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Critical Thinking in Japanese Learners: A Discourse Perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores the reality of what learners do during classroom activities by applying discourse analysis to the recorded conversations of a small group of first-year Japanese English language learners at a university. The manner in which Japanese English language learners show their critical thinking abilities and assess the skills is demonstrated. The data shows that despite the significant restrictive role that poor language proficiency can play in the demonstration of students' critical thinking skills, the participants were able to make inferences, question the validity of what they had read, give persuasive arguments using evidence, and demonstrate both lower order and higher order thinking skills. Suggestions for enhancing the prevailing standard model of question/answer to allow learners to become more invested in the task and further enhance their critical thinking skills are made.

Background

The ability of Japanese learners to engage in discussions requires them to both articulate their opinions and to use lower order (remembering, understanding and applying), and higher order thinking skills (analyzing, evaluating and creating) (Kubota, 1999). This paper describes the class discussions of a group of first-year Japanese English language learners at a Japanese university and examines how the participants were able to give their opinions and demonstrate their ability with these skills, and suggests how they may be enhanced in lessons.

To define critical thinking, Seigel (1988) describes it as “the educational cognate of rationality”. D’Angelo (1971, p.7-8) says that, “Critical thinking is the process of evaluating statements, arguments, and experiences” (cited in Shoemaker, 1993). While difficult to quantify into an observational scale, Long (2003, p. 231), clarifies critical thinking as a process, and as entailing the ability to perform specific cognizant actions: making inferences, separating facts from opinions, separating facts from evaluations, questioning the validity of evidence, giving persuasive arguments using evidence, asking questions using both lower order and higher order thinking, verifying information, resisting jumping to conclusions, understanding multiple perspectives, seeking “truth” before being right, and finally, “listening” and “observing”.

In line with the understanding of critical thinking as a process, several scholars (Dunn, 2014; Long, 2003; Kubota, 1999) discount Atkinson’s (1997) claim of critical thinking as a social practice while acknowledging the tendency for Japanese learners to be reticent

during discussions. The argument exists that by developing both critical thinking skills and an understanding of language and how to use it, learners can become part of a larger community (Dunn, 2014).

This ties into the theme of Japanese as citizens and as members of a global community, which is echoed by educators as well. Dunn (2014) notes that even though there is a need for harmony in Japanese culture, it should not prevent learners from learning new skill sets, and through the guidelines of MEXT, which states that its goals for the future direction of education are to educate “talented people who can understand and solve problems” (2002). Regardless of any value a culture may place on skill sets, it is important to guide learners to understand how other communities may consider such skills to be of value (Dunn, 2014). This is in line with the MEXT’s goal to “foster Japanese citizens educated to live in the international community” (2005).

To determine how learners demonstrate critical thinking skills, this study focused on answering the following research questions: In what ways do learners actually demonstrate critical thinking skills in their discussions? In what ways can teachers assist learners in developing their linguistic skills in tandem with their critical thinking skills?

Analysis

PARTICIPANTS

The teacher-researcher of this paper gathered qualitative spoken data from six participants for this study who were first-year, lower-

intermediate, full-time Japanese university students majoring in International Communications. Five of the participants were female (SJ, YJ MJ, RJ, WJ) and one was male (TJ). Selected on a volunteer basis, they described themselves as highly motivated to learn and use English, but lacking in confidence and experience using English outside of class. The participants were assigned to the class based upon the university's standardized level assessment, but their individual scores were not available. The study took place during the second term with the participants having been together for 27 weeks; while they were familiar with each other, it was not possible to determine their personal relationships outside of class.

MATERIALS

Three texts were given to the participants for them to read and discuss. For phase one, a text from the course book detailing the growing problem with young men in Japan not being interested in dating (Text One) was selected. For phase two, another text from the same course book, focusing on the historical reasons for young American women entering college, was selected (Text Two). Both of the selected materials centered on gender issues and were required readings for the course.

Each unit in the course book begins with an introductory activity presenting vocabulary items translated into Japanese and supplemented with gap-fill questions. This is followed by a reading of approximately 400 words with the previous vocabulary items incorporated into the text. Then, there is a series of sections that present questions based on the reading, which are intended to help

elicit critical thinking skills.

A third text, adapted from *The Japan Times*, described the rising number of Japanese women uninterested in getting married and who are becoming career-focused and unwilling to quit their jobs to raise a family (Otake, 2013). This text was presented without any discussion questions.

PROCEDURES

The data for this study was collected from recordings of the learners' conversations conducted in two phases over the course of two lessons. For the first phase, the participants were randomly grouped into pairs with each participant being given 20 minutes to read and perform a dictogloss activity with two of the four paragraphs of the text. Afterwards, the learners discussed questions from the course book with their partners until the end of the allowed time of 10 minutes. The questions focused on why "herbivore" young men might be more or less happy than other men, what the participants thought of them and whether or not the trend would continue.

In the second phase of the study, the available participants were divided into two pairs with one pair receiving Texts Two and Three (MJ and YJ) and the second pair being given Text Two with discussion questions (TJ and SJ). The first pair was told to use the differences in content and vocabulary for their opinions and critique. The second pair was instructed to discuss the questions from the textbook which focused on the advantages and disadvantages of single-gender schools, and who are better at studying - men or women.

In both phases, they were not allowed to use dictionaries during

the allocated time and were instructed to guess vocabulary from context, ask someone else, or to ask the teacher-researcher. All conversations were recorded on the participants' smart-phones, and were e-mailed to the teacher-researcher and later transcribed and analyzed qualitatively for content.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the data showed that the participants were able to articulate their opinions, albeit with numerous grammatical and lexical errors. When they could not think of vocabulary, the learners simply moved on to the next question. They were generally able to recall information from both readings, thus demonstrating an ability to remember, understand and apply information by providing rationales from sources outside of the texts in both phases.

DIFFERENCES IN OPINION

In phase one, YJ and MJ's discussion of the first question focused on differing points of view with MJ adding information from an outside source referring to a news story about Japanese office workers overworking, resulting in their death.

1. MJ: Recently many people will die because of hard working. This book says herbivore
2. men don't want to work. It will be good for their life so I think herbivore men might
3. be more happy than other men.

Participants articulated opinions that, at times, were blunt and unabashed as demonstrated in the conversation in phase one between RJ and SJ.

1. RJ: I think that herbivore men are weak, shy and poor communication skill.
2. SJ: I don't care about boy eating cakes or sweets but tight clothes and weak body is no.

This is also present in line 2 in this discussion.

1. TJ: They are happy. They don't have to spend money for other people.
2. WJ: For unhappy. They have poor communication. Sometimes they look like homosexual.
3. TJ: Is that bad? For you?
4. WJ: Maybe.
5. TJ: That's a nice idea.

Some of the language was quite direct. However, the participants often attempted to negotiate differences in opinion as harmoniously as possible by more or less agreeing with each other, as in lines 10 and 14.

6. TJ: I think herbivore men are good. Not bad. Because it is a way to live for them.

7. WJ: Ah, I think that herbivore men are very kind to their friends and families because they
8. have poor communication, so they have narrow friendships. They thought that their
9. friends and family life are important.
10. TJ: Yes. Good?
11. WJ: Yes.
12. WJ: The textbook says they are usually on the internet, so the internet will be more
13. better so the herbivore men will continue or develop. More more herbivore.
14. TJ: Yeap. More than before, yes yes.”

JUSTIFICATIONS

The participants also attempted to provide real world justification for their responses, such as in MJ’s response in phase one.

6. MJ: I have good reason. I also I think that herbivore man will continue. Do you know the comic
7. book Otomen? The title was Otomen. That comic was hit two three years ago. Because the
8. comicbook was a hit. Many herbivore man’s sympathy..... society like maybe this idea, so I
9. think the average of herbivore man will increase, because the title of the comic was how to

10. say became a TV drama and very famous actor act the main character. That will impact
11. many people.

Interestingly, at times, the participants overlapped and echoed each other, assisting one another to come to the vocabulary they needed.

1. MJ: This paper say many men doesn't help their wife, so...
2. YJ: The time is decreasing.
3. MJ: Care their child, spend their families. Men have to work.
4. YJ: And women have to.

In addition, they made inferences in their discussions by adding information from outside sources attempting to separate facts from opinions that were not detailed in either article as in this example from phase two.

12. MJ: It is difficult to receive the woman who come back to work after maternity leave sankyu
13. so maternity leave is also problem. Have to change the law.
14. YJ: Sou (I agree)

When they were unsure or questioned their partner's response, they asked for clarification or directly pointed out information, such as in phase two between TJ and SJ.

2. TJ: America, because many people went to college to find husband. And then many people
3. found husband and then stop to study to get married. But Japan, Japanese are studying, but
4. not find husband to go to university. Japanese people go to university to study. Just study.
5. So Japanese are strict.
6. SJ: In 2010, 57 percent of college students were female.
7. TJ: Ah.
8. SJ: I think women should career because woman is not only mother or wife. In the future I want
9. to have career than my husband. Because if we work, I can live.

Discussion

As evidenced from transcripts, although the participants were limited by the constraints of their grammar and vocabulary, they were able to give reasoned justifications with supporting evidence for their opinions. They would, at times, offer their own opinion somewhat directly, however, at other times more indirectly in order to maintain a positive social relationship with their partner.

In terms of critical thinking, the pair that was instructed to compare and contrast different sources of information, as in phase two, made inferences and linked outside information more often than their counterparts. Separating evaluation and opinion from facts, on the other hand, was somewhat problematic as sorting out facts from opinions seemed to be influenced by their language proficiency, which acted as a negative influence on their ability to

recognize and make the necessary distinctions clear.

The participants did, on occasion, question the validity of each other's statements with many attempts to give persuasive arguments using evidence that they had at their disposal. The fact that they did so of their own accord without prior instruction can be seen as an indication of their interest and personal investment in the questions and the texts. What became evident from the data was that learners require both cognitive and linguistic support as well as materials that are relevant to their lives when engaging in critical thinking activities.

Linguistic Support

Likely due to the amount of time they had spent together over two terms through nine months, the participants in this study did not have apprehension giving, or justifying their opinions, since they were familiar with each other. They did, however, seem to have difficulty with the cognitive demands of simultaneously processing the language necessary to synthesize the information and formulate opinions. Providing multiple forms of scaffolding, such as through a dictogloss activity, or supplementing information with alternative points of view provides learners with multiple opportunities to be exposed to language, which is necessary to process what they want to say and facilitate more in-depth discussion. To further help learners develop higher order critical thinking skills, such as analyzing and evaluating, it is necessary to:

1) Give learners more opportunities to search for and discuss vocabulary and expressions that they need or want to use. This would provide learners with adequate scaffolding and learner-generated language, thus assisting them in focusing less on giving easy answers and more on their individual insights and opinions.

2) Focus their attention on a few key points in texts and have them check other sources to determine the validity of the claims by providing opposing opinions and points of view grading the language to the learners' proficiency.

Cognitive Support

The participants who were provided two texts to compare and contrast demonstrated an ability to better assess the validity of the information in reference to their own knowledge than other participants. The participants who had only an article and set of discussion questions had limited resources to compare information. Furthermore, while they could make inferences, all of the participants failed to question the validity of the first article in phase one. In phase two, the comparison activity seemed to help participants note discrepancies between the articles and this guided them to move their conversation to a more analytical style.

The learners previously may not have been regularly asked to compare and contrast or to evaluate the validity of articles or statements. Learners can be encouraged to be reflectively skeptical about information through problem-solving activities that are relevant to them such as:

1) Discussion scenarios that have learners act as intermediaries in a disagreement related to the topic. This would personalize the context of the information, present opportunities to see different points of view, and allow for reflection of language needed to solve the disagreement.

2) Materials, for example multiple short texts, that provide different scenarios which relate to the topic. Through outlining different scenarios, the learners would have a chance to evaluate various possible outcomes of a conversation and have an opportunity to distinguish facts from opinion.

Relevancy

In the opinion of the author, as the topics selected were relevant to the participants, the learners were able to demonstrate their ability to articulate their opinions, however limited their expressions were. The topic of young men not being interested in girls, at the time of the study, was a topic in news and social media in Japan. Also, because of the gender demographic of the class, the topic of women in college was also highly interesting to the learners. Teachers should strive to find or adapt topics to be immediately relevant and accessible to learners through supplementing texts with YouTube videos, relevant manga, or just contextualizing the information in a format that takes into consideration the age of the learners.

Conclusion

The discourse generated during the dictogloss and comparison activity did not reflect anecdotal evidence from Japanese university teachers. Unfortunately, this study only examined the conversations of six learners from a qualitative viewpoint, and as such is not a representative sample and lacks statistical data to support its conclusions. Future research using quantitative analysis of authentic classroom discourse using Long's (2003) criteria to examine instances of learners' critical thinking skills would be beneficial. However, it would be imperative to explicitly classify and define each of the criteria and how it is observed in such a study.

While this study found it difficult to ascertain whether or not the participants demonstrated all of Long's (2003) critical thinking skills, the level of skill evidenced in the learners' transcripts was much more than anticipated and showed that they are certainly not shy or hesitant to talk. The participants in this study focused on what they knew; gave reasons and answered "why", and while they did have a tendency to harmonize in discussions, this should not be seen as a sign of an inability to think critically. In fact, at times, they were exceedingly direct in their opinions.

The main conclusion of this study is that in order for learners to develop their abilities to assess, judge and evaluate information, they require lexical and cognitive support in conjunction with topics that are relevant to them. Through such support, developing Japanese learners' thinking skills will be smoother, and their learning experience will be enhanced. By challenging what they know, they can be given a voice.

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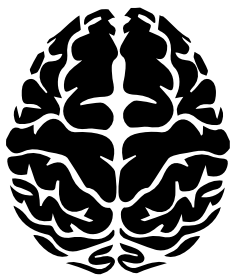
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