

## **Incorporating a Community Out-reach Project into a Language Program**

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### **Abstract:**

Until recently, most foreign language education has been centered on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. While recognizing that grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning advocate "the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages" (1999) and identify five goals of today's foreign language classroom: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. The present study attempts to investigate how an out of class activity such as an interview project motivates and enhances the students' learning of the target language based on the five goals of the National Standards. A class of third-year college level students of Japanese language was assigned to interview Japanese families in the local area and later summarize the interviews in class. At the end of the course, the students completed questionnaires regarding the project. The researcher examined the questionnaires and oral presentations of the students. The study describes how an out of class activity with a focus on meaning can not only provide a great number of learning opportunities as described in the national standards, but also promote a deeper understanding of the Japanese language and culture. Moreover, it illustrates how such a project can assist the developmental and creative aspects of second language acquisition.

### **Reference:**

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Standards Executive Summary. [Online] Available <http://www.actfl.org/index.cfm?weblink=/public/articles/details.cfm?id=33>, 1999.

# **Incorporating a Community Out-reach Project into a Language Program**

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## **1. Introduction**

Traditionally the study of foreign language has centered on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. While maintaining that grammatical competence is an essential concern, the National Standards identify five goals (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) to enable learners of foreign languages to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with speakers of other languages.

In the National Standards, the traditional four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are viewed as integrated skills and three modes of communication are addressed: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication. While acquiring interpersonal communication skills in Japanese, "learners must attend such characteristics of the Japanese language as the elaborate system of honorifics (*keigo*), the wide range of speech registers, and the sharp distinctions between formal and informal language" (Standards for Japanese Language Learning, 1998). It is also suggested that presentational communication in Japanese requires attention to the special formulaic language used in formal speeches and learners must recognize and understand the level of formality in order to develop interpretive communication skills. Japanese is well known for its complexity of formality levels and styles. Japanese language textbooks tend to introduce some of the honorifics as well as the distinction between the formal style and the informal style within the first year. In the classroom, the concept is explained and the students are provided opportunities to practice through situational role-plays. However, it still remains a challenge for the students to develop the competence to generate appropriate speech style/formality to a given situation. Authentic activities that expose the students to a variety of speech styles must be created by a teacher.

In addition, the cultural distance between the United States and Japan also tends to increase the time needed to acquire the language: basic communicative functions, such as requesting, disagreeing, and inviting are performed very differently in Japanese Culture. (Standards for Japanese Language Learning, 1998). Carefully prepared lesson plans and context-based activities must be developed.

In this study, students in a post secondary Japanese class were asked to interview native Japanese housewives in Japanese and to present the results in class after the interview. At the end of the course, the students completed questionnaires regarding the project. The researcher examined the presentations as well as questionnaires. The result of the study describes how it is possible to realize the five goals in a foreign language class and how such projects can indeed motivate and enhance students' language learning. Furthermore, it illustrates how such an activity with an emphasis on meaning can assist in the developmental and creative aspects of second language acquisition.

## **2. Literature Review**

Some scholars and educators have recognized great benefits in using community resources for foreign language classes.

d'Anglejan (1978) advocates communicative interaction between the learner and a well-disposed native speaker. She conducted a pilot study with immigrants to Quebec, which involved activities of actually going out into the community and communicating in the real world. She reported that the students' self-confidence in their ability to function in a French environment was greatly improved.

Buchheit and McAlpine (1984) conducted a class project of collecting oral literature from a community. They stated that "the contact with native speakers and active use of language contribute to a higher degree of motivation in language learning and the subsequent retention of a student in a language program." (76). They also reported positive evaluations of the project by the students, who recognized their improvements in speaking and listening skills.

Stevens (1987) points out three benefits of using the community outside the classroom: (1) an opportunity for real interaction; (2) being able to bypass the teacher "who otherwise is the inescapable other participant"; (3) improvement in the students' willingness and intention to learn. He also states that "not only is project work usually popular with students, but the very act of collaborating with other students, in the language they are learning, increases the quantity of interaction." (174).

Yamashita & Ogawa (1994) states that through an interview with a Japanese, a student of Japanese language will be able to learn an appropriate speech style depending on the interlocutor's age, sex, and circumstances. Furthermore, the student will be able to learn Japanese perspectives on a variety of issues and to compare them with his/her own, which will ultimately lead him/her to a deeper understanding of both cultures.

In addition to the above benefits, *Beyond the Language Classroom* (1984) suggests more benefits in the acquisition of the target language and culture when using community resources:

- an opportunity to explore language and culture as interrelated aspects of communication (in all dimensions--linguistic and behavioral)
- an opportunity to observe language in its cultural and situational contexts
- a chance for students to learn how to learn, especially in an out-of-the-classroom situation
- an opportunity to learn from people other than the teacher, in situations other than the classroom, and on topics other than those dictated by the course syllabus
- and a way to increase their awareness of the intercultural dimensions of their community and the international ties between their community and the rest of the world; i.e., to gain a sense of themselves as global citizens (72).

In sum, interaction outside the classroom seems to offer tremendous benefits to students, contributing not only to target language and cultural acquisition, but also to the students' increasing awareness of themselves as independent learners. In this study, I will attempt to verify these benefits of integrating a community out-reach project into a language classroom, and in addition to demonstrate how such a project can help to achieve the five goals of National Standards in a foreign language class.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The interview project was conducted during the fall semester of 2001 within a third year level Japanese class at a women's college in the United States. The project was made possible through the cooperation of Japanese housewives who lived in the area.

#### **3.2 Data Collection & Procedures**

The data for this study was obtained in three forms: (1) from class notes recorded by the researcher after each class; (2) from the recordings of their presentations; and (3) through written questionnaires.

At first, each student needed to call an interviewee to make an appointment for the interview; thus, we reviewed telephone conversation situations that the students had learned in previous classes. There are special formulaic languages for telephone conversations and a variety of situation can occur in a telephone call, such as: starting a conversation with an interviewee; asking for an interviewee; leaving a message (in person or through an answering machine); asking for directions to the interviewee's house; and others. Therefore, we practiced many different situations in class and each student telephoned the instructor for more practice before they actually telephoned the assigned interviewees.

After they made an appointment with their interviewees, each student chose a topic that interested her and created 20 questions according to her topic. In class, we examined each question and discussed validity of the question as well as other possible questions according to the topic. We also practiced the use of honorifics in class. Since the interviewees were older than the students were, the use of honorifics was expected.

In the actual interviews, the students were asked to take notes. With the permission of the interviewee, the student could record the interview if she wished. They were also encouraged to expand on the questions than they had prepared in order to obtain more specific information.

After the interviews, each student summarized the result of the interview and presented it in class. Other students were encouraged to ask questions to the presenter and to have a lively discussion. In order to assure their active participation, a portion of the grade was based on their presentations and participation in the discussions. The researcher took notes on how well each student summarized their interviews as well as what questions and answers occurred after each presentation; however, the linguistic accuracy was not graded because the primary focus of this project was communication with native speakers.

At the end of the course, the students were asked to fill out the questionnaire in English regarding the project. To maintain anonymity, a student assistant distributed and collected the questionnaires.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The recording of their presentation and the researchers' notes from classes served to demonstrate their linguistic improvement as well as cultural and creative aspects of their language acquisition. They were also used to verify the content of the students' questionnaires.

An Analysis of the questionnaires was sought to discover the students' motivation and learning through the participants' perspectives. A Likert scale was used for the questionnaire ('1' is lowest agreement and '5' is highest.) The quantitative analysis of this data was supplemented by the analysis of the students' open-ended comments on the questionnaire to understand and better interpret their perspectives.

### 4. Results

The following figure shows the mean score for each questionnaire.

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I liked this interview project	4.5
The project motivated me to speak better	4.8
The project motivated me to think in Japanese	4.0
The project helped me to use what I have learned before	4.8
The project helped me to learn new vocabulary/expressions	4.2
The project motivated me to use honorific expressions properly	4.7
The project helped me to improve my listening skills	4.9
I learned more about Japan through the project	4.4
I learned more about Japanese people through the project	4.5
I learned more about my own culture through the project	3.7
The project helped me to compare different cultures	4.5
The project encouraged me to do critical thinking	3.5

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The figures indicate that the students enjoyed this interview project overall. Some students commented that they simply enjoyed meeting new people. Many of them especially like the fact that they were able to communicate with a 'real' Japanese. Others commented that they were so happy to be able to carry an interesting conversation with a native speaker. The students were asked to use between 30 minutes and 1 hour for the interview, but most of them spent over an hour, which proved that the students were talking more than expected.

In terms of language learning, most commented that they did not want to make mistakes and they organized their thoughts carefully. Some of them actually came to my office hours to check their interview questions and asked questions on certain grammar uses or honorific uses before the interview and presentation. Many of them noted that because the interviewees do not correct their mistakes, they had to know what they were going to say and had to be more conscious of what they were saying. Many students agreed that the project motivated them to think in Japanese because they realized that it took more time to translate from English to Japanese and they began to think in Japanese.

All the students were able to use what they had learned in previous years, especially, telephone conversations, asking for directions, and the use of honorifics. Many students commented that it was a great opportunity to use honorific expressions since they did not have many opportunities to use them otherwise. Some wrote that they did not wish to sound rude, so they were extra careful about using honorific speech.

Most students agreed that they learned new vocabulary and expressions through the project. The interviewees sometimes used vocabulary/expressions that the students had not learned; thus the students had to ask for explanations. Some students also said that certain vocabulary was necessary for their topics, which they had to look up in their dictionaries. Each student was instructed to make a vocabulary sheet for the presentation if they were to use new words, which gave other students a chance to familiarize themselves with those new words.

The most effective aspect of the project was their improvement in their listening skills. Most students commented that it was necessary to listen carefully in order to respond or ask follow up questions. Some said that they had to know the answers perfectly in order to present them later in class. Others also commented that they listened carefully during other people's presentations in order to think of good questions to ask.

With regard to cultural learning, most of them agreed that the project helped them learn about Japan and Japanese people. Many thought that they were able to learn about Japanese people's lives and their way of thinking through the project, which they never learned in class. Some students commented that it was very interesting to do an interview regarding the themes that they were interested in. Others said that everyone in class was able to get to know more about Japan since each topic was different.

Most students thought that the project helped them to compare different cultures though there were mixed opinions with regard to learning about their own cultures. Some students found that the interview helped them in realizing the differences and the similarities between Japanese culture and their own. They also said that they were able to see American culture from the Japanese perspective. Some commented that the interviewees asked some questions in turn; thus, they had to think about their own culture. There were a few students who commented that they only asked about Japanese culture; thus they did not learn anything about their own culture. Interestingly, however, those who commented that they learned nothing about their own culture did recognize that the project helped them to compare different cultures.

Though it was the least effective aspect of the project, the students still recognized that they did think more critically through the project. Through the process of analyzing their own cultures and comparing them to their interviewees, they said that they needed to think more critically about many issues. Some also commented that they needed to think critically in order to summarize their interviews as well as participating in discussions.

## **5. Discussion**

In this section, I will examine the findings in relation to the specific definitions of the goals of the National Standards.

## 5.1 Communication

*Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.*

This goal addresses the 'interpersonal mode', which is characterized by "active negotiation of meaning among individuals." (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996:32). Through this interview project, the students were engaged in lively conversations with native speakers and exchanged opinions during their presentations, which incorporated the interpersonal and negotiated dimensions. The students were excited about having serious conversations with native speakers and asked many questions relating to their topics. Many students commented that they never had an opportunity to speak Japanese with such intensity and they thought the project was a challenging but great experience. The project did not simply contribute to a greater amount of communication. The students sincerely engaged in making new friends and learning about their culture. Several students stayed in touch with the interviewees after the project.

*Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.*

This goal reflects the 'interpretive mode', which is emphasized on "the appropriate cultural interpretation of meanings that occur in written and spoken form where there is no recourse to the active negotiation of meaning with the writer or the speaker." (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996:32). In this study, each student selected a different topic for her interview and shared the results in class. Many students enjoyed not only the actual interview itself, but also learning from other students' presentations.

*Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.*

This standard addresses the 'presentational mode', which refers to "the creation of messages in a manner that facilitates interpretation by members of the other culture where no direct opportunity for the active negotiation of meaning between members of the two cultures exists." (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996:34). Although the students did not make a formal presentation to a group of native speakers, I believe that this project came close to meeting the tenants of this standard by presenting the results to their classmates. In the questionnaires, many students commented that it was very difficult to organize their presentation so that it would make sense to the audience. I also found that every student was eager to talk about her interview results, especially introverted students who were usually quiet in class spoke more in their presentation. A student commented, "it was easier for me to talk about my interview results than to talk about my own personal matters or ideas."

## 5.2 Culture

*Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.*

This goal focuses on "the practices that are derived from the traditional ideas, attitudes, and values (perspectives) of culture." (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996:46). Through this project, the students were able to practice honorific forms with the interviewees. The ages of the interviewees ranged from the late 30's to early 50's; and they participated in this project voluntarily; thus the students felt it natural in using honorifics for this occasion. The students normally use formal styles when they talk to their teachers, but do not use honorifics as much since they feel that they will be forgiven. However, most students said that they were afraid of offending the interviewees by not using honorifics appropriately; thus they paid careful attention to use the forms properly.

In addition, the students learned about various topics of Japan by sharing their results. Topics included such things as lifestyle differences in Japan and America, the Japanese education system, Japanese seasons and annual events, Japanese students' lives, Japanese pop culture, Japanese sports, Japanese food, Japanese sports, Foreigners in Japan, etc.

*Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied.*

This standard places an emphasis on "the products of the culture studied and on how they reflect the perspectives of that culture." A student whose topic focused on Japanese pop culture presented portions of Japanese animation videos and J-pop songs; and discussed how much English language was used in many Japanese songs these days. Another student whose topic was Japanese sports showed a tape of Sumo (Japanese wrestling). Unfortunately not enough time was available to discuss each perspective in depth; and some of the topics were not relevant to this standard.

## 5.3 Connections

*Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.*

This goal focuses on "target language support for content from other disciplines." (Standards for foreign Language Learning, 1996:50). Because most students were not taking Japan related courses, we could not achieve this goal; however, a student who was taking a Japanese Pop Culture Course was able to use the results of her interviews for her course paper. She wrote, "It was great that I was able to add Japanese perspectives on Japanese anime and comic into my final paper."

*Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.*

This standard focuses on "information now available to the learner through the target language." (Standards for foreign Language Learning, 1996:50). All the topics were Japan related and they were able to practice a variety of language skills that are unique to Japanese, such as honorifics, telephone formulaic language, and so forth. Most students commented that this project helped them to broaden their knowledge about Japan by presenting and sharing the results of the interviews.

## **5.4 Comparisons**

*Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.*

This goal places an emphasis on "the impact that learning the linguistic elements in the new language has on students' ability to examine their own language, and to develop hypotheses about the structure and use of languages." (Standards for foreign Language Learning, 1996:54). Through the project, the students used language to convey their thoughts to the best of their abilities. A student noted, "I realized that when I used the wrong word or sentence, unlike my classmates or teachers who can guess what I want to say, she looked confused and asked for more explanations, so I tried my best not to make mistakes." The project also helped students contrast the two languages. A student said, "This project made me realize what I can and cannot express in Japanese. I found out that you cannot translate certain phrases directly because it does not make sense."

*Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concepts of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.*

This standard focuses on "the development of insight into the nature of culture." (Standards for foreign Language Learning, 1996:53). Through this project, the students made informal level comparisons between the two cultures. In the interviews, the students asked questions regarding Japan and Japanese people and most of them learned to see sameness and differences between the two. A student noted, "I realize something that seems ordinary might not be the same in Japan." Another wrote, "It was really interesting to see more similarities than differences between American and Japanese cultures and values." The project also helped them to learn about their own culture although some wrote that they already know about their culture. A student noted, "I was able to see my own culture through someone else's eyes." Another wrote, "I realized through talking with my interviewee that there is still a lot I could learn about my own culture and its many traditions." Some students also commented that they were asked

many questions in turn by the interviewees and found it a challenge to make their world comprehensible to someone who does not share the same cultural background.

## **5.5 Communities**

*Standard 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.*

This standard places an emphasis on "language as a tool for communication with speakers of the language throughout one's life: in schools, in the community, and abroad." (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996:60). As was noted in the communication section, the students simply enjoyed communicating with native speakers. Many students pointed out that what they most liked about this project was "being able to have interesting conversations with a real Japanese." The students enjoyed the project because it was 'real'. In addition, the interviews were conducted at the interviewee's home or at coffee shops near campus. In other words, they were able to use the language in the community outside of school, as well as in school when they presented the results.

*Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.*

This goal focuses on personal enrichment throughout their lives. After the project, many students got invited to the interviewees' homes again for lunch or coffee. Some of them decided to stay in touch: a student became her interviewee's babysitter and another student was hired as an English tutor. The project helped students continue using Japanese to communicate and enrich their lives. In addition, most interviewees told me that they enjoyed the interviews and it was a great experience for them, too.

## **6. Conclusion**

The results of this project suggest that the interview project with native speakers can offer great benefits to students, such as using the target language for an authentic purpose, making new friends, and learning about their culture. Many thought that the interview project was an exciting way to practice their oral skills and this motivated some to communicate more. However, it is important to keep in mind that this project is not necessarily focused on quality or quantity of speaking and listening, but rather to provide an engaging environment for real use of the language.

As discussed, many of the goals of National Standards were realized during this project. The project helped the students improve their mastery of language and increased their cultural knowledge. Through the process of engaging in meaningful communication, the students were provided a context for reflecting on their own culture, ultimately leading to the development of critical thinking skills.

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