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# Reframing to Enhance Perceived Value in the Foreign Language Classroom

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*There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*

—William Shakespeare

## Prologue

### *Something in the Coffee: Part One*

The other day I was suddenly surprised in the queue at Starbucks when a young Japanese girl tapped my shoulder from behind and struck up a conversation. Eventually she asked a question that is all too familiar to many of us who are living in the land of the rising sun: "Why are you teaching in Japan?" Normally I just give the same stock answer that I've shared a thousand times already, but this time I paused and thought about it a little longer. I considered what specifically it is that I value that keeps me both in the profession and in Japan. I told her I needed time to think, then turned the question around and asked, "What is it about learning English that you value most?" She too went deep inside to consider her own learning. There was growing curiosity around us now and I was surprised when others spontaneously offered their perceptions on the value of English. "It's great for making friends," said one boy. "You can make a girlfriend from another country," said another. "It helps me to communicate more directly," said an older woman. Still others offered different reasons. After getting our coffees we all sat down, continued our discussion and then something very unexpected happened. . . .

## Introduction

Some people are fond of the expression "time is money" and yet, other than financial gain, time is valued for numerous other reasons as well. In fact, the value that we perceive in our time spent on various activities is closely linked to our reasons for work and play and our ability to fully engage in those activities. A language classroom is no different. Students need to perceive value in attending the class in order to participate actively, enthusiastically and, in some cases, to attend at all! In this paper I

will focus on one situation in my language classroom involving learners who were "value-challenged." I will demonstrate what I did to increase their perceived value (PV) through a process called reframing and the results this brought about. Finally, I will make suggestions for teachers who are ready to benefit from deeply examining how their students are perceiving value in their classes.

## **Background**

The concept of perceived value (PV) [Doyon and Deacon, in progress] is crucial in order to understand why students engage, disengage and re-engage in learning. Furthermore, it is necessary to have access to various tools as educators to carefully gather the necessary information in order to accurately assess student motivation and learning engagement. Some of these tools include the ability to reflect in action (during the class) and on action (before or after the class) [Schon, 1983]. The Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle, (Kolb, 1984), is one useful systematic approach for teachers to consider adopting for a deeper understanding of teaching and learning for on-going reflection (a detailed exploration of this cycle is beyond the scope of this paper). It is with a belief in the importance of noticing and enhancing student PV that led me to notice the challenging situation that we will focus on in this paper.

## **The Situation**

Approximately 24 working adults and housewives attended a twelve-week, intermediate-level, open-college conversation course on Saturday mornings. Each class lasted for ninety minutes. The students were highly motivated, attending the course by choice, and had clear learning goals (which they shared on a needs analysis form in the first lesson). They were also highly aware of what constituted value for them in the language course, but some had a problem in that they did not perceive value in a specific type of activity: They questioned the value of speaking in English with other Japanese learners of English. They saw little value in speaking English with their peers because they believed that other Japanese speakers of English would negatively affect their own English. One student wrote:

I discuss with other non-native speakers which is not very exciting sometimes, because we are all non-native speakers. So even if we discuss long, I feel it doesn't improve my English skill. (S1)

Thus, in this scenario there was a conflict between my PV and some of the students' PV with regards to activities where students would communicate with each other in the target language.

## Reframing: One Technique for Enhancing PV

At first, I asked if others felt the same way and after discovering that some did, I decided that a technique called *reframing* (Bandler and Grinder, 1979) might help to open their models of the world and increase their PV for pair-work activities. *Reframing* involves taking an existing situation (e.g., viewing pair work with other Japanese as wasteful) and presenting new frames of reference allowing for a shift in perception to one that is implicitly more beneficial for the perceivers. In the above situation (by giving them more choices and tools, as shown below), I originally set out to affect change in their beliefs, which would in turn bring about beneficial changes in their perceptions. Specifically, I attempted to reframe the learning by (1) making the rationale explicit, (2) offering more functional tools for pair work, and (3) providing opportunities for discussion based on group feedback. My goal was to provide them with experiences of actually learning from non-native speakers and getting excited by it. For that purpose I introduced the following steps.

### Explicit Rationale

I gave the students worthwhile reasons for engaging in pair dialogue by: (a) offering the idea that pair work gives them an effective opportunity to negotiate meaning which enhances language and communication skills, (b) reminding them it was impossible for the teacher to interact with every student on a one-to-one basis all at the same time, and (c) showing a video of previous learners who acted as models and shared their positive views on the benefits of pair work for learning.

### Functional Tools

On a functional level, I taught them numerous tools they could use in pair-practice activities. These included strategies such as (a) *shadowing*<sup>1</sup> each other's speech, (b) *reformulating*<sup>2</sup>, (c) clarifying meaning, (d) negotiating turn-taking, and (e) actual turn-taking, all of which aid in the facilitation of the acquisition of native-like interactions.

### Feedback as Feedforward

I was also able to stimulate reflection by having the students write focused feedback specific to pair work. I summarized their comments, and then printed, and distributed *newsletters*<sup>3</sup> to promote further reflection, broaden perspective, and act as *feedforward*<sup>4</sup> (Kindt and Murphey, 2000). These included summarized excerpts taken from their own feedback (see Appendix for an example) with regards to the class and other students' opinions from past classes. They read and shared their opinions about their peers' comments.

## Results

After introducing the above opportunities for reframing students' perspectives on pair work and carefully observing student interaction, I noticed lessened resistance and greater enthusiasm in the class. My impressions were subsequently confirmed by students in their feedback. Many students mentioned becoming more open to learning from their classmates and that they had just not been aware of the ideas and rationale behind pair work that I had presented. Many were also impressed with their peers' thoughts, stating that they had not considered these alternative ways of thinking. One student declared, "I was impressed with Y---'s comments and hadn't thought of that idea before. I would like to try it and I learned something useful today." By having the opportunity to reflect with their peers, using their own and each other's voices, I believe our community became more "ecological" (van Lier, 2000). That is, the students weren't merely listening to their teacher pontificate on the value of pair work, rather, they were listening to and experimenting with multiple voices in the class. They learned to shift their perspective by "trying on" and assimilating new ways of thinking, which helped increase their perceived value of pair work. There was a lessened resistance to pair work and overall increase in enthusiasm to learning from each other. Ultimately, the learners became more autonomous and able to take greater control of their learning through expanding their choices for learning.

## Conclusion

The students, through negotiating new ways of noticing their learning, reevaluated their learning beliefs and attitudes, and perceived greater value in pair work in particular and the class in general. I would argue that all instructors could benefit from examining how their students perceive their classes and the activities they use. By "trying on" our students' perspectives we can more accurately notice what, how, and if they are valuing the lessons. Then we can fine tune our teaching to include other ways of sharing with our learners how they might look at their learning experience to either enhance or reshape their perception of value in the classroom. Sometimes the most effective learning may be realized by having students shift their focus to one that leads to increased participation and enthusiasm for learning. We also need more research on how teachers can lend a helping hand to achieve this shift (Murphey, 1996).

## Epilogue

### *Something in the Coffee: Part Two*

. . . So, the smell of coffee was strong in the air, and our discussion was heating up as everyone shared their perceptions on the value of English when someone said, "Wow!

I had never thought of English in all those ways before." Another person commented that it was indeed remarkable that there were so many ways to value English and he felt his world was expanding. It was at that moment that the young girl and I came to the mutual conclusion that there is no single reason to explain why we value and continue to learn and teach English. We were reminded that perceptions dynamically change, shift, and expand, especially when talking with others. And on that note we queued for a second cup!

### Notes

1. "Shadowing" is simply repeating language after someone (either silently or out loud). It can also be done more selectively by repeating key words, phrases, and endings.
2. "Reformulating" is repeating back to someone the content of his or her speech. Or, alternatively, the contents of the speech of a third party or one's partner. It is used to clarify what one has understood and can be done selectively during speaking/listening activities.
3. "Newsletters" involve choosing comments from students (with their permission) and putting them anonymously on a handout or Internet group letter. The "newsletter" is then given to the rest of the class to read, discuss, and think about.
4. "Feedforward" describes the process of highlighting and making student feedback manifest in ways that encourage deeper reflection and increased learner awareness of improving present learning in the future.

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## About the Author

*Brad Deacon is currently teaching and learning with his amazing students at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. He enjoys hearing from readers and can be contacted at deak@nanzan-u.ac.jp.*

## Appendix

### Feedback Letter #4

#### Various Students' Comments on Pair Learning

5/2000

· Pair share (speaking in pairs) is a very good time because we have few opportunities to speak English at home. So it is very important for us. I want to continue this system, especially pair share.

· Pair share was very useful because I think that expressing our thoughts is the best way to speak a foreign language.

· Most of the time I speak English in this class and it is fun! I am glad to have an opportunity like this and I am glad to get to know my classmates through English.

· I can share many ideas and opinions with my partners. It is very interesting to hear my partner's ideas and opinions too.

· I think it is very important to discuss various things with my partners because we have a chance to exchange each opinion in English and it is very useful for me. I can learn many things from not only the teacher but also partners in this class. I want to learn a lot from friends and also teach them what I know. As you give us time to exchange our opinion it is very useful.

· Basically, Japanese do not react very much to when we talk with each other. So I would like to become the person who reacts to a person's saying.

· To communicate with many people who are housewives, company workers, schoolteachers and you is the most useful thing. I have few opportunities to talk with

people who jobs are different from me. To know more about people's ways of thinking is very important.

- I have almost no chances to speak English in my daily life so attending this class and exchanging the opinions in English was a very precious experience for me.

- By conversing with many people I learned how to keep the conversation rolling by viewing the conversation from various aspects and asking questions.

- Talking with many people and to know various opinions or feelings is interesting.

- Each students has their own way to talk English, so I can find a new way to talk including new vocabulary, phrases and new ideas.

- I often have the feeling of frustration when I can't express what I think. But having this feeling is important for me I guess. I want to speak English like the other members.

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