

# Foreign Language Activities and Motivation: Nurturing Skills for Active Communication<sup>1</sup>

外国語活動と動機づけ

ーコミュニケーションに対する積極性の育成ー

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## Abstract

In the past few years, there have been many discussions surrounding the introduction of Foreign Language Activities (FLA) classes at Japanese elementary schools. The majority of these discussions have centered on language and teaching from an SLA (Second Language Acquisition) perspective. This paper, however, attempts to give an analysis of FLA in Japanese elementary schools from a motivational viewpoint, emphasizing that FLA can be an effective opportunity to nurture a positive attitude in students toward learning foreign languages. The author proposes that elementary school teachers should focus on increasing the intrinsic motivation of their students to learn a foreign language by helping students create vivid images of themselves experiencing foreign languages successfully. The paper begins by giving a brief summary of the goals for foreign language related subjects as set by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan and their relationship with motivational theories. This is followed by several suggestions of practical ideas for teachers to use in their lessons to inspire a desire in their students to become fluent in a foreign language in the future. The paper concludes by suggesting that building a strong affection for English, or other foreign languages, will inspire students to continue their studies even during difficult times there may be in the years beyond elementary school.

## 1. Introduction

According to the curriculum designated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) from April 2011, it became compulsory for all Japanese public elementary schools to conduct FLA lesson to year five and six students. In the hope of creating a

strong link between FLA and foreign language classes, namely English, in junior and senior high school, MEXT set clear goals focusing on communication which would be nurtured by eight years of foreign language experience (i.e., two years in elementary school, three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school). The overall goals for each of these levels of schooling can easily be found on MEXT's web page (MEXT, 2010a; MEXT, 2010b; MEXT, 2010c). Although there is no need to reprint these goals here, it is worth noting that all three center on the common themes of promoting positive attitudes toward foreign languages, culture and communication. However, even now, more than 18 months after FLA becoming a compulsory at elementary school, much discussion is held surrounding the terms *foundation* in the goal for FLA in elementary schools and *basic* in the goal for junior high school foreign language classes.

Although the difference in meaning of foundation and basic may be quite clear when written in English, it is not so when reading the objectives in Japanese, the native language of the majority of FLA teachers. In the FLA goals, MEXT has used *soji* for foundation, and *kiso* for basic. When these words are searched in a Japanese-English dictionary, such as the Grand Concise Dictionary (Sanseido, 2003), the confusion may increase with *soji* being defined as, “(*kiso*) a foundation, a ground(work)” (p. 1288) and the definition for *kiso* being, “the foundation; the basis. . . [groundwork]” (p. 531). In order to clarify the differences between the three objectives at elementary school, junior high school and senior high school, I have suggested ‘building a house’ (Figure 1) as an analogy for understanding MEXT's goals (Leis, 2011).

When building a house, it is vital that the land on which the house is being constructed is strong and firm in order to support the entire house for decades after it has been built. If the land is not strong, the entire house will not be sturdy. Similarly, I suggest that FLA classes at elementary school should be focused on building students' positive attitudes toward learning foreign languages, their interest in and appreciation of foreign cultures, as well as building children's confidence with foreign languages through an enjoyable and successful English (or other foreign language) experience. Doing so may support students' motivation to learn the language more extrinsically when they reach junior high school. It is important to realize here that the idea of *soji* does not finish at the elementary school level. It needs to be continuously strengthened throughout junior and senior high school, where students are taught the finer points of foreign languages, and are faced with various tests of their foreign language proficiency. The motivation of students to learn, especially foreign languages, is often a long and fragile process that can be destroyed in a short comment from a teacher or peers. For this reason, just as land supports the house for years after it has been built, it is vital that all teachers of foreign languages, not just those in elementary school FLA classes, need to be aware of the importance of *soji* as an ongoing part of a student's language learning experience.

After a solid foundation with a positive attitude toward and affection for foreign languages has been established in elementary school, students can be better prepared for the basics of

language that will be taught more explicitly in the three years of junior high school. This second stage of foreign language can be compared to the framework of a house. Even though the framework of a house cannot usually be seen from the outside, it is at the heart of the home and is what keeps the building solid. It is here where teachers can focus their lessons on increasing students' understanding of the basics of language (i.e., grammatical explanations and building students' vocabulary strength) while encouraging their students to use the language in a communicative way to prepare for more opportunities for output in senior high school.

Figure 1. The House of Foreign Language Instruction.

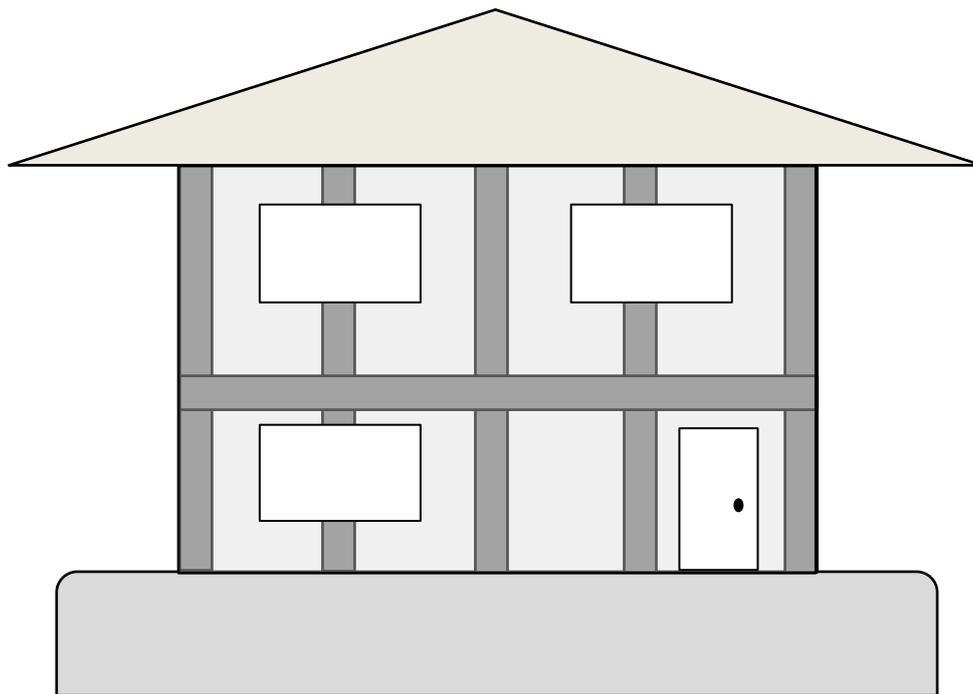


Figure 1. An analogy of building a house as an interpretation of the objectives for FLA at elementary school (represented by the land below the house), and Foreign Languages at junior high school (the framework of the house) and senior high school (the exterior).

At the senior high school level, which is compared to the exterior of a house in Figure 1, students can be given numerous opportunities to express themselves in the foreign language they are studying. This may be done through speaking or writing activities, such as role-plays, debating, essay writing, and letter writing to supplement comprehension tasks done in class. The increase of output at this level of education makes students' language skills more observable, similar to a house's exterior. Foreign language education at junior high school and senior high school can often be highly demanding for students, especially with the extra pressure that comes with high school and university entrance exams. In order to help students prepare to overcome hardships they may face during these six years, it is advisable for elementary school teachers to focus on

increasing the intrinsic motivation of their students to learn foreign languages. When students have a foundation of affection for learning and using foreign language, they may find it more enjoyable to work hard through the challenging grammar and vocabulary that is often seen at higher levels of education. One theory that focuses on the importance of centering motivation on each individual student is the L2 Motivational Self System. This paper will now briefly introduce this theory and propose how it can be put into practice in the FLA classroom as a foundation for English education during junior and senior high school.

## **2. L2 Motivational Self System**

Motivation is perhaps the most commonly used word when explaining whether humans are able to complete a complex task successfully or not. Many second language (L2) teachers often put the success of their students down to motivation; those who did well were the ones who seemed to have more drive to study. For years, Robert Gardner and his motivation model, which was centered on the idea of integrativeness, was considered by many as revolutionary in SLA research. Integrativeness was defined by Gardner (2001) as, “a general interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community” (p. 85).

Inspired by the work of Gardner (1985) and Markus and Nurius (1986), the L2 Motivational Self System was proposed by Dörnyei (2005). Gardner (1985) argued that for students to be motivated to increase their L2 proficiency, it is important for them to have a desire to be closer to the L2 community. Dörnyei (2005) marks a weakness in Gardner’s (1985) L2 motivational model, in its being based on an ESL (English as a second language) environment. Whereas language students in an ESL environment (i.e., a country, such as Australia or Canada, where English is the native language) students are able to have a clear understanding of the L2 community they want come closer to, with English being such a vast language with many varieties, those in an EFL environment (i.e., studying English in a country, such as Hungary or Japan, where English is not the native language) may have difficulty clarifying the L2 community they are attempting to come closer to. Therefore, Dörnyei attempted to create a clearer understanding of this L2 community for those studying in an EFL environment. The inspiration for his idea came from Markus and Nurius’s (1986) suggestion of possible selves.

Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed that humans’ motivation comes from a balance of increasing the distance between their current self and feared self (e.g., becoming homeless), and reducing the gap between their current self and their future ideal selves (e.g., becoming rich and successful). Combining these two ideas, Dörnyei (2005) recommends that in an EFL environment, the L2 community is in fact the image of oneself speaking the L2 fluently. Therefore, highly motivated students will be those who work to come closer to realizing the ideal image or dream of themselves speaking the L2 without troubles, while making equal efforts to move away from the

possibility of the imagined feared L2 self, such as failure to communicate in the L2 (for an overview of the L2 Motivational Self System, see Dörnyei, 2009).

The L2 Motivational Self System has been used as a base for several research projects. In a study comparing the L2 Motivational Self of students in three Asian nations (i.e., Japan, China and Iran), Taguchi, Magid and Papi (2009) suggested that Japanese feel they must study English to increase their employment opportunities. At the same time, however, their ideal English self has a very weak link with their image of being successful professionally. This suggests that Japanese may tend to focus their study of foreign languages on getting good marks in university entrance and employment exams, rather than for communication. In a study of university students, Leis, Suzuki and Ando (2011), reported that there seems to be a significant difference in the clarity of students' image of themselves using English successfully or not, depending on the level of their self-perceived English proficiency: the clearer a student's ideal L2 self image is, the more proficient they perceive themselves to be in English, and vice-versa.

These two studies suggest that many university students do not have a clear enough image of themselves using English as a tool for communication, but simply see it as a means to pass examinations. Those who do, however, have a clear ideal L2 self image, (i.e., with English for communication) do indeed seem to have higher confidence with the language than those who do not. Therefore, it is necessary to instruct young Japanese learners to see foreign languages as tools for communication, not simply for tests. This paper will now suggest some ideas to achieve this in the FLA classroom.

### **3. Pedagogical implications**

The L2 Motivational Self System, like theories of intrinsic motivation, shows that students' success can often be related to the drive that comes from within the students themselves and the English-speaking image they create. FLA teachers need to be aware of this, designing fun and interesting classes to nurture the intrinsic motivation and ideal L2 self-image students have. Classes need to be centered on students' ideas and encourage students to think deeply, satisfying their natural curiosity. This can be done in several ways.

#### **3.1 Teachers' Active Participation in FLA classes.**

The language instructor needs to be a good role model for students. Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) list "set a personal example with your own behavior" (p. 215) as the first of their ten commandments for motivating language learners. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggests that the enthusiasm a teacher shows for language will be passed on to his or her students. Although, as Csikszentmihalyi continues, students may outwardly make fun of the teacher, inside they tend to feel admiration for such an attitude, developing a strong intrinsic eagerness to learn.

### **3.2 Using media to show videos of the students using English.**

The use of video technology and other enhancement of images have for many years been widely used in research in the fields of psychology, education and sport. Such ideas can also be used to help students create and strengthen their ideal L2 self image (Dörnyei, 2009). By seeing videos of themselves successfully using foreign languages through games and songs in class, students begin to build the image using language successfully. Imagery, Berkovits (2005) stresses, also increases children's verbal proficiency, because of the clarity and precision images bring.

### **3.3 Praising students effectively.**

Praising is not a new idea for teaching. Many teachers praise students, which helps increase students enjoyment of class as well as their self-confidence. Alter (2011), suggests that when we are praised, whether it be by others or even ourselves, it makes us happy. This, in turn, results in a release of serotonin and dopamine by the brain, increasing our self-confidence and willingness to challenge difficult tasks we would otherwise not. However, I advise that it is important for teachers to consider the way they praise students. Many teachers may say, "Very good!" "Excellent!" or "Good job!" Although these kind words may seem to make some students feel happy, others may be left thinking, "What was good?" or "Did the teacher really understand what I said?" Therefore, I suggest teachers praise the content of what students say to show that their English has been understood. This can be done in ways such as, "Oh, you like bananas? I like bananas, too. I like bananas with ice cream." Even though such a response may not seem to directly praise students, they will likely gain more confidence from the fact that their English has been understood, a feeling that arguably lasts longer and is more effective than a simple, "Well done!"

Another effective way of praising is to look at the method of presentation or speaking of the student. To achieve this, I suggest adding explicit praise such as, "Very good! You were looking at your partner's eyes." Such comments, which of course may be added in Japanese for ease of understanding, will not only help the speaker to see the positive points of the communication, but also help other students to gain ideas to improve their own speech.

The two methods of praise I have suggested here are, of course not limited to FLA classes. However, in an environment where students feel anxiety that is often seen in foreign language classrooms, it is essential that effective praise be used in order to increase the confidence of student, so they will be more willing to take risks and challenge more difficult tasks in the future.

### **3.4 Having students think deeply.**

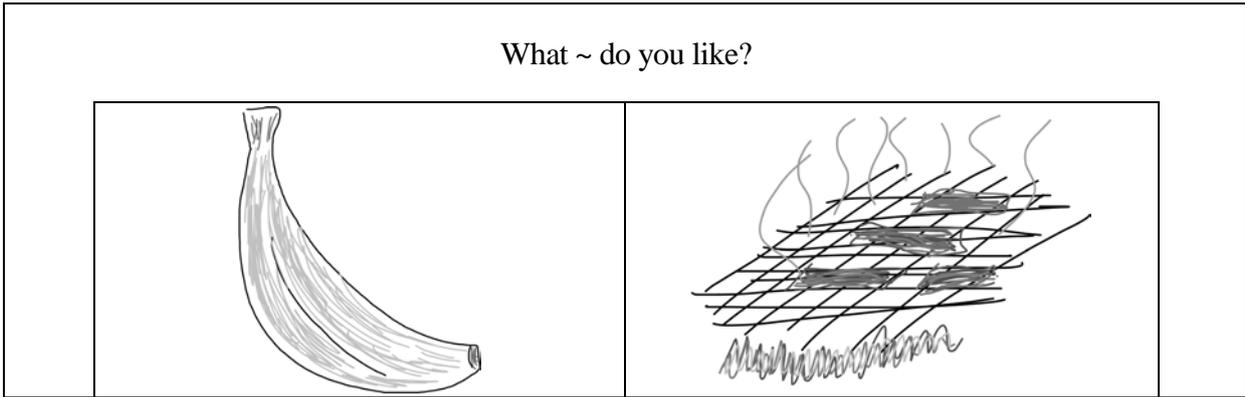
With advances in technology, the modern quickly changing society seems to becoming more and more convenient. With this, children appear to be given fewer opportunities to think carefully

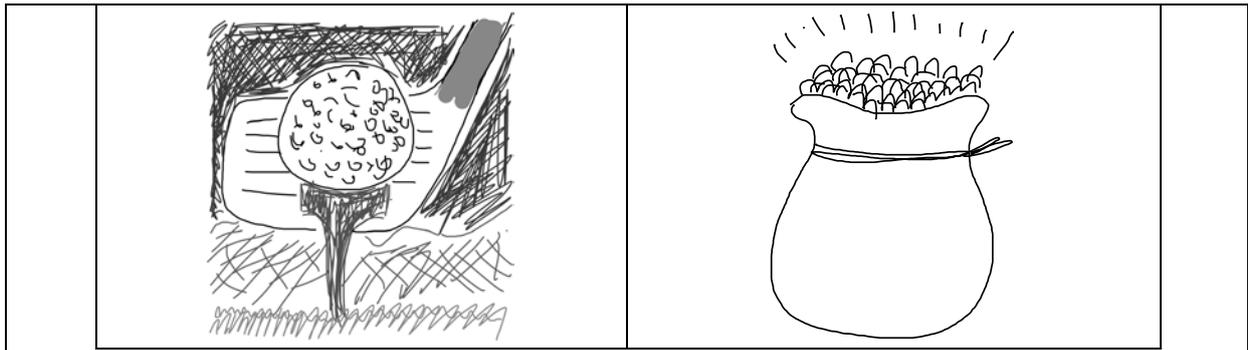
and deeply. Therefore, it is important for teachers to give such opportunities to students in various ways. One way I propose in this paper, which can be used especially in FLA classes, is Double Janken. With many games and communicative activities being used in FLA, the game ‘rock, paper, scissors’, or *janken* as it is called in Japanese, is very popular. Double Janken is similar to the traditional *janken*, but uses two hands rather than one.

In Double Janken, participants choose ‘rock-scissors’, ‘rock-paper’, or ‘scissors-paper’. The winner is decided by what the participant does *not* use. That is, if person one produces the ‘rock-scissors’ combination (i.e., not using paper), and person two produces the ‘rock-paper’ combination (i.e., not using scissors), person two will win, because scissors beats paper. Compared to the traditional *janken*, Double Janken is initially a little slower as it takes time to think about what each participant has produced, or, more specifically, not produced. However with time, this speed will increase as students learn to think more deeply and more quickly, as they start to look at things they cannot see with their eyes.

**3.5 Encourage student creativity.**

In his immensely popular speech, *Schools Kill Creativity*, Sir Ken Robinson (2006) emphasizes the importance of encouraging creativity in students. Although again, this is not limited to FLA classes, these lessons can be used to give students an opportunity to use their innate creativity, centering the class on their ideas, and increasing their intrinsic motivation. The designated text for FLA, ‘Hi, Friends’ (MEXT, 2012), provides teachers with an ample supply of picture cards for teachers to use in the classroom. These cards are colorful, motivating and make preparing the lesson much easier for teachers.





*Figure 2.* A worksheet that can be used in FLA to encourage student creativity, while personalizing the activity for the students and increasing intrinsic motivation. Before handing out the worksheet, it should be blank, so students can draw their own pictures.

In addition, I encourage teachers to also use blank cards, allowing students to create their own creative ideas, making the lesson more personal and intrinsically motivating (see figure 2). The example here is a suggestion for Unit 5 of *Hi, Friends Book 1*. During the lesson, students can be asked to draw a picture of a fruit they like (e.g., banana), a food they like (e.g., barbecue steak) and a sport they like (e.g., golf). In these first three examples, students should be encouraged to use colors, enhancing the clarity of their image of the item. However, in the final quarter, where students are asked to think of a color they like, I suggest having the students draw a picture of their favorite color, only using a lead pencil. This may help enhance students' creativity as they show their favorite color (e.g., gold) in an illustration.

#### **4. Conclusion**

After 25 years of preparation, research and testing, FLA is now in a very raw period of practice in the classroom. There are still discussions being held by researchers and elementary school teachers alike regarding the objectives of FLA and their link with junior high school and beyond. This paper, focusing on a motivational viewpoint rather than being written with a focus on SLA, has recommended that FLA classes should concentrate on increasing the intrinsic motivation of students, generating a love of learning foreign languages through student-centered classes that encourage students to be creative and think deeply. When such classes are led by FLA teachers with a positive attitude toward foreign languages, culture and people, students' enjoyment of FLA classes may increase and in turn improve students' proficiency of foreign languages, especially English. When such an attitude can be raised in students, they will be better prepared for more linguistic-based instruction in junior and senior high school, especially at times when they find language learning difficult and begin to lose self-confidence, linking to more positive results at all levels of foreign language education.

## Note

1. This paper is an expansion of Leis (2011). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Japan Elementary School English National Conference at Chiba University on July 15, 2012.

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