Students' perceptions of online apprenticeship projects at a university

Hisayo Kikuchi[1]

Abstract. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a hybrid apprenticeship model in the context of university level English education in Japan. The focus is on freshman perceptions and attitudes toward their English learning. For this study, seniors were asked to create brief videos in English sharing study strategies, helpful student life tips, and advice regarding study abroad programs. The study examined (1) the improvement of the freshmen's smartphone video assignments before and after they viewed the seniors' videos discussed above, and (2) pre- and post-questionnaires with four Likert-scale items and one open question. These results show that the apprenticeship videos can not only serve as modeling but also foster scaffolding outside of the classroom.

Keywords: apprenticeship, university, Japan, smartphone.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, apprenticeship has been a primary mechanism for teaching and learning. However, in Japanese universities, the apprenticeship model, in the context of English education, has been difficult for three primary reasons. In general, Japanese young adults over age 25 generally do not attend universities. Recent statistics show no more than 1.9% of Japanese university students are over 25 years old, which is low compared to the world average (19.6%) (MEXT, 2011; OECD, 2014). Thus, there is a statistical shortage of 'mentor' students who have accumulated enough life experience to provide more meaningful tutelage to younger students. Furthermore, new students often do not have opportunities to make strong connections with more senior students. Individual English classes are generally comprised of students at the same education level, so freshmen are not

1. Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan; hisayo@t07.itscom.net

likely to mix with seniors in the course of regular class activities. Thus, vertical connections between different class years are improbable.

Finally, when newer students have chances to interact with older students, they may hesitate to ask for advice. This may be traceable to traditional Japanese societal paradigms, which assign roles of superiority and inferiority to senior and junior positions, respectively (Mosk, 2007). In addition, in English as a foreign language settings like Japan, it can be hard to find a role model. In many cases, teachers who are native English speakers are likely to become students' role models. However, this is not always beneficial, according to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. If the role model is too far removed from the learner, in terms of skills, the learners may lose their motivation. Murphey (1998) recommends that for the purpose of modelling, we focus on various desirable attitudes and practices of some "lesser gods, closer to home" such as the students' "Near Peer Role Models" (NPRMs)" (p. 202).

2.   Literature review

Examining NPRMs (Murphey & Arao, 2001) provides useful information for this study. Murphey and Arao (2001) defines NPRMs as "peers who are close to one's social professional, and/or age level, and whom one may respect and admire" (p. 2). Long and Porter (1986) examined the language produced by adult learners whose first language was Spanish. Intermediate learners talked with a speaker from each of the three levels: intermediate, advanced, and native speaker of English. They found that the learners talked most with advanced level speakers. This means that an apprenticeship relationship may be most effective if the ability gap between the mentor and the learner is not too wide. The study of Choi and Ishiwata (2016) found that in Australia, adult low pro-proficiency learners of English had greater language learning success when they were grouped with high-proficiency learners as opposed to other low-proficiency learners.

3.   Method

3.1.   Participants

The participants of this study were 28 freshmen in an English class at a university in the Kanto area (16 male students and 12 female students). Their collective English

level was B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). All of them were non-English majors and taught by a Japanese teacher who used both English and Japanese in class. The class was held once a week for three months (90 minutes per class session).

3.2.   Procedures

For the study's mentors, I asked a successful second-year class (CEFR B2-C1) consisting of ten students (four male and six female students) to participate in this study. I explained to them that their learning techniques and university survival skills would be accessed and leveraged to help freshmen. I asked them to discuss their experiences and decide upon one topic individually, avoiding overlaps. They created brief instructional videos using their own smartphones. The length of each video was about one minute. The topics were:

- How to effectively use time.
- How to find opportunities to use English outside of class.
- How to stay in good physical shape.
- What my first year schedule looked like.
- How club activities help me.
- Why it is important to join university union projects.
- What part-time job or internship I did.
- How I improved my English.
- How I improve my test scores.
- What classes I took.

3.3.   Questionnaire

At the first class the freshmen responded to the pre-questionnaires. The questionnaire items were adopted from Murphey and Arao (2001). About one month later, these freshmen watched the videos created by seniors and posted their opinions on our closed webpage in either Japanese or English. They also answered the post-questionnaire. The pre- and post-questionnaires featured the same elements with a five point Likert Scale (1=Strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree), followed by an open question.

- Making mistakes in English is OK.
- It is good to have goals in learning English.
- Speaking English is fun.
- Japanese can become good speakers of English.

- What did you learn from the seniors' videos?

4.   Results

First, the scores of the questionnaire items increased across the board after the freshmen viewed the mentoring videos (Table 1). Second, in particular, those who did not have prior successful English learning experiences, or who had low confidence, showed greater positivity in terms of responses. Third, the freshmen's videos were more creative and more relatable to their daily life.

The online comments posted on our closed website were basically short, such as "Great!", "Cool!" and "I want to speak like them". These comments were in keeping with the results from Murphey and Arao's (2001) study. There were no comments regarding the content, including further questions about learning skills or strategies.

When I asked the apprentice group of younger students to write follow-up questions to the mentoring seniors, they wrote questions such as the following (in Japanese):

- What kind of practice do I need?
- How did you improve your pronunciation?
- What practice do you usually do at home?
- How much did you study English?

Table 1.   The mean ratings before and after the freshmen viewed the seniors' video

	before	after
1. Making mistakes in English is O.K.	3.8	4.2*
2. It's good to have goals in learning English.	3.7	4.5**
3. Speaking English is fun.	3.2	3.7**
4. Japanese can become good speakers of English.	3.7	4.1*

*significant changes at $p<0.05$, ** significant changes at $p<0.01$

In response to the open question: *What did you learn from the seniors' videos?*, the freshmen did not mention the 'academic' content of the mentoring videos (such as learning skills or strategies). The apprentice students were instead focused on the presentation aspects of the instructional videos. Responses included:

"I think I should speak faster".

"Seniors used easier vocabulary than I thought. I always thought I needed to use difficult words, but I think easy words should be better and more understandable".

"I cannot believe the length of the presentation in the video was only around one minute. There was a lot of content even though it was only one minute".

The study protocol included freshmen preparing their own videos. In their first videos, they were likely to read from pre-prepared scripts and be quite short. However, after watching the seniors' mentoring videos, freshmen's confidence appeared to increase, and they were inclined to speak in more impromptu and creative ways.

After this study, I created an opportunity for the freshmen and the sophomores to meet face-to-face at a luncheon. Five sophomore 'mentor' students and nine freshmen participated. My observations included the following: (1) both freshmen and sophomores willingly helped each other, (2) they talked about the video content, and further asked about it in Japanese, and (3) the sophomore students were very proud of themselves.

5.   Conclusions

The study established the following three points: first, it is very useful to provide video apprenticeship features for newer students. Second, structured apprenticeship programs, such as the smartphone video apprenticeship program used in the study are helpful in fostering the apprenticeship model. Without this kind of structured interaction, it can be rare for freshmen to have opportunities to meet older students at universities in Japanese English class. Third, as observed in NPRMs (Murphy, 1996), a one or two-year gap between student groups is suitable. Based on my observations throughout the study, the freshmen's awareness of the fact that successful mentor students were only one year older appeared to be a factor in engendering confidence in the younger students.

6.   Acknowledgements

References

Choi, H., & Ishiwata, N. (2016). Interactional behaviours of low-proficiency learners in small group work. In M. Sato & B. Susan (Eds), *Peer interaction and second language learning: pedagogical potential and research agenda* (pp. 113-134). John Benjamins Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1075/lllt.45.05cho

Long, M. H., & Porter, P. (1986). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*(2), 207-228. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586827

MEXT. (2011). *Shakaijin ryugakusei no jokyo* (in Japanese). Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shougai/031/shiryo/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/06/05/1348400_09.pdf

Mosk, C. (2007). *Markets, norms, constraints. Japanese economic development: markets, norms, structures*. Taylor & Francis e-Library. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203935873.pt1

Murphey, T. (1996). Near peer role models. *Teachers talking to teachers,* 4(3), 21-22.

Murphey, T. (1998). Motivating with near peer role models. *On JALT '97: Trends & Transitions* (pp. 201-204).

Murphey, T., & Arao, H. (2001). Reported belief changes through near peer role modeling. *TESL-EJ, 5*(3), 1-14.

OECD. (2014). *Education indicators focus 23*. https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF_23%20eng%20(2014)EN.pdf

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny