

Personal Growth Foreign Language Homework

—An Experiential Task In The Local Community—

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Abstract

This paper discusses the design of foreign language homework involving student interaction with the local community. It attempts to show how this can lead to both effective language learning and personal growth.

The paper begins with a short description of the humanistic education movement and its influence on foreign language teaching. The concepts of personal growth (Moskowitz 1978), interactive language teaching (Rivers 1987) and experiential language learning (Jerald and Clark 1983) are then discussed. To show how these concepts can be integrated into educational tasks, a classroom activity framework known as the S-I-S-F model (Timmerman and Ballard 1975) is introduced.

To illustrate this model, an English language homework task called 'Conversation with a Stranger' is described. For this task, university students had to go into the local community, talk to a stranger in English or Japanese, and then write an English report about their experience. After an analysis of the task using excerpts from student reports, features and criticisms of the approach are discussed. It is concluded that interactive, experiential foreign language homework can promote linguistic and social skills, stimulate student initiative, motivation and enjoyment, and foster good interpersonal and international attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

With the world-wide growth of technology and bureaucracy, people in many countries fear that life in modern society is becoming increasingly impersonal and dehumanized. Many look to education for an antidote to this. There is concern among educators themselves, however,

that our schools are losing their 'heart' by concentrating too much on the 'head'. (The following quotes all from Moskowitz 1978.)

"Each year I become more pessimistic about what is going on in educational institutions. They have focussed so intently on the cognitive and have limited themselves so completely to 'education from the neck up', that this narrowness is resulting in serious social consequences. . . As a (result), most of the excitement has gone out of education." (C. Rogers 1975)

"Teachers have long been expert in providing information. . . Our major failures do not arise from lack of information. They come from. . . our inability to help students discover the personal meaning of the information we. . . provide them. Our preoccupation with. . . information. . . has dehumanized our schools, alienated our youth, and produced a system irrelevant for most students." (A. Combs 1970)

"Are all classrooms dead? No, not all. But too damned many are. . . What is the difference between a dead and a live classroom? In the dead classroom learning is mechanistic, routine, over-ritualized, dull and boring. The live classroom. . . is full of learning activities in which students are enthusiastically and authentically involved. . . the learning involves living." (G. I. Brown 1975)

Out of these kinds of concerns has grown the 'humanistic education' movement, dealing with the affective, emotional and psychological aspects of learning. Proponents of humanistic education stress that effective learning requires the integration of subject matter with students' feelings, emotions, experiences and lives. This movement encompasses a wide variety of educators, ranging from academics attempting taxonomies of humanistic objectives (Bloom 1964) to practicing teachers focussing on personal relationships (e. g. Buscaglia 1982).

These ideas of humanistic education have also entered the field of foreign language teaching, notably through the writings of educators such as Moskowitz (*Humanistic Activities*), Curran (*Counselling-Learning*), and Gattegno (*Silent Way*). Though a profession-wide consensus is difficult to reach, humanistic education has certainly stimulated debate (e. g. British Council ELT Document #113 1982). Humanistic influences can also be seen in student-centered language

teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching.

Moskowitz (1978) states that the goal of humanistic language teaching is to enhance our students' personal growth along with their growth in the target language. By 'personal growth' or 'self-actualization', she refers to self-knowledge and self-esteem, to the development of independence, empathy, caring, positive feelings about life and other people, to the realization of one's potential abilities as a whole person.

How can foreign language educators integrate humanistic ideas into their teaching? How can we make our classes less 'dead', boring, mechanistic and more alive, involved, enthusiastic? In addition to the ideas of the authors cited above, there are perhaps two additional ideas that are relevant here. One is 'interactive language teaching', discussed in depth by Rivers (1987). The other is 'experiential language teaching' discussed by Jerald & Clark (1983).

The interactive language teaching approach postulates that real, meaningful language learning cannot take place in impersonal, passive, teacher-dominated classrooms. To be effective, language learning must promote interaction between teacher and learners, between learners and learners, and between learners and the foreign language. This interaction must involve willing student participation, creativity and initiative, as well as a sense of enjoyment and enthusiasm.

Experiential language teaching, in the words of Jerald and Clark, involves helping students "bridge the gap between practicing the language in the controlled, secure environment of the classroom and using it for communication in the unpredictable real world outside. . . (It results in) learning that comes from field experiences that the students have. . . The teacher's job is to provide the structure for the experience, to prepare the students for going outside of the class, and to help them analyze what they have learned from it". Strevens (in Rivers 1987) describes this community contact as 'interaction outside the classroom' and argues that such activities increase student enjoyment, create student initiative and self-motivated language learning, and enhance the reputation of the teacher. Experiential learning can thus promote personal growth.

THE S-I-S-F MODEL

For personal growth to be achieved through educational tasks, an effective learning framework is required. The values built into such a framework will determine what is learned. Traditional motivations such as authority, punishment, reward and conformity have been

criticized by many writers as being counterproductive to real learning. One model for humanistic learning has been proposed by Timmerman and Ballard (1975). This is called the S-I-S-F Lesson Plan Model and is claimed to facilitate learning for any classroom activity.

The S-I-S-F Model consists of four steps as follows :

- 1 Structure : This provides the framework for the activity, sets limits and provides expectations. The structure is set up by the teacher. The structure of humanistic homework tasks should be designed to stimulate students, to engage student initiative and to provide opportunities for personal growth. They should also ensure student involvement and success.
- 2 Involvement : This refers to the voluntary participation of students within the framework of the task in terms of their own personal interests and concerns. A well-designed task will thus be open-ended, inviting eager student participation and involving student emotions, imagination and free choice. Well-planned involvement leads to success.
- 3 Success : This is a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment ("I did it!") on the student's part accompanied by a feeling of personal growth. A good task will ensure that each student succeeds and will permit the teacher to congratulate the student and provide feedback.
- 4 Feedback : This is a positive response from the teacher and other students which affirms a student's task success and helps the student to interpret the experiences he or she had. Good feedback should encourage students, make them feel appreciated, and help them see better what and how they did.

A COMMUNITY-BASED EXPERIENTIAL PERSONAL GROWTH LANGUAGE TASK

To understand the principles of personal growth learning and the S-I-S-F Model, it is best to have a concrete example task to discuss. The task I will introduce here is a homework assignment given to first year English students of Tottori University at the beginning of the school year in April. Details of the task are as follows :

<u>Name</u>	“Conversation With A Stranger”
<u>Background</u>	In class, students studied an English textbook lesson about beginning a conversation with a stranger. This topic is very common in conversation texts. The textbook dialogue took place in a hotel lobby and began with the question “Is this seat taken?” The two people then asked ‘getting to know you’ questions such as “Where are you from?” As part of the lesson, different communicative strategies for starting conversations in English were discussed: “Hot today, isn’t it?” and “Excuse me. What time is it?”
<u>Task</u>	For homework, students were asked to talk to a stranger in either English or Japanese. They were then asked to write a report on what happened.
<u>Objectives</u>	<p><u>Linguistic</u>: (1) To practice the language of English conversation starting</p> <p>(2) To sensitize students to ‘communication strategies’</p> <p>(3) To sensitize students to English/Japanese differences in culture and communication</p> <p>(4) To practice student self-expression in English through writing an English report on their experiences</p> <p><u>Affective</u>: (1) To break down student shyness and inhibitions about talking to strangers</p> <p>(2) To stimulate student interests, emotions and initiative</p> <p>(3) To give students an opportunity for personal growth</p> <p>(4) To give students an opportunity to interact with people from the local community</p>
<u>Rationale</u>	<p>(1) <u>Talking to Strangers as a General Social Skill</u> Speaking to strangers is an important social skill. In daily life we often have to ask others for information (what time it is; how to get somewhere). Young people need practice in how to talk politely and correctly to strangers, even in their mother tongue, Japanese.</p> <p>(2) <u>Talking to Strangers as a Special Foreign Language Skill</u> Speaking to strangers is an important skill for foreign language learners both in Japan and overseas.</p> <p><u>In Japan (a) Helping Foreign People</u></p>

With increasing numbers of foreign students, workers and tourists here, there are greater opportunities to talk to people using foreign languages. Foreigners in Japan often get lost or have trouble with Japanese language or customs and appreciate it when Japanese people come up to them to help.

(b) Making Friends

Many foreigners miss the casual friendliness of their home countries and are happy to meet friendly Japanese strangers who can talk to them in their own language.

Outside Japan (a) Travel Survival Skill

For Japanese travelling overseas, especially those not on group tours, being able to ask strangers for information is an important travel survival skill. In order to know where things are, how much things cost, when and where buses leave, etc., it is crucial to be able to talk to strangers to ask for information.

(b) Learning About Foreign People & Cultures

Japanese people travelling abroad often have no contact with local people. Being able to talk to locals in the foreign language brings not only friendly relations but also greater understanding of the foreign culture.

(3) Contact with the Local Community

In the past, North American universities were often criticized as being 'ivory towers' cut off from the reality of society. As greater numbers of housewives, working people and senior citizens have entered the university, however, the situation has improved. It is considered a good thing for young students to mix with and learn from people from the larger society. Japanese university students are also quite isolated from society. I believe that, by talking to people in the local community, Japanese students can gain valuable experience, become more mature and improve their motivation to study. The importance of the community for language learning is discussed in detail in Ashworth (1985).

(4) Choice of English or Japanese

Though students were encouraged to talk to strangers in English, many chose to speak in Japanese. This was not felt to be a bad thing. As Tottori

Instructions

has a small number of foreign residents, it is a practical impossibility for several hundred Japanese students to each find a different foreign English speaker to talk to. Some students are not psychologically ready to speak English to foreigners and might well have a bad reaction if forced to do so. Students are told that they will practice the textbook lesson by talking to a stranger for homework. Students are always surprised by this and react with astonished remarks in Japanese among themselves "heeeeeee", "honto?" It is explained that they can talk in English or Japanese to either foreigners or Japanese people, but that the report they write must be in English. Though they are told it is a perfect chance to speak in English with non-Japanese people, no pressure is put on them and it is stressed that it is their free choice who they talk to. A handout explaining the homework is shown along with an example report based on a real student's report.

English Report

CONVERSATION WITH A STRANGER

Mr. Cates

WHAT TO DO

1 Start a conversation with a stranger, someone you don't know, using the methods we discussed in class:

QUESTIONS : Excuse me. Is this seat taken?/What time is it?

COMMENTS : It's quite cool today, isn't it?

2 Write a report in English about your conversation :

a) DESCRIBE THE SITUATION

Who did you talk to?

When and where did you talk to this person?

b) WRITE THE CONVERSATION

How did you start the conversation?

What did you talk about?

c) DESCRIBE YOUR IMPRESSIONS

What happened?

How did you feel?

EXAMPLE

Last weekend, my parents came to Tottori to visit me and to see what my college life is like at Tottori University. They stayed at the Hotel New Otani in downtown Tottori City, so I went there to meet them. We had arranged to meet at 3 pm on Saturday afternoon, but I arrived there a little early, so I waited in the lobby. I saw a noble old woman sitting in one of the chairs there. I thought this was a perfect chance for my English homework, so I went up and talked to her.

Me : Excuse me. Is this seat taken?

Lady : No. Sit down, please.

M : It's nice weather today, isn't it?

L : Yes. The scenery here is so lovely and green.

M : Where are you from?

L : I'm from Kobe. I came to Tottori to meet my grandchildren.

M : Oh, how wonderful!

L : Are you from around here?

M : Yes. I live in Tottori, but my hometown is Kyoto. I'm a student of Tottori University in the Faculty of Medicine. My parents are staying at this hotel for the weekend, so I'm waiting for them to come down from their room.

L : I see. I'm waiting for my daughter and grandchild.

M : Oh. Here come my parents! I have to go.

L : Please have a nice weekend with your parents.

M : Thank you. Have a good stay in Tottori with your daughter's family. Bye-bye.

This was my first time to talk to a stranger. I was a little nervous when I asked the lady 'Is this seat taken?', but she was very nice and friendly, so I soon relaxed and enjoyed the conversation with her. I think she was very happy to be visiting her grandchildren, so it was easy for her to talk to me. I think it was a good experience for me.

S-I-S-F FRAMEWORK OF THE 'CONVERSATION WITH A STRANGER' TASK

Structure The content of the task, talking with a stranger, is open-ended and yet gives students clear guidelines as to what is required. The task itself is quite stimulating and does provide opportunities for personal growth.

Involvement The task, talking with a stranger, naturally ensures student social and emotional involvement. The open-ended nature of the task encourages students to use their initiative and allows them to modify the task to accord with their own personality, interests and socio-linguistic ability. Students who are brave, interested in foreign countries and eager to try out their English can choose to speak in English to foreigners. Those who are shy, interested in the local community and not yet ready to use a foreign language in public can choose to talk in Japanese to a local Japanese person. The task stimulates students and allows them to challenge themselves.

Success Students are virtually guaranteed success since all they have to do is talk to a stranger and write an English report on the experience. It doesn't matter how the stranger reacts. Students are encouraged to see the task as a social experiment and thus to be slightly detached from the result.

Feedback After students have done the task, the teacher is able to give feedback in several ways: written comments on each report, spoken comments to students individually or with the whole class, etc. Other students can also be encouraged to give feedback through group discussions, reading and commenting on each other's reports, etc. Teacher feedback can stress students' success in completing the task, highlight language and cultural points, discuss communication strategies, help interpret student experiences and congratulate students on the personal growth achieved.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT RESPONSES

The following excerpts taken from student reports show the kinds of experiences students had and the linguistic and affective learning that students achieved.

Communication Strategies : Conversation Starting Techniques

In order to talk to a stranger, students were forced to become aware of the nature of

communication strategies in conversation. Besides the English conversation starting techniques introduced in class, some students used their own creativity and initiative and tried their own techniques. #4 was used by a few desperate students.

- 1 I dropped my handkerchief and asked "Is this your handkerchief?"
- 2 "I'm a photographer. Can I take your picture?"
- 3 "How changeable today's weather is!"
- 4 "Excuse me. We have Mr. Cates' English class. Please help us."

Success and Gratitude

Because of the S-I-S-F framework, virtually all students were able to succeed on the task. Those students who had particularly good experiences reported strong feelings of joy, excitement and gratitude. Some students were so pleased with the task that they even thanked me for giving them the homework - a rare, almost unbelievable occurrence for a teacher!

- 1 I talked to a Canadian student. This was a good chance to talk with foreigners. This homework is excellent!! Thank you, my teacher.
- 2 I walked on Ekimae-dori. I saw a very beautiful lady. Suddenly, I remembered my homework. Thank you, Mr. Cates, for a wonderful encounter.
- 3 Thank you, Mr. Cates. If it had not been for this English homework, I would not have wanted to talk to a foreigner and not have made such a friend.

Overcoming Inhibitions-Conversations in Japanese

As mentioned previously, students were given the choice of using English or Japanese to talk to strangers. As mentioned in the rationale, this was for both practical and psychological reasons. Those students who chose to talk to Japanese people or to foreigners in Japanese reported good experiences and often mentioned feelings of satisfaction about overcoming shyness. Typical comments follow.

- 1 This was the first time I talked to a stranger because I am very shy. I always get stage fright when I talk. But by this, I got great confidence.
- 2 At first, I was ashamed of myself for having a conversation. But, at last, I felt it was

comfortable and I noticed it was a very happy time.

- 3 From this homework, I knew that what is important to have a lot of friends is to act positively and not to hesitate talking to people.

Gaining Confidence in a Foreign Language

Students who spoke with a stranger in Japanese chose to deal only with psychosocial inhibitions such as shyness. Those students who spoke to others in English chose to deal not only with their shyness barrier but also with the language barrier. Conversations in English were of two types :

(a) Conversations in English with other Japanese

Amazingly enough, some students decided to speak in English with strangers who were Japanese. Because of the great scarcity of native English speakers in the Tottori area, it would have been easier for them to speak in Japanese with Japanese people. However, they made an effort to use the foreign language. This indicates the strong motivation some students have for actually using the foreign language in real life, even if it is only with fellow countrymen. Despite feelings of initial awkwardness, students overwhelmingly felt the experience worthwhile. Some typical comments were :

- 1 I talked to someone in English for the first time. I was tense at first, but gradually he and I enjoyed English conversation.
- 2 I asked a Japanese girl the way to Tottori University in English. She laughed and I explained why I spoke English. We went to a coffee shop. I thought this is a good way to meet girls! - Japanese boy
- 3 When I went shopping on Sunday, I happened to meet a boy. I said, "Excuse me, may I have a talk with you in English?" He was surprised but answered "Yes".

(b) Conversations in English with Foreigners

The bravest and most ambitious students decided to search out foreign people in Tottori to speak with them in English. As with the students above, many felt shy and apprehensive at the beginning but gradually gained valuable confidence in their social and linguistic abilities. Even students who couldn't understand very much or make themselves understood well still felt a

sense of satisfaction.

- 1 I was regrettable that I could not make myself understood. But I was happy because I talked with a foreigner.
- 2 First, I was afraid but after I thought English conversation isn't difficult.

Greater International Awareness and Interest

In addition to developing confidence and new social and linguistic skills, many students also reported a feeling of greater international awareness as a result of this homework task. These students were typically those who had talked to foreigners either in English or Japanese. From reading the comments, one can feel that even these brief encounters worked to widen the horizons of these Japanese students. Some representative comments :

- 1 I talked to a boy from Malaysia. I want to go to Malaysia.
- 2 I spoke to a Chinese student. How well she speaks Japanese! It must be hard to live in a foreign country. Could I do such a thing? I respect her.
- 3 It was the first time to talk in Japanese with a foreigner. It was difficult to speak Japanese well and easily to others. It was a good experience to me.
- 4 At first, I had little interest in talking to a foreign student. But, I gradually became interested. Now, I want to talk to many foreign students.

Disappointment

A small number of students had difficult or embarrassing experiences and felt disappointed. This is to be expected. Negative feelings, however, can be prevented by proper teacher orientation. Before the task, students were told to consider the homework as a sociological experiment. They were told that it didn't matter what kind of reaction they got, that the stranger they talked to might be friendly, angry or might even run away. For the task to be successful, all that was necessary was to start a conversation with someone and report clearly what happened and how they felt. Given this orientation, students approached the task in a positive way.

Post-task guidance was also important. Students whose experiences were difficult could be helped by the teacher to see what went wrong and how to have a better experience in future.

Students in #1 and #3 below realized their mistakes themselves. Overly sensitive students, such as #4, could be guided to see that what is rude in Japanese is not necessarily rude in English. In general, even students whose experiences were embarrassing still felt the experience was valuable and were eager to try talking to strangers in future.

- 1 I went to a restaurant where a German woman works. I asked her to help with my homework. She made an ugly face and refused. I repent mentioning homework.
- 2 I told a boy I wanted to talk something over with him. He ran away without looking back. My heart was filled with grief.
- 3 I asked a foreign student "What time is it?". He saw I had a watch and asked why I didn't see it. I was so scared I couldn't say anything. And I ran away. I felt I was a real fool but I want to try again.
- 4 I was ashamed of the way I spoke English. It was rude. I thought I offended her.

Failure

Because of the S-I-S-F design of the task, all the students had to do to 'succeed' was to talk to any stranger, regardless of the response they got, and write a report about it. Therefore, the only way not to succeed was to not talk with a stranger. Of the hundreds of students involved, only one did not talk to a stranger. This student's comment is given below :

- 1 I'm shy, so I can't write this report. I'm sorry.

Yet, this student actually did write a report. He intended to talk to a stranger and went to Tottori train station for this. Instead of talking to a stranger, though, the student was too shy and just spent an hour observing the people waiting there. The report he wrote was a detailed description of the people he had observed. Although this could be classed as a 'technical failure', a bit of compassion and psychological understanding underline the fact that, just as there is a 'readiness' for learning, so there is a 'readiness' for this kind of risk-taking. If some students are really not able to complete the task, then an alternate kind of report can be devised.

FEATURES OF PERSONAL GROWTH HOMEWORK PROJECTS

Having discussed a concrete example of a personal growth homework task, what stand out as the main features of such projects?

I Linguistic Features

- 1 *Focus on meaning* - A key aspect of these tasks is meaningful personal involvement. Using the words "Is this seat taken?" in a real-life situation is much more meaningful than just reading them in a textbook. Writing an English report to describe a powerful emotional/social/cultural/linguistic experience you've had is much more meaningful than describing something you're not involved in. In various ways, then, linguistic focus is primarily on meaning.
- 2 *Focus on form* - While meaning is the primary focus, linguistic form is still emphasized. Students who spoke in English were eager to use the correct forms in order to be understood. Those who spoke in Japanese focussed on the differing form of English when they translated their conversations into English.
- 3 *Focus on communication* - Tasks such as this involving real, social interaction force students to become aware of communicative strategies and the features of real communication.
- 4 *Focus on culture* - Whether interacting with foreign people or doing English language tasks in the Japanese community, students are brought face to face with differences in culture which they have a chance to experience first-hand.

II Educational Features

- 1 *Focus on learning* - In tasks using the S-I-S-F framework, students become the 'stars' of the event while teachers take up support roles as facilitators and advisors. The spotlight throughout is on the experiences and learning of the students.
- 2 *Adaptability* - The S-I-S-F model and the features of personal growth, interaction and experiential learning are not limited to a single activity, but can be adapted to a wide variety of language learning activities. With a bit of teacher creativity, most foreign language dialogues, topics, functions, and situations can be integrated into this format.

III Socio-emotional Features

- 1 *Interpersonal interaction* - These kinds of task touch the essential social role of language as a means of communicative interaction between people. This provides a needed balance

to the traditional view of language as book-learning. Interpersonal interaction is essential for the healthy personal growth of students.

- 2 *Community contact* - Breaking down the walls that separate the isolated world of the classroom from the 'real' world of the wider society helps students situate their study in a proper context. Tasks which encourage community contact will widen student horizons, stimulate motivation, build student confidence and maturity, enhance the reputation of students in society, and encourage students to use effectively the human and other resources of the community.
- 3 *Creativity, interest and initiative* - Open-ended tasks which invite students to participate on their own terms automatically produce enthusiasm. When students are free to involve their own ideas and interests, they become active participants in learning. The surprise, spontaneity, discovery and enjoyment felt by students lead to more effective and successful learning.

POSSIBLE CRITICISMS

No learning activity is perfect. Every activity has both strong and weak points and, of course, every activity can be improved. What then are some of the criticisms we should consider about this kind of personal growth language task?

- 1 Teacher Manipulation : One could criticize teachers for manipulating students' emotions and personalities through such tasks. However, if we are honest, we have to admit that all teaching is manipulative in some sense. What is important is the goal of our manipulation, in this case to help students learn social, communication and language skills while experiencing a sense of personal growth.
- 2 Creating Teacher-pleasers : Tasks like this may lead some students to falsely report personal growth 'because that's what the teacher wants to hear'. However, even these students are affected by the task experience.
- 3 Differing Student Personalities : Some students are outgoing, some very shy. These tasks try as much as possible to adapt to student differences while still encouraging students to challenge themselves and their inhibitions.
- 4 Bad Student Experiences : As mentioned, some 'bad' student experiences are perhaps inevitable, but these can be alleviated with good teacher pre-task orientation and post-

task guidance. Guaranteed task success and lavish teacher praise help here.

- 5 Speaking Japanese : Allowing Japanese students to speak Japanese on an English homework task is not ideal. However, given the scarcity of English speakers in Tottori, this represents a practical compromise with reality and, in various ways, facilitated the linguistic and affective objectives of the task for some students.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Learning involves both our heads and our hearts. Real, meaningful learning is more than just 'education from the neck up', but involves our interests, experiences and initiative. From our discussion of humanistic teaching, we saw how affective objectives must be integrated with cognitive objectives for education to be effective. To help achieve this, we brought in a model of humanistic learning called the S-I-S-F model and discussed how tasks could be designed to incorporate active student involvement and learning success.

As a concrete example of what a personal growth foreign language task would look like, we looked at an English class homework project called 'Conversation With A Stranger'. Through an analysis of the task, we saw how it fit the S-I-S-F format. We were able to get an overall impression of the linguistic and personal growth learning achieved through an analysis of representative comments taken from student reports. The comments given would seem to suggest that these kinds of task promote linguistic, communicative and social skills, lead to greater student motivation, satisfaction and initiative, and foster better interpersonal, intercultural and international attitudes.

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