Incorporating self-assessment practices into a college Japanese language course: investigating the effectiveness on students’ learning

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This paper reports on a study that investigated the effectiveness of students’ self-assessment practices incorporated into a Japanese conversation course at a university in Korea. Findings from the students’ self-analysis reports, self-reflection sheets, end-of-semester subject questionnaires and follow-up interviews suggested that the self-assessment practices had positive effects on promoting learner-autonomy and motivation, and increasing learners’ self-confidence in speaking Japanese. This study outlines the rationale of self-assessment and procedures of the self-assessment practices implemented in the Japanese course, analyzes the findings from the self-assessment practices, and finally suggests that self-assessment practices should be incorporated into the classroom.

Key words: self-assessment, learner-autonomy, self-confidence, motivation, OPI

1. Introduction

During recent years, foreign language classrooms have moved away from traditional teacher-centered method toward learner-centered teaching. In the learner-centered approach, students become active agents in their learning. Learner-centered teaching challenges instructors to release some of their control over the class and what happens within the classroom during the lesson. They must be concerned with more than just content; treat student errors as learning opportunities; and change their role from distributors of knowledge to facilitators of learning. In foreign language classrooms many language teachers have utilized a variety of learner-centered methodologies to enhance student learning. However, these methodologies ignore the value of learner-centered assessment. While a great deal of time and energy has been devoted to developing methods and techniques of learner-centered teaching, not as much attention has been focused on learner-centered
assessment. As Nunan (1988) suggested, in learner-centered teaching, faculty should not solely evaluate and grade student work, but assessment activities that involve students should also be included in the process.

In a foreign language context, developing and assessing learners’ speaking skill is one of the most important parts of language teachers’ jobs but it may be challenging, especially in the university foreign language speaking course in which a scaled grading system is used to differentiate students. As an instructor of a third- and fourth-year advanced Japanese speaking course at a university, I faced challenges in terms of both grading and students’ motivation. Learners in the class often have very different speaking abilities because exposure to and interaction in the Japanese language outside the classroom tend to vary greatly. Thus, students who did not have many opportunities to speak Japanese outside the classroom feel intimidated by their more proficient peers who have already studied or traveled to Japan. These students seem to lose motivation to actively participate in oral class activities and some of them finish low in the final rank order. The other challenge is that some of the students who are quite fluent in Japanese tend to be reluctant to participate in oral activities in the classroom because they usually do well in oral performance exams without making much effort. Their primary concern is not to improve their speaking ability but rather to earn a moderate grade.

Self-assessment practices were introduced as a response to this problematic situation. In these practices, the learner is at the center of the assessment process. Assessment should be seen as a means to help learners promote their learning, not just a means to grade students. The desired effect was that this learner-centered assessment process would encourage students to participate more actively in class activities by conducting personal goal setting to promote independent learning and by raising the learners’ consciousness about their own learning.

2. Rationale

2.1 Self-assessment in foreign language learning

Recently, learner-centered assessment is considered a highly-valued practice in foreign language pedagogy and various non-traditional forms of assessment have been used in foreign language classrooms. These are often referred to as alternative assessments and include student portfolios, peer-assessments, self-assessments, and so on. Such alternative assessments are applied in the field of education in Japanese as a foreign language and many studies show the effectiveness of alternative assessments (Kawamura 2005; Thomson 2008; Yokomizo 2002).