

If the goal of a language program is to develop communicative competence in the target language, then I believe the reciprocal teaching and learning endeavors can be compared to an expert botanist cultivating lush gardens in a greenhouse. In this analogy, the teacher is the expert gardener, but the students are *not* the plants. What the teacher is cultivating is the *language*, the bonds of the classroom community, of which students and teachers are members. I have come to this analogy via my three perspectives as a learner, a teacher and a graduate student.

I am a native speaker of English with a lot of classroom Spanish under my belt who became interested in learning Japanese in my twenties. As a highly motivated adult learner, I became an observer of my own second language acquisition process. My later experience as a classroom Japanese teacher enabled me to observe the second language acquisition process of many students. Finally, as a graduate student I actively pondered these experiences in light of theory and best practices. I now believe, along with Larsen-Freeman (2011), that my non-native status provides me with an extremely useful understanding of “the obstacles to acquisition and how to surmount them” (p. 169). These obstacles, or constraints, of any foreign language program may include the following:

- Limited language input and interactions
- Unrealistic expectations (of program, instructors, students and parents)
- Inappropriate methodologies
- Complexities of learner differences (motivation, interests, aptitude, beliefs)
- General lack of understanding of how languages are acquired by all stakeholders

Fortunately, language ability is innate in humans and emerges naturally under certain conditions. An expert foreign language teacher arranges these conditions intentionally. In the greenhouse of the classroom, the temperature needs to be optimal. In my analogy, temperature correlates to the emotional, affective climate. Students (and teachers) should feel safe and valued. The expert gardener understands that the cultivation process takes time and cannot be rushed. Hence the teacher needs to set realistic goals (not the native-speaker model) and measure progress in terms of what students *can do*. The ACTFL proficiency guidelines provide a suitable

measuring scale. Evidence for what students *can do* is most accurately collected in portfolios that can travel with students within a program and beyond. Since students' levels of proficiency develop at individual rates, I believe that teacher cultivators should adopt a mastery mindset that anticipates and allows for multiple attempts by students to demonstrate proficiency. When these expectations are in place and communicated to students, they will feel safe and valued knowing that they are not being asked to do something unrealistic like "sound like a native." With the greenhouse temperature stable, the teacher gardener now needs to provide essential nutrients in the form of comprehensible, stimulating and meaningful language input.

Given the relatively limited amount of hours in the classroom, the teacher cultivator needs to provide concentrated fertilizing language input. A curriculum based on high-frequency language stacks the odds in the students' favor that they will encounter the language repeatedly, promoting retention. However, frequency is not enough as the human brain craves novelty. The effect of input on the classroom greenhouse is critical: it must be stimulating and meaningful. If not, it will be unable to generate the urge to communicate which is necessary to activate the internal language learning abilities of students. The teacher gardener seeks to create the need for student community members to use the language to communicate. The teacher can generate essential input via students' interactions through the use of well-chosen tasks, co-created stories and a strategic focus on high-frequency language and literacy development. The skill to cultivate a target-language using community takes creativity, flexibility, and sensitivity on the part of the teacher cultivator. However, even when the teacher provides what she judges to be the best input, real communication is not guaranteed due to the complexities of the classroom greenhouse. Students are individuals and their unique levels of interest, motivation, ability, and energy will certainly fluctuate. Progress will not be steady and will not take place at the same rate for everyone. The teacher cultivator may have to dig deeper to uncover obstacles in each greenhouse. However, if the classroom community is at the heart of a program, the climate protective, and fertilizing input via meaningful interactions is generously supplied, the instinct to connect with language will emerge, like buds in the spring.

I wholeheartedly agree with Kumaravadivelu (2001) that "more than any other educational enterprise, language education provides its participants with challenges and opportunities for a

continual quest for subjectivity and self-identity” (p. 543). By developing their unique human capacity for communication via language, language learners empower themselves in many ways. They expand their worldviews, cultivate sensitivities, make human and academic connections, increase options and become more able to effect change in the world. As a Japanese language learner and educator, I am committed to cultivating this life-changing endeavor.

## References

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2001). Toward a Postmethod Pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(4), 543.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques & principles in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 169.