPS に対する態度は概ね良好であった。回答者の大半が「ポイント制度があると、授業中に質問しようという気持ちになる」（48人、56.4%）、「ポイント制度があると、授業中に出された問いに答えよういう気持ちになる」（58人、68.3%）、「ポイント制度があると、自分の意見を言おうという気持ちになる」（45人、53%）、「ポイント制度があると、授業中のアクティビティに参加しようという気持ちになる」（43人、50.6%）という4項目について、「非常にそう思う」または「そう思う」と答えた。従って、回答者の大半が「PPS は授業への積極的な参加を促進する効果がある」と感じていることが明らかになった。

上述の通り、回答者の大半が自身の授業参加態度に PPS が良い影響をもたらしたと判断したものので、学習者全員の見解が一致したわけではない。PPS の単独導入が、日本の社会文化的規範に強く影響された学習者の行動に変化をもたらすとは限らない、という認識が必要である。

本論文で検討される授業参加ポイント制度は、英語の授業で遭遇する学習意欲問題を完全に解決しうるものではない。第2言語の習得において学習意欲問題は複雑かつ困難な問題である。PPS は解決の余地になり得るが、これだけに依存せず、一般的に適用されているその他手段と共に活用されるべきである。
Introduction

This paper explores the idea of adopting a “participation point system” (PPS) to encourage more proactive learner participation in Japanese university English classes. The PPS is designed to encourage Japanese university learners of English to ask and answer questions, give opinions, volunteer for activities, and generally take on more proactive roles in their English language classes.

In Section 1 of this paper, I discuss the factors that make proactive participation in Japanese university English classes both necessary and desirable, including the logistics of such classes, conditions established by the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, and the expectations of Western English teachers.

In Section 2, I discuss factors present in Japanese university classrooms that can prevent learners from participating proactively, including a tendency in Japanese culture toward collectivism in group interactions, the cultural phenomena of iwareru, meiwaku, and expectations of Japanese English learners.

In Section 3, I describe and evaluate the participation point system, and give details of how it can be implemented.

In Section 4, I summarize my observations of the effects of the PPS, and discuss whether it has been successful in helping to encourage more proactive language learners. I also present and discuss the results of a survey administered to students designed to reveal their attitudes toward the PPS.

Finally, in Section 5, I provide a conclusion to the foregoing discussion, and offer some recommendations for English teaching practices in Japanese university classrooms.

1. Factors which make proactive participation in Japanese university English classes both necessary and desirable

1.1 Logistics of Japanese university English classes

Japanese university English classes usually contain a large number of students. Twenty-five to thirty students in a class tends to be the norm, and up to forty or fifty students is not unusual. At J. F. Oberlin University, where this research was carried out, there tend to be 20 to 25 students per class for “core” English lessons. One class, or koma, is usually 90 minutes
long, which would give each student only 3 to 4 minutes of the teacher’s time if he or she were to divide it equally between them.

To do so would obviously not be an efficient use of class time, and class sizes and durations usually necessitate a good deal of large group and whole-class interactions. Examples might include requiring students to feed back answers to previously set questions, summarize thoughts and opinions about issues being addressed, take part in example role-plays, and model language learning activities.

The latter example is especially pertinent when we consider the axiom “don’t explain; demonstrate”. Teachers can spend a considerable amount of time trying to explain an activity which would be much more quickly and much better understood when demonstrated by volunteers from the class.

All of these practical factors—time limits, group sizes, the need to demonstrate rather than explain—make proactive participation on the learners’ behalves a necessary prerequisite for smooth and successful English lessons at Japanese universities.

1.2 Conditions established by Communicative Language Teaching

CLT is the currently accepted approach to English language teaching (Knight, 2007). CLT requires learners to have meaningful interactions in the target language, and as much exposure to genuine communication as possible. Asking questions (whether of the teacher or of classmates), giving opinions, and responding to the opinions of others inevitably leads to more chances for exposure to genuine communication. Exposure to genuine communication leads to increases in communicative competence and further chances to communicate, creating a virtuous cycle of language learning. In this sense, “willingness to communicate” is a necessary prerequisite for acquiring communicative competence (Cao and Philip, 2006).

The CLT approach is in line with the goal of the English Language Program at J. F. Oberlin University, which is to provide students with “a foundation in the English language suitable for communication in an increasingly interconnected international community” (J. F. Oberlin University, 2013, p. 5).

CLT also emphasizes the importance of personalization in language learning activities. Personalization is important as it ensures communication is genuine. Unless we have already discussed the issue, I genuinely do not know whether a student prefers classical or heavy metal music. A real information gap is created, which the student is expected to fill by expressing their opinions, describing their experiences, or stating their preferences.
CLT also requires learners to take risks and speak up even when they may not be sure of the grammatical formation for a particular utterance. Risk-taking is important as it allows learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage (when errors are corrected or recast by the teacher), or focus on developing fluency (when errors are tolerated by the teacher).

Willingness to communicate, personalization in language activities, and a willingness to take risks, all imply a need for proactive participation, in the form of answering and asking questions, giving opinions, and speaking up even when unsure of correct grammatical formations. These practices are necessary for language learning to take place in CLT-based language classrooms.

1.3 Expectations of Western English teachers

Proactive participation in lessons by way of asking questions, contributing to the classroom dialogue, and volunteering opinions is seen as a trait of a good student in Western education. The situation in American classrooms in summarized by Saito and Robinson:

As soon as the teacher mentions a topic, whoever is quickest hits it back, and an exciting discussion starts. Even if people in the class are close friends, it is easy to disagree with another person’s opinion. (Saito and Robinson, 1995, p. 9)

The aim of such an approach is to create “stimulated” students who are “attentive, intelligent, and expressive” (Miller, 1995, p. 32 citing Rohlen, 1983, p. 245).

The Western style of conversations, in classrooms and elsewhere, has often been compared to a game of tennis. One player introduces a topic by hitting the ball, another player hits it back. Players do not wait for a chance to speak, they take it, each time trying to give the conversation topic “a new twist, an original spin or a powerful smash” (Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982, p. 81).

For Western English teachers wishing to bring about opportunities for “genuine” communication (see above, 1.2) — and by implication learners wishing to take advantage of such opportunities — it is not just the content of the conversation, but also the style that matters.
2. Factors preventing proactive participation

2.1 Collectivism in group interactions

The difference between group interactions in Western versus Asian classrooms is often characterized by the distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures. Western students, it is said, are raised to be individualists, and are encouraged to publicly express their thoughts even when they may differ from the general consensus. Asian students, on the other hand, grow up in a collectivist culture, and are dissuaded from speaking their minds when doing so may deviate from the norm (Hofstede, 2001).

Recent research tends to suggest that the distinction is not as simple as this in Japan. Konsky, Eguchi, Blue, and Kapoor (1999) failed to find a clear-cut preference for collectivist values over individualist values in the Japanese subjects they tested, whilst Kobayashi, Kerbo, and Sharp (2010) found their Japanese subjects to be both less collectivist and less individualist than their American counterparts.

However, there is enough evidence in other studies (Eisenstadt, 1996; Jansen, 2000; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004), as well as anecdotal experience, to persuade us that some Japanese learners will tend to gravitate towards collectivist values, and that in doing so, they may be less willing to speak up in English classes.

2.2 Iwareru and meiwaku

The cultural phenomena of iwareru and meiwaku can have a significant impact on the extent to which Japanese learners of English feel able to proactively participate in lessons. Basically defined, iwareru means to be spoken of by others, and meiwaku means to be an inconvenience to others (Clark, 1983). Both are undesirable conditions that Japanese learners will do their best to avoid.

Both iwareru and meiwaku have an effect in the language classroom when it comes to learners asking and answering questions and giving opinions. Japanese learners may feel that they are being an inconvenience to others (meiwaku) when asking questions, and therefore may often refrain from doing so. This anxiety arises from the belief that the majority of the other learners probably already understand the point or know the answer to the question being asked, and therefore to ask it is to waste valuable lesson time and to be an inconvenience to others (Saito and Robinson, 1995).

Fear of becoming iwareru also applies when answering questions, in the sense that other
students who may not know the answer may think that the answerer is showing off. However, this fear must be balanced with the equally undesirable situation of nobody answering the question, which would be *meiwaku* to the teacher. Expressing opinions is also problematic where the opinion is given before a general consensus is reached. Divergent opinions are considered *meiwaku* to others and cause the giver to become *iwareru* (Saito and Robinson, 1995).

### 2.3 Expectations of Japanese university English learners

If in traditional Western classrooms, the teacher expects their students to be “attentive” and “expressive” by way of speaking up and offering their opinions, perhaps even interrupting their classmates to do so, the expectation in Japanese classrooms may well be the exact opposite:

> Japanese tradition emphasizes the lecture format in high school, rather than a discussion format, because information loading — not the development of critical thinking skills or facility in self-expression — is the central goal of instruction” (Miller, 1995, p. 32 citing Rohlen, 1983, p. 245)

Indeed, individuals who hold back their questions and their opinions, in line with the Japanese concept of *enryo* or “self-restraint”, may well be perceived as “model students” in Japanese classrooms (Miller, 1995). The idea of self-restraint is so strong that a reluctance to state one’s own opinions, desires, wishes and preferences may even prevail when a student is asked directly by the teacher to do so (Kobayashi, Kerbo, & Sharp, 2010). Students starting their studies at a Japanese university but entering Western style language learning classrooms may be as surprised at what they are expected to do as their teachers are at their apparent reluctance to do so. However, in the majority of cases it is clear that “student’s reluctance to respond quickly is a deeply ingrained response which accords with sociocultural norms” (Miller, 1995, p. 32) and is therefore not easy to overcome.

Ultimately, Western teachers, and Japanese university freshmen — inculcated by their experiences at Japanese high schools — will often be on a completely different page when it comes to what kind of activities and interactions are expected to take place in a typical English language class.
3. A participation point incentive scheme to encourage proactive learner participation in English language classes

3.1 Description

The participation point system (PSS) developed by the author of this paper is not intended to completely bridge the divide between Western and Japanese philosophies of education. However, it can act as a stepping stone toward some kind of reconciliation, and hopefully encourage learners to overcome their anxieties and become proactive learners in the way described above in Section 1.

At its foundation, the PPS is very simple, and operates as follows:

1) Desirable behaviors (answering or asking questions, giving opinions, volunteering for activities, etc.) are assigned a point value;
2) Students who engage in desirable behaviors are rewarded with a physical representation of the point value (coins or tokens);
3) At the end of each lesson, the number of points received by each student is tallied up;
4) Special prizes are awarded at the end of each semester for the students with the most points;
5) The value of points may also count toward students’ final grades.

The PPS is essentially behavioristic, but this fact in itself does not automatically impugn its value. As other teacher-researchers (Hadley, 2001; Jeffrey, 2003) have found, the system has a positive effect, and is not designed to “control” or “dominate” students, but rather “to encourage them to overcome their psychological barriers to communicating in English [and] their basic fear of making mistakes” (Jeffrey, 2003).

3.2 Implementation

The PPS was implemented in four English language classes, two of which focused on core reading and writing skills, and two of which focused on core speaking and listening skills. All four classes were delivered broadly in line with the CLT approach (described above, 1.2). It is worth noting that this PPS could also be utilized in classes other than those focusing on language teaching. Any kind of class where the teacher wishes to promote proactive
participation amongst the students could benefit from the use of this PPS.

As with most point systems, one of the most challenging aspects is in keeping a record of the points that have been awarded. Using physical tokens to represent the points can help in this regard, and also increase students’ motivation further as they can hold their points in their own hands and “look at them with a sense of achievement” (Jeffrey, 2003, p. 2).

Almost anything can be used to represent the points: marbles, coins, poker-chips, slips of paper, etc. In my system I purchased some inexpensive plastic “gold” coins (Figure 1), which add to the sense of fun and achievement.

In my PPS, the basic behaviors rewarded with points are answering or asking questions, giving opinions, and volunteering for activities, especially in large group or whole-class situations. Other behaviors are assigned a point-value on an ad hoc basis. If students are very reluctant to participate, the point-value of behaviors can be increased as required. Certain behaviors, for example modeling role-plays in whole-class situations, may be awarded much higher point values than other activities, such as writing answers to questions on the whiteboard.

Because the points are physical, a physical method of distribution is also required. This has been noted as one of the most troublesome aspects of other PPS’s, with Jeffrey (2003) noting:

One problem with the PPS is that it takes a lot of energy to move around the classroom distributing points. After three forty-five minute classes in succession I feel I have had a fairly extensive physical workout. (Jeffrey, 2003, p. 3).
One way of overcoming this problem is to get the students themselves to distribute the points where possible. Points can even be awarded to the students distributing the points, to acknowledge their effort in assisting with classroom management. In smaller groups, piles of coins can be placed between the students, with each student taking a coin for themselves every time they ask or answer a question. Students are generally good at self-moderating, and instances of cheating or dishonesty are usually rare.

At the end of each lesson, students line up and “cash in” their points. Other students are assigned roles as point collectors. An iPad with a simple spreadsheet application is used to record the number of points for each student. As points are entered on a week-by-week basis, a cumulative total is automatically generated, eliminating the need for further paperwork by the teacher. A formula for converting the number of points received into a percentage of each student’s final grade can also be input into the spreadsheet application.

4. Is the PPS effective in encouraging more proactive language learners?

4.1 Teacher’s observations

The observational evidence for the effectiveness of PPS’s such as the one described in this study is compelling. In my own classes, I have observed students engaging in a much higher number of desirable behaviors (answering and asking questions, giving opinions, volunteering for activities) compared to classes conducted prior to implementing a PPS. The time between a question being asked, and a student responding, has been noticeably reduced.

The observational evidence gained from this study, and others like it (Jeffrey, 2003; Hadley, 2002; Bess & Bess, 2002) suggests that participation point systems can be highly effective in helping students overcome their anxieties and become more proactive language learners.

4.2 Students’ attitudes towards the PPS

A survey was administered to the students (n = 85) which aimed to reveal their attitudes toward the PPS utilized in their English classes, particularly regarding its effectiveness in encouraging them to ask and answer questions, give opinions, and volunteer for activities. Students were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with the following four statements:
1) Getting participation points encourages me to ask questions
2) Getting participation points encourages me to answer questions
3) Getting participation points encourages me to express my opinions
4) Getting participation points encourages me to volunteer for activities
   (e.g. modeling role-plays in front of my classmates)

Students were able to select from a Likert scale of five responses: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. The survey was professionally translated into Japanese in order to ensure comprehension. The English version of the survey is provided in Appendix 1, and the Japanese translation in Appendix 2. The results of the survey are presented below.

As we can see from the results of the four survey questions below (Figure 2 to Figure 5), the students’ attitude towards PPS is generally positive. The majority of students agree or strongly agree that the PPS is effective in encouraging them to ask questions (48 students, 56.4%), answer questions (58 students, 68.3%), express opinions (45 students, 53%) and volunteer for activities (43 students, 50.6%). The majority of students therefore feel that the PPS is effective in encouraging them to become more proactive language learners in the sense described in this paper.

However, the PPS is clearly not 100% effective in encouraging these behaviors in all students. Further methods of motivation would need to be explored, and additional studies conducted, in order to ascertain how best to encourage such students to overcome their anxieties and become more proactive language learners.

Figure 2:
A chart to show the extent to which students agreed with the statement “Getting participation points encourages me to ask questions”
Figure 3:
A chart to show the extent to which students agreed with the statement “Getting participation points encourages me to answer questions”

Figure 4:
A chart to show the extent to which students agreed with the statement “Getting participation points encourages me to express my opinions”

Figure 5:
A chart to show the extent to which students agreed with the statement “Getting participation points encourages me to volunteer for activities (e.g., modeling role-plays in front of my classmates)”
5. Conclusion

The PPS described in this paper is one possible way of encouraging more proactive learning in Japanese university English language classes, and any other classes where the teacher wishes to promote more proactive participation amongst the students. However, although the majority of students surveyed deemed the PPS to have a positive impact on their own participation, such a view is not unanimous amongst all the students.

Additionally, English language teachers at Japanese universities need to be aware of the cultural considerations explored in this paper (Section 2), and acknowledge that the apparent reluctance evident in some students to participate proactively in class may be the result of deeply ingrained sociocultural norms. A PPS alone may not always be effective in helping students to change behaviors that have been instilled by such norms.

Teachers wishing to adopt a PPS in their own class also need to acknowledge that it can be a time-consuming endeavor, although in the opinion of this researcher, the hard-work in administering the system is worth it in terms of the increased proactivity the system brings about in the learners.

Bibliography


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Appendix 1:
 Survey administered to students (English version)

Please indicate the extent of your agreement with the following statements about the use of “participation points” in your English classes:

1. Getting participation points encourages me to ask questions:
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree

2. Getting participation points encourages me to answer questions:
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree

3. Getting participation points encourages me to express my opinions:
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree

4. Getting participation points encourages me to volunteer for activities (e.g. modeling role-plays in front of my classmates):
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree
Appendix 2:
Survey administered to students (Japanese version)

英語授業内の「授業参加ポイント」制度について、あなたの考えを聞くせてください。

1. ポイント制度があると、授業中に質問しようという気持ちになる。

□ 非常にそう思う
□ そう思う
□ どちらでもない
□ そう思わない
□ 全くそう思わない

2. ポイント制度があると、授業中に出された問いに答えようという気持ちになる。

□ 非常にそう思う
□ そう思う
□ どちらでもない
□ そう思わない
□ 全くそう思わない

3. ポイント制度があると、自分の意見を言おうという気持ちになる。

□ 非常にそう思う
□ そう思う
□ どちらでもない
□ そう思わない
□ 全くそう思わない

4. ポイント制度があると、授業中のアクティビティに参加しようという気持ちになる（例：他の生徒の前でロールプレイに参加する等）。

□ 非常にそう思う
□ そう思う
□ どちらでもない
□ そう思わない
□ 全くそう思わない