

It's All in the Cards: Using Playing Cards to Lower Student Stress and Use Time Efficiently in Class

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Abstract: *In Japan, university students arrive at their universities after spending 12 years in public education. During that time, they have been taught to be passive receptors of information rather than active seekers of it. This situation mirrors many Japanese cultural traits, which value quiet conformity and obedience. It is a persistent problem, which numerous position papers from the national Ministry of Education encouraging student autonomy and participation in their own education have failed to fully solve.*

Upon entering university they may encounter professors (particularly those from foreign countries) who expect a very different kind of student and teach a very different kind of class. Foreign professors often seek to teach a communicative style that relies on student participation, volunteering information, and frequent changes of partners and groups. The resulting confusion and clash of values can cause discomfort for both sides, as well as waste valuable class time.

This presentation will demonstrate specific techniques which can break down the physical and psychological walls between student passivity and activity. Through the use of playing cards, many of the above problems can be solved and students are able to successfully make the transition from being taught to learning. Many teachers use cards to play various games, but few recognize their potential value as tools of classroom management which can eventually guide students in the direction of becoming autonomous learners.

Keywords: *learner autonomy, classroom management*

Introduction

Japanese students arrive in university woefully unequipped to deal with second language learning as it is understood in most countries. They have spent years studying for entrance exams which will gain them entry to universities. These exams focus almost exclusively on discrete facts and rely on students' ability to memorize rather than to think. These are impediments to effective language learning which must be addressed in order for students to make progress.

Foreign teachers, on the other hand, often arrive in Japan looking for opportunities for cultural exchange. However, this generally only highlights what Hinkel (2007) describes as the “four Fs”: Food, Festivals, Folklore, and Facts. These are the obvious, visible elements of culture that often are cited in textbooks and lessons. Few teachers consider the impact of culture in the classroom, and on how they approach their students and lessons. The hidden aspects of culture, which are often more significant in interpersonal behaviour and interactions, are all too often ignored. This paper hopes to bring these elements into focus, and also to introduce specific methods to overcome them through effective classroom control techniques.

The Cultural/Psychological Environment

Language learning, by its nature, is a messy and often frustrating experience. It is also very psychologically complex, with relationships between student and student, student and teacher, and even student and self all playing a role. Williams and Andrade (2008) found that the teacher was the cause of anxiety for a majority of students. Situations in which the teacher called on the student to answer, asked the student to speak in front of others, and spoke in a way that the student could not understand what was being said were major causes of anxiety. In short, requests for student output and processing of information were most often the causes of student unease.

Many of these issues can be traced back to previous experiences in junior and senior high school. In spite of Ministry of Education guidelines which emphasize the use of English as a tool for globalization and international communication, there has been little change in the way that English is taught. Nishino and Watanabe (from Wagner 2013) found that classes are still highly structured and teacher centred, with little or no time devoted to developing actual communication skills. As a result, students enter university with a six year history of language lessons in which spontaneity and communication were largely ignored.

Often, students who learn best are risk takers and gamblers, those who allow function to supersede form in their approach to language. However, these are attitudes that run counter to many cultural norms that are deeply held in Japan. Hammond (2007) noted that Japanese school culture is one of the greatest impediments to language learning, particularly at the junior and senior high school levels. Classrooms in Japan emphasize a quest for correctness rather than a search for knowledge. Traditionally, language classes have been conducted using a grammar and translation method which both fulfils Japanese cultural desires for certainty and also prepares students for high risk exams which determine entrance to colleges and universities. Yashima et al (2013) discovered that a very low tolerance for ambiguity among language learners was a key factor in contributing to student anxiety. This teaching style also encourages students to rely on their teachers for explanations and translations of the class material rather than seek this information themselves. Thus, when they encounter (often for the first time) a language class taught by a native speaker almost exclusively in English which does not offer such support, they suffer anxiety, nervousness, and even fear (Yashima et al, 2013).

Another factor that impacts the classroom is the communicative style that Japanese students learn during their public education. Anderson (1993) noted four primary characteristics of this style, the most relevant of which to language learning is the belief that the listener bears responsibility for understanding what is said. This runs counter to most western cultures, in which the speaker feels the onus to be understood. Thus, a teacher who suddenly calls on a student to answer a question is putting a great deal of pressure on that student. Given that the student feels pressure to understand, they may simply shut down and freeze. They also may feel too embarrassed to ask for clarification and instead wait mutely for the teacher to repeat the question. Another possible outcome is that the student will turn away from the teacher to consult with his/her peers about the question and the possible answers. Finally, the student may seemingly ignore the teacher and wait until another student is selected.

A teacher who is unprepared for this situation may inadvertently exacerbate it. They may attempt to recast the question in a form that they think the student will understand which will only lead to further confusion. Now the student has TWO questions to deal with. The teacher may feel ignored or disrespected if the student either doesn't answer or seeks advice/counsel from their peers before answering. The same if the student responds with a blank stare or a sideways tilt of the head. None of these situations are conducive to language learning.

In short, teachers who seek classrooms which feature traditional western notions of learner autonomy are often frustrated with their classes. Iimuro and Berger (2010) suggested a need for "guided autonomy", which needs to be carefully nurtured and seen as a long term goal. Since language learning is above all a social activity (ibid.), the following activities are designed to create a classroom atmosphere that subtly encourages student autonomy while at the same time lowers their stress level.

Uses for Trump Cards in Class

1. Cards for Seating

The physical act of entering the classroom and finding a seat is one that can immediately cause panic in students. This is particularly true in first year students, who are still in the process of forming friendships with their fellow students and are also coping with the stress of finding their way around a new environment (the university campus). Further, as students begin to form bonds and groups, it is entirely possible that some students are excluded from participating due to their lack of confidence or social skills. They may hesitate to sit next to or near students they do not know. Those who do know each other will sit together in groups, which can in turn cause discipline issues in the classroom. The students may chat, laugh, or otherwise engage in behaviour that is not conducive to learning. Other students will make the conscious decision to sit on the periphery of the classroom, either at the back or towards the sides. This is a clear signal to others that they do not wish to be disturbed, and also a signal to the teacher that they are not

interested in the class.

To alleviate these issues, trump cards can be used to assign seating in the class. For small classes (fewer than 25 students), the teacher simply puts a trump card on each desk. At the same time, the teacher keeps a second, similar card in a separate deck. For example, for each red seven card on a desk (seven of hearts or diamonds), the teacher reserves the other red seven card in a deck. Be sure to NOT put both red sevens on desks! When students enter the room, they are given a card from the teacher's deck and told to find the corresponding card in the classroom, which will be their assigned seat. A student who enters and is given a black nine, for example, sits at the desk which has a black nine on it. For larger classes, use two decks of playing cards.

2. Cards for Partners

A hallmark of communicative language teaching is pair/group work. However, asking students to spontaneously form pairs and groups can create anxiety and stress. It can also waste a lot of time, as students hesitate to ask one another to be partners. Alternately, students who know each other will immediately form pairs and groups. Others may be ostracised and awkward, and excluded. This requires the teacher to intervene and put students into pairs/groups one by one, which is socially uncomfortable for everyone involved.

Another issue may be gender. In comparison with students from western countries, Japanese students tend to be shy and nervous around members of the opposite sex. Part of the reason may be the prevalence of gender specific junior and senior high schools, and part may be that even in mixed gender schools there is still de facto gender separation.

The use of trump cards can quickly solve this problem. In addition to finding initial partners, the careful selection of cards by the teacher can also make changing partners easy and quick. For example, in a class of twenty students, the teacher selects 20 trump cards in the following way: complete sets of four cards, from each of five numbers. Four aces, four twos, four threes, four fours, and four fives would be an example. To make partners, the teacher distributes the cards at random to the students. The teacher then announces that the partner for the activity will be the person who has both the same number of card AND the same color of card. For example, the two of hearts and the two of diamonds would be partners. This leaves no ambiguity as only one person in the class can be the partner. For a change of partners, the teacher announces that the next partner is the person who has the same number of card but a different color. For example, the two of hearts and either the two of clubs or the two of spades would be partners. In this case, there are still only two possible partner choices available.

This system can also be used to form groups in the class. In the above example, a teacher wishing to make

groups of four students each could ask that all the students with the same number form a group. A teacher wishing to make groups of five students could ask that all the students with the same suit (hearts, diamonds, clubs or spades) form a group. Finally, a teacher wishing for two groups of ten students each could simply ask that all the students with the same color of card (red or black) form a group. Again, this prevents students from forming cliques or groups of friends only, and also ensures that nobody is left out or excluded.

3. Cards for Group Answers

A popular warm up or final activity in many classes is the “anketto”, or class survey. Using this technique, the teacher can quickly get a feel for the mood and experience of the class. For example, in a class that will study travel English, a natural warm up activity would be to ask how many students have travelled abroad. Another would be to ask the class how many would like to travel abroad in the future. Those who answer “yes” are invited to raise their hands.

However, many teachers notice that students are often reluctant to raise their hands to answer such seemingly easy and innocuous questions. At best, a few hands will be tentatively raised a few centimetres off the desks, heads will turn around anxiously to see if others are answering, and the inevitable consultation with immediate neighbors will start. The following situation may ensue:

Teacher: If you have travelled abroad, please raise your hand

Class of twenty students: (no visible response, a few heads turn to their neighbors)

Teacher: OK, if you have NEVER travelled abroad, please raise your hand.

Class of twenty students: (little visible response, a few sideways tilted heads, a few wrists twitch, no hands move above eye level)

For teachers, especially native speakers, this is a source of frustration, particularly when the question that was asked is not at all difficult to understand. However, the cause of the reluctance is not a language issue but again a social one. For students, raising their hands is a daring and psychologically difficult act. It exposes their answer to the entire class and lays them open to possible ridicule, either for their answer or for their boldness in having the courage to answer. In either case, the safest position for the student to take is to sit quietly and wait for the teacher to move on.

Using trump cards will remove this anxiety. Simply give each student one red card and one black card (the number on the card is not relevant). On the board, write that red = yes and black = no. Students display

the card with the color corresponding to their answer by holding it at chest level, facing the teacher. In this way, they can maintain their privacy as most other students cannot see their response. It is also physically much less stressful than raising their hand to a height visible to the teacher. The teacher in turn can easily see the responses and then report to the class what the group consensus was.

4. Cards for “Volunteers”

Volunteering to answer in class is an inherently risky activity for students, a veritable minefield of dangerous outcomes with little in the way of reward. A student who volunteers and answers correctly may be seen by others as arrogant, while a student who volunteers and answers incorrectly feels the shame of making a mistake.

Williams and Astrade (2008) discovered a strange dichotomy in students' feelings when being called upon to answer in class. For some students, the teacher choosing “volunteers” at random was a source of great anxiety since there was the potential that they would be chosen at any time. However, others felt the same about teachers who used a predictable order, such as row by row or by class list. They could feel the pressure building and building as their turn came closer and closer.

To alleviate these fears, this study recommends that calling individual students not be done when at all possible. For activities that require writing on the blackboard, for example, it is better to select all volunteers and allow them to approach the board as a group, rather than asking for answers individually. This will lower the anxiety level a great deal and give the volunteered students a chance to consult with each other as they answer. Trump cards can perform this task admirably. Simply assign one color (red or black) as the “volunteer” color and the other as the safe color. For example, in an activity where there are six required answers, use six volunteer cards and the rest the other color. Quickly distribute the cards and have the students all check them at the same time. The “volunteers” can then get together and write their answers. This also gives the volunteers a brief time when they can consult with those around them before standing up and approaching the board.

Conclusions

These techniques, when used properly, can greatly speed up the pace of the class and lower the anxiety level of students. Coincidentally, they may also lower the anxiety or stress level of teachers, who are operating in a cultural environment that is not familiar to them. Even veteran teachers with years of experience in Japan can feel annoyed at times by student behaviour that they understand from a rational point of view but are still viscerally irritating.

However, there is some debate as to whether, and to what extent, foreign language teachers should

accommodate the psychological needs of their students. Should the culture of English, with its “western” concepts of spontaneity and discourse, be taught at the same time as the language? Or should language teachers adapt their methods to suit the reality of the Japanese context in which they are working?

Ideally, a language should not be divorced from its culture. Nonetheless, given the reality that the vast majority of English speakers in the world are not native speakers, and further that most Japanese students will interact with other Asians (Cogan, 1995), perhaps the teacher should be the one to take the first steps towards compromise. Once a rapport and relationship is built with the students, and also between members of the class, it may be possible to begin teaching in a more “western” style. However, until that time, using techniques such as those described above can help bridge the gap between student and teacher, and also contribute to creating a safe and low stress learning environment.

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