

## Exploratory Japanese Language at Middle School: Foreign Language Selection and Learning Outcome

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Key words: **FLEX, middle school, selection of a foreign language, learning outcome, kanji learning**

In public schools in the United States, the foreign language exploration/experience (FLEX) program has a long history, with an ebb-and-flow tidal phenomenon in practice. Along with the emergence of the Japanese language in the high school foreign language curriculum in the United States, it is apparent that a gradual top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top curriculum expansion has been taking place.

This paper focuses on Japanese language in the FLEX program, offered in the first year in a suburban middle school, progressing to a formal sequential Japanese language course establishment. An examination of the learners' selection of a foreign language after their participation in the FLEX program has revealed that the initiation of formal Japanese language courses and their solidification as viable subjects in school curricula, (without referring to curricular evaluative measurements) are affected by such variables as the following: curriculum policy decision by school administrators, support by other foreign language teachers, community residents' interest, learner characteristics, and the availability of competent teachers. These variables are intertwined in the establishment and implementation of Japanese courses.

Aside from such external elements, the learning outcome of the seventh grade students is articulated in behavioral terms in three areas: affective domain (achieving general education goals); oral activities; and kanji learning. Thus, this article provides a glimpse of surrounding educational environments and a middle school FLEX classroom specific to Japanese language instruction.

### THE FLEX PROGRAM

#### Introduction

The idea of foreign language exploration or experience (FLEX) was conceived near the end of World War I when it was closely tied to the emerging junior high school. More

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frequently, FLEX is offered to students in grades six, seven, eight or nine; the students study two or more foreign languages for six, eight, nine or eighteen weeks, depending on each school's curriculum set-up. Based on the students' exploratory learning experience, they then choose which foreign language to study further.

Since the inception of the FLEX program in the United States, the number of schools that have adopted the FLEX program has been fluctuating for various reasons. Currently, there is a view that considers only sequential formal foreign language programs to be educationally worthy, and the FLEX program is not even considered at all. In spite of this opinion, the FLEX courses are still supported. Kennedy and De Lorenzo describe FLEX as "a fluid state of the art" (1985).

This is a case study of Japanese in the FLEX program which was implemented in a middle school<sup>1</sup> for the first time, and the examination of the enrollment result for the students' selections of their formal foreign language study. The possibility of high levels of foreign language instruction (for example, level three, four or five) rests normally upon a large number of students enrolling in the lower levels. For this quantitative perspective, the size of first year foreign language enrollment determines the potentiality for upper levels of Japanese language instruction. (Of course, there are other factors which affect the possibility of high levels instruction.)

In the school year 1991-92, when the Shaler school district, a suburb of Pittsburgh, restructured their junior high school into a middle school Shaler Middle School initiated exploratory programs to fulfill in part the goals of "middle school concepts" (NASSP, 1985, 1987, Williamson and Johnston, 1991)<sup>2</sup>. The seventh grade's exploratory program at Shaler Middle School consisted of French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Computer and Business, in which 320 seventh graders (including Special Education students) rotated classes every six weeks. Exploratory courses were non-academic, and students were graded only as Excellent, Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory.

At the end of the school year, each student was to select a language to pursue during the eighth grade. This was the first year the School District added the Japanese language, but only in their middle school FLEX program, not in the high school foreign language curriculum. I was the first Japanese language teacher in the FLEX pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the inclusion of Japanese in FLEX in the Shaler school district, the other school district in this region conceived a similar idea, but the lack of a Japanese language teacher resulted in the omission of a Japanese course. The source of difficulty in locating Japanese language teachers includes certification and benefits. It is very common that the Japanese teacher's position during the first year is not considered full-time due to the limited number of Japanese classes.

<sup>2</sup> For those who may wonder what the major differences between junior and middle schools, junior high school is made up of grades 7, 8, and 9; while, middle school is from grades 6 through 8. Music, Arts, Home Economics, and Industrial arts or Physical education are often labeled as exploratory or special courses in the polarity of academic and non-academic. Whether foreign languages are considered academic or non-academic is decided solely by the curricular structure of each school.

gram.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the school year, the 1992–93 eighth grade foreign language enrollment was reported as follows: Spanish: 163 students (54 percent); French: 109 students (36 percent); German: 16 students (5 percent); Japanese: 16 students (5 percent).

Although I was aware that Japanese is still a minor component of the American foreign language curriculum,<sup>4</sup> I had hoped that perhaps 10 percent of the exploratory students would choose it for further study. The actual percentage was somewhat surprising to me.

It was my assumption that the teacher's adequacy of instructional presentation and affective personality would be keys to attracting adolescent students' interest and influencing their choice of a foreign language of study. I thought I had captured their interest based on my subjective observation of their enthusiastic participation in classroom activities and the friendly rapport that we maintained both in and outside the classroom. I also established a positive relationship with school counselors. Also, I happened to be the only native-language teacher. Learning a foreign language directly from a native-language-teacher with experience in dealing with American adolescent students is thought to be to their learning advantage. Given this, factors extraneous to instruction must have influenced the students' decisions.

The following is not a formal factor analysis. It is merely an exploratory description relevant to a particular social and educational environment.

### **Learner Characteristics**

The idea of the non-graded evaluation for FLEX courses was derived from the apprehension that students may choose a particular foreign language by comparing grades: they may choose a language course where they received an A grade over another language in which they received a B grade. The teacher's letter grade could be, in a way, arbitrary, relative to each class performance norm, the teacher's perception of the student's personal traits, the impossibility of getting well-acquainted with each student in the very short time of contact, and the difficulty of validating four grade-levels precisely and consistently among four language teachers.

The notion of non-grading, therefore, is intended to assure that the students' decisions are solely based on their own perceived self-aptitude, ability to pursue (intelligence), learning orientation, desire and needs. Traditionally, the learner's ethnocentric

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<sup>3</sup> The Pennsylvania State Department of Education does not require foreign language study, although it recommends four years of foreign language study for college bound students. The Shaler school district is now in the process of implementing a new curricular structure, in which the above requirements are to be mandated.

<sup>4</sup> See "MLA Survey of College Foreign language Enrollments. "Also Rhodes and Oxford (1988) for the results of a national survey conducted by the Center for Language Education and Research. *Nihongo Kyooiku Tsuushin* No. 7 (1991), by the Japan Foundation Language Center, reports the current status of Japanese in secondary schools in the states of Oregon, Washington, and Iowa.

tendencies and attitudes towards the member of other groups also help to determine which language to study.

*Demographic Distribution:* The seventh graders' ethnic backgrounds in this middle school are: one Spanish, one Korean-American, three blacks, and one native Indian. The rest are all white. This means that the ratio of foreign language enrollment does not represent the configuration of ethnolinguistic community residents represented in the seventh graders' backgrounds, despite the fact there have been German exchange students in school from time to time.

*Socio-affective Filter:* It is reasonable to agree that "the strong relationship between parents' and children's attitudes suggests that attitudes are developed in the home, before language training starts" (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). It is postulated that a majority of Shaler's seventh graders' perceptions towards Spanish-speaking people are neutral, not necessarily positive or negative. On the other hand, some students, as a reflection of their parents' views, may hold a bias against the Japanese (and German?) people. Such social attitudes towards Japan are found in their portfolios or in class discussion. It is difficult to estimate to what extent such expressed opinions are shared by other taciturn students.

*Learning Orientation:* It can be postulated that a majority of seventh graders' orientation towards learning a foreign language is short-term rather than long-term. The achievement of a long term goal requires the persistence needed for the laborious and time-consuming task of developing real competence in a new language. Can they perceive the commitment ahead or do they have sincere interest in the people who speak that language?

Gardner and Lambert theorized terms of instrumental and integrative motivation for measuring second-language proficiency from their research of English-speaking high school students learning French in Canada. According to their research, motivation and attitudes *independent of* aptitude and intelligence contribute to the success of students mastering a second language. With the recognition of differences between a second and a foreign language, the following inferences seem to be valid:

*Instrumental*—Seventh graders have chosen a foreign language for the value of linguistic achievement—or academic fulfillment (earning a good grade and preparing a requirement for college entrance). It was unusual to find students who stated that they chose Japanese for their future career in business.

*Integrative*—Students may have chosen a language, "reflecting a willingness or a desire to be like representative members of the "other" language community, and to become associated with that other community" (Gardner and Lambert, 1975). With few exceptions, district students who grew up in their monolingual community without any visibility of subculture groups may not have any realistic images of the characteristics of "the other group," beyond the stereotypes portrayed by media.

*Anxiety (Drive-reduction):* Students' selections of a foreign language could be based on an unconscious avoidance of the unknown, completely new, or of perceived hard work. One teacher in the building interpreted the enrollment statistics from a psychological aspect. She said, "They are probably afraid of non-alphabet languages.

Their motivation for selection would be 'Spanish is easy, and my sister took it, and I can ask her about my homework.' ”

Her judgment is quite in agreement with Lambert. He states, after quoting the national statistics of Spanish dominance in foreign language study in the United States, "At first glance, the dominance of Spanish as the language of first choice by students might appear to be driven by the large and increasing Hispanic Minority in the United States. This, in fact, plays a very small role. To a greater extent it is a testimonial to low motivation for language learning. Much more important to heavy enrollment is the general belief among students that Spanish is easier to learn than French and certainly easier than German" (Lambert, 1989: 7). Balch writes, "American students' motivation, attitude, and dedication to the learning process appears to be decreasing (Balch, 1991). A fear of failure of a course is realistic for students. From the reality of the adolescent school life, the following analysis is hypothesized.

*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:* The determinant of students' behavior, in selecting a foreign language, does not rest solely on their conscious desires for achievement or avoidance of fear of poor grades. They may have conscious or unconscious needs to be satisfied.

According to Maslow, needs are defined as psychological drives, and a hierarchy is formulated: physiological, safety, belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization, the desire to know and to understand, and aesthetics (Maslow, 1970). Adolescent learners may choose a course out of unconscious or conscious "safety needs." Some students may feel safe in choosing the most commonly taught languages, because they have a "preference for very familiar [for example the Spanish language has existed in the school curriculum for many years, and students' siblings may know the teachers well] rather than unfamiliar [the newness of the Japanese language in the curriculum or a native-language-speaking teacher], for the known [availability of a higher level of course study] rather than the unknown [being the first year, Japanese course continuity was not guaranteed or announced]" (Maslow, 1970).

Some of them may choose a foreign language in order to gratify their "belonging needs." Venturing into something new may not be worth the alienation from a majority of their peer group, or may even scare them psychopathologically. A linguist describes it, although not in Maslow's hierarchy frame, as "the individual's unwillingness to violate the solidarity of the group by exceeding its norms" (Stevick, 1976).

Some may consciously avoid selecting the Japanese language despite their active and satisfying classroom experience in Japanese class because the selection of the Japanese course may lead to a conflict in terms of adequacy of their self-identifications with their immediate environment. This, therefore, implicates their sense of "self-esteem."

It is practically impossible to investigate how many students have chosen a foreign language out of their cognitive needs or conative needs. The satisfaction of their needs in the lower hierarchy may be prepotent for some students. The intensity of their learning motivation in the stage of "self-actualization" or "to know and to understand the other group" through a foreign language study cannot be measured in statistical numbers.

*Age Differences:* Is there any age factor involved in this result? “. . . the age of ten or so may be the most receptive and friendly developmental period for introducing cultural differences. Perhaps language training should be adjusted to capitalize on this age level, for it is then that children are more likely to see foreigners as different but interesting, whereas before and after the age of ten or so, they tend to link “different” with “bad” (Gardner and Lambert, 1975). Is thirteen or fourteen year old student too late for satisfying a student’s own inquisitiveness?”

### **Counselors’ and Parents’ Influences**

In the secondary public school system in the United States, there are counselors for students in every school. One of their roles is to give advice to students, sometimes they even assign which course to take. Needless to say, well-supervised students’ decisions were supported and approved by parents at home. In the hall, I met one student who apologized to me for not being able to gain his parents’ approval to enroll in Japanese. On the other hand, several parents persuaded their children to study Japanese against the child’s first choice of another language. One father told me, “I encouraged my daughter to study Japanese. She wanted to study French because her friends do. I studied French for five years in school, but it did not help me. I think the Japanese language will be more practical for the future.”

### **Language Characteristics: Truly Foreign Languages vs. Cognate Languages**

For a person whose native language is English, Spanish, German, and French are not considered to be “truly foreign languages” (Walton, 1992). They are relatives to English. The Foreign Service Institute and the Defense Language Institute established a world language classification based on learning difficulty for native English speakers. According to this classification, French, Spanish, and German are called Category 1 languages. Japanese is a Category 4 languages.<sup>5</sup> This scale, derived from learning and linguistic analysis, may influence the young learner’s choice of foreign language, especially if the learning purpose is merely to fulfill academic requirements.

### **Teachers’ Promoting Strategies**

An assumption exists that students perceived all four language classes in FLEX as almost the same in instructional content and learning difficulty, except for the differences in teaching styles and promotional strategies.

Various television commercials promote sales by attracting children’s attention to particular consumer commodities. In education, the subject matter can be viewed as a commodity. For a school district, when it can offer more of a variety of programs—academic or enriching—it will be credited with increasing the potential of reaching more

<sup>5</sup> Category 1 languages: French, Spanish, German, Afrikaans, Norwegian, and Swahili; Category 2: Bulgarian, Farsi, Greek, Hindi, and Indonesian; Category 3: Burmese, Hebrew, Russian, Turkish, and Finnish; Category 4: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (Walton, 1992: 3).

children and improving the quality of children's lives in school, although not directly generating a stream of basic benefits: improved three Rs, Reading, writing, and arithmetic, skills. The FLEX program can be viewed as a consumption educational good functioning in a broader perspective. "Education can be viewed as a necessity, a good and a luxury" (TRI-State Forum, 1991). Studying French or, for that matter, any language in FLEX, does not lead the learner to be a future bilingual person; it merely facilitates the first step of their interest in a foreign language. Therefore, their experience of FLEX study may be viewed as a luxury.

For each teacher in FLEX, the number he/she attracts tends to be equated with the level of their instructional success (or sales achievement?) by school administrators. With each teacher's pride and competence in his/her own subject, a tacit competition is being held in attempting to gain a greater market share of students for his/her own subject area.

One teacher carries a bucket full of candies and gives them to students as rewards for correct answers. Another teacher emphasizes the advantages of the target language for the dominant speakers in the United States, thus persuading the adolescent learners of the usability of that foreign language without leaving this country. Another teacher could have exploited the students' ethnic backgrounds and drawn more students. The Japanese teacher's conscious effort was to alleviate, if not eradicate the learners' potential social bias or unnecessary linguistic anxiety, being indoctrinated somewhere.

### **Long-term Perspective of Japanese Language Instruction in the School District**

In the first school year that Japanese was offered, there was no commitment for future Japanese language instruction in the main foreign language curriculum from the Board of Education or the foreign language department. The lack of assurance of Japanese language continuity affected the first-year students' attitudes in their choice. Several students asked me, "Will the Japanese language be offered in our high school?" Why should they choose a foreign language that is not guaranteed continuity by the school district?

At the end of the school year, I met with administrators of the school boards, submitting recommendations for offering Japanese in their high school concurrently. Then, at the end of the summer, I was notified of the change of my employment status from part-time to full-time, despite the limited number of instructional classes. This favorable treatment toward a Japanese language teacher, while some other subject teachers were furloughed, indicates that this school district began to place a definite value on the Japanese language as a formal foreign language in their long-term curriculum perspective.

*Considerations:* There are, of course, a number of limitations to this exploratory description of the general patterns of the Japanese language curriculum's entrance and expansion in U.S. public schools. First, not all the Japanese language courses offered in U.S. schools entered the school curricula in the form of FLEX. Secondly, how widely FLEX Japanese is offered is not known. Thirdly, each school district weighs the value of the Japanese language study on a different scale according to their community's sense of educational needs and the directions set by the Department of Educa-

tion in each state. Therefore, this report must be interpreted as an educational event happening in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

However, there are commonalities to be shared. Shaler is like many other schools in a suburban or rural area where no sub-culture groups are found and the residents are "all American." Inside the school, there is tacit competition among foreign language teachers to increase student enrollment in their own language. In a multicultural society, this is a matter-of-fact phenomenon.

## INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING

From the 30-hour exposure to the Japanese language in the FLEX program, what is the seventh grade students' learning outcome? To what extent can they develop language skills taught by the communicative approach? How do they learn kanji? These topics are dealt here as examples of instruction and learning taking place in the classroom as a result of the teacher's input and the learners' processing output.

### Affective Domain

The FLEX program of a six-week rotating base is a typical model of "Enter—>Instruction—>Exit" in the context of testing. In this type of model, there is no feedback about whether or not students learn, and no remedial treatment is possible. In an exploratory program, the main goals are the learner's exploratory experience, broadening cultural knowledge and "tasting" of language learning. It is not aimed for linguistic skills development. (Although in as little as six weeks, the learner's innate ability for language development is observed, which is described behaviorally later.) Then how do teachers assess the participants' experiences from their point of view?

*Portfolio:* The portfolio as an assessment tool is reported by many writers in the American educational scene (American Teacher, 1992; Rief, 1991; Wolf, 1988), and journal writing is used by college-level learners (Oxford and Crookall, 1989). I adopted a variant form of a portfolio, journal writing, in my class to raise students' consciousness of their own progress, satisfaction, discovery, etc. It also provided me with a chance to examine "how students learn."

Here are some students' comments: *Satisfaction-* "I learned greetings, counting, introducing myself, kanji *recognition*, how to write my name in katakana, the islands of Japan (*geography around Japan*) and other things like origami, kimono *pattern design*. I enjoyed all of them and I think that I never would have learned this stuff *if the Japanese language was not offered.*"

*Confidence—*"Learning Japanese was interesting. In the future if I ever met a Japanese person, I would know how to communicate. . . ." *New realization/discovery—* "I think Japanese is complicated when you first look at it (*she probably means kanji; I introduced several kanji for recognition level*), but once you learn about them, it become easy." "Learning Japanese is nothing like English at all." This male student was fascinated with kana. After my brief introduction of grapho-phonemic correspondence, he taught himself how to write the words, *to yo ta, ho n da, and su zu ki* in katakana.

Later, I found paper planes under his chair. On the wings of the paper planes, there were drawings of the Japanese flag and the name, *Toyota* written in katakana.

There were several students who expressed their preconceived views toward the Japanese language: “I don’t really like to study Japanese because I am not interested in Japanese,” “Japan put us down, saying we are lazy,” “Japan took our jobs,” and “Studying Japanese is only good when you go to Japan.” A majority of students wrote their experience in phrases like “I enjoyed it,” “I had fun,” “It was very interesting,” and “It was not as hard as I thought.”

### Oral Activities

The students’ portfolios demonstrate one aspect of the lessons’ general educational outcome, by reflecting the learners’ experiences. There are indeed other dimensions to the lessons, one of which is the participants’ language development.

After approximately 95 percent of the students are able to produce accurately in a created context introduced words and formulaic phrases, the lesson progresses to the next stage. Although real language development (language acquisition) does not occur in a linear fashion, constraints in classroom foreign language instruction are inevitable.

As a part of self-description, expressions revealing what they like and do not like are taught. For example, the affirmative sentence pattern of “*Yakyū ga suki*” (*I like baseball*) was introduced before “*Yakyū ga suki ja nai*” (*I don’t like baseball*). Vocabulary expansion is part of the sentence pattern drills. The learners’ cognitive capacities and relevancies to their personal and social interest are considered when selecting instructional strategies. For the memory enhancement of new vocabulary learning, which is identified as “creating mental linkages” and “applying images and sounds” (Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall, 1989), the teacher uses flashcards, realia, students’ illustrations of objects on papers or the blackboard; for example, fish candy is used to teach the word *sakana* (fish).

To capitalize on the young learner’s preference for physical motion and interactions with their peers, they perform body gestures, like playing a baseball hitter or pitcher, and their peers guess the performer’s pantomime by a noun on their word level, later by a phrase and a sentence. The students are grouped by dividing the whole class of 20 in half, then into small groups of four or five. Pairing is often used. Learning is enhanced not only by interaction with the teacher but also from model students among their group members. This has theoretical grounds, termed the “zone of proximal development” (Faltis, 1990).

After a few day of various practices, the students were expected to respond with what they like and do not like to the teacher at natural speech speed. One student responded, “*Pizza ga suki*” (*I like Pizza.*); the next student, “*Spinach ga suki ja nai*” (*I don’t like spinach*), and so forth. In the middle of this activity, one student’s response was, “*The Penguins ga suki.*” (*The Pittsburgh Penguins are a hockey team.*) Hearing this, all the students howed favorable emotion toward the team by repeating this sentence individually and together, and it almost became a cheer. The next student said, “*Black Hawks ga suki ja nai*” (*I don’t like the Blackhawks*). This time, a roar of voices of agreement filled the classroom. Then another student uttered his favorite hockey

player's name, one of the Penguins. This led to another student to speak out, “(XXX) *ga suki ja nai.*” (In parenthesis is the name of a player who injured a Penguin superstar.)

By this time, the whole class became very excited, and students who enjoyed oral activities were eager to say something unique. They wanted to get their peers' attention, seeking agreement, disagreement, or even for laughter. “*Dave-kun's mother ga suki*” (I like Dave's mother) or “*Beer and whisky ga suki*” (I like beer and whisky) uttered by boys brought another wave of laughter. “*Gakkō ga suki ja nai*” (I don't like school) gained much support, and so forth.

The operation on this level is to “recognize and use *the learned* formulas and patterns” and then to “recombine *a new item*” to create their own expression. In this recombination process, they negotiate the meaning, and focus on the message, not on the form of the language. In the above activity, their spontaneous production and comprehension appeared as if they were immersed in the Japanese language for a moment without noticing themselves.

The learners' oral productivity and their enthusiasm for participation in oral activity can be found in linguistic variables (simplification) and motivation, respectively. Prior to this group, “*Y wa X ga suki desu*” (Y like(s) X) (Pattern A) had been introduced and practiced. This time, the part of “*Y wa*” and “. . . *desu*” were omitted and only “*X ga suki*” (Pattern B) was practiced. The oral activity practiced for Pattern A was very dull. “Too much processing capacity is taken up with details of *linguistic form*, the message and the whole linguistic transaction suffer as a consequence” (Pienemann and Johnston, 1987: 85), while the activity of Pattern B was alive: “simplification leads to communication efficacy” (ibid.). Language fossilization at this stage and in this program is not a concern.

Second language pedagogy applies in a foreign language classroom. Wennerstrom states: “1. Learners are best motivated by *topics* (replacing ‘pronunciation materials’) taken directly from their own personal situations. 2. Learners can make the most progress when they are actively *participating in an activity* (replacing ‘studying their own pronunciation’)” (Wennerstrom, 1992: 15).

The above oral activity can also be interpreted with reference to Heshiki's sketch of language development (Heshiki, 1991). Each child has language acquisition devices (LAD) which constitute tacit mental structures—cognitive and communicative competence. “*These* two structures contribute to the formation and the development of the external communicative structure that includes language” (Heshiki, 1991: 135).

Probably, in a majority of the students' minds was the World Stanley Cup Playoff, in which the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team was to play the Chicago Black Hawks. As community supporters of the Penguins team, they were very emotional and had a desire to express their enthusiasm. This external event and their learned Japanese language patterns combined to form these intracultural communications. Their laughter on topics such as one boy's liking for his friend's mother or expressions of preference for a brand of beer took place on the grounds of a “principle of metaphor.”

This is not to say that all the participants mastered this expression. A day after the Stanley Cup Playoff, I encountered the following situation. Thomas M., who has average ability and aptitude, came to the school's main office. Seeing a computer illustration of a penguin on the counter, he asked the secretary. "May I have this penguin's picture? I like the Penguins." Happening to be there, I asked him immediately, "In Japanese, how would you say what you said now in English?" He paused and uttered, "*Ga suki the Penguins.*"

### **Kanji Learning by a Special Education Student**

In one of my classes, there was a special student named Jason C. who appeared to have no problems in his native language verbal skills, but had difficulty concentrating on learning in general: he was unable to sit still, unable to pay attention or listen intently, and unable to discriminate between main words and phrases that the teacher was trying to introduce. He was unable to select items to store in his memory, and consequently there was nothing left to retrieve the next day or even on the same day. His learning problems seem beyond a "phonetic coding deficit" which is attributed to be a cause of foreign language learning difficulty (Sparks and Ganchow, 1991). Nonetheless, Jason demonstrated an unusual interest and a unique ability in learning the Japanese ideographic characters called kanji.

Kanji were introduced as a part of Japanese orthography exploration after students mastered the numbers from one through thirty. Some students easily grasp the number system (adopted from Chinese) and can produce up to one hundred in a few lessons.

There are various techniques to introduce and practice kanji. First, a review of their understanding of Egyptian Hieroglyphics (their prior knowledge) as a writing system different from English was made in order to aid the comprehension of the concept of kanji, a word writing system. This assists the students' understanding by laying down a "cognitive bridge." Next is the visual recognition of the number kanji by naming or labeling aloud, such as *ichi* for 一 (presented on a big flash card, or by writing it on the chalk board), "one"; *ni* for 二, "two"; and so forth. The next procedure is *kūsho*, imitating the formation of characters in the air with their writing hand. Then, the students practice writing them on paper, on the blackboard, or in pairs: one writing on the partner's back and the other guessing what was written on his/her back. There are other alternatives for practicing kanji, integrated with various forms of art work and calligraphy.

During the second kanji lesson (a kanji lesson is approximately 15 or 20 minutes per class period), and before my review activity, Jason unexpectedly volunteered to write, from memory the numbers one (一) through ten (十), skipping eight and nine, on the chalkboard. He didn't consult his notebook before writing. He had memorized them all, and all the kanji he produced were accurate. When I asked him to read aloud each character which he had written, he read aloud correctly while pointing to each character, *ichi*, *ni*, *san*, *shi*, *go*, and so forth.

How could Jason who couldn't even master *konnichiwa* after two or three weeks of

hearing it every day in the classroom write eight kanji after such short exposure? The possible answer would be that Jason was motivated by mathematics, not by conversational phrases, and he treated the kanji as a "coded" number system.

The next day, I briefly explained in class how *jū ichi* (eleven) is written: a combination of *jū* and *ichi*. After twenty minutes, I switched to an oral activity. Not participating in the oral activities, Jason occupied himself writing kanji numbers from 11 through 99. At the end of the period, he proudly showed me what he had written and asked me what is one hundred in Japanese and how it is written in kanji. I praised his efforts and the accuracy of his kanji numbers. When I pointed to the number unit, 七十九 and asked what it was, he paused and responded in English, "seventy nine."

I had not observed his writing process. One can fill space with mathematic manipulations such as writing *jū* (+) ten times, and filling in *ichi*, *ni*, *san* and so forth later. He could have followed through with each unit number. My observation of Jason's kanji learning confirmed that "meaning features for a simple pictorial stimuli (kanji numbers in this case) can be accessed without any degree of processing of phonetic features" (Nelson, Reed, and McEvoy, 1977), and phonemic features of a word into a verbal label or name code can be reintegrated after the process of its semantic characters.

After number lessons from 1 through 30, without the requirement of mastering kanji from one through 10, the vocabulary lesson focused on the for months of the year. At varied rates, the majority of students acquired skills to distinguish aurally and produce words for the months. However, Jason's number learning appeared isolated, and he could not transfer his number knowledge to form a month expression during the rest of the course. For him the oral and aural activities of a foreign language are beyond his ability and/or interest.

## CONCLUSION

Upon learning that students study four foreign languages for six weeks in rotation, native Japanese frequently express rather negative views: "it confuses the learners," or "what a waste of time it is." They fail to see America's dynamic pluralism and its cultural diversity. The addition of the uncommonly taught Japanese language in public schools is indicative of the flexible, democratic and dynamic vision of schools toward education. By providing various choices and experiences to community children, schools attempt to achieve their mission of equipping children for the changing society and the world community.

The Japanese language will probably not gain dominant learner population in public schools in the United States, nor would this be a reasonable goal. However, by the focused efforts of Japanese language teachers, among other social, economic, and political factors entering into play in learners' or their parents' choices of a foreign language, there might be a steady and gradual increase of student enrollment. Then, our task is to inspire the learners to study and to encourage them toward further study.

Teachers in public school classrooms sometime cannot fully utilize learner-centered creative lessons due to departmentally-defined or school-district-regulated curriculum

goals and structures, that are consistent with other foreign languages. In any given situation, however, we Japanese language teachers, particularly in the FLEX program, should identify areas of the students' cognitive development and ways to enhance their general knowledge about Japan with a positive yet educationally critical outlook.

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