

# *" Once Again, Short Form Rears Its Ugly Head."*

(A case of how what you don't know *can* hurt you.)

by

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## Context

Mills High School is located in a middle class to upper-middle class neighborhood on the border between Burlingame and Millbrae. Last year 50.8% of its graduates went on to a four-year institution of higher learning, and another 42% continued their education at community college. It is a California Distinguished

School and known throughout the area for the academic achievement of the students who go there. It draws most of its students from Burlingame and Millbrae, but also a significant amount of students from San Bruno, Redwood City, and Hillsdale. Opened in 1958, it was featured in a 1960 Time Magazine cover story about new building techniques and conservation of materials. With removable walls and lighting partially provided by skylights, the school was designed to last "...a hundred years." Now entering its forty-first year of operation, Mills High School serves a much different student body than it did on its first day of operation.

About 1,462 students attend the school in grades nine through twelve. The racial make-up of the school is as follows: 81% Asian, 13% White, 4% Hispanic, 1.5% Pacific Islander, and .5% Black. Of course, within that overall percentage of Asian students, heterogeneity is the rule, rather than the exception. Native-born and immigrant Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and East Asians all contribute their own particular blend of culture and spirit to the daily life of the school. That is not to say, however, that Mills is a happy melting pot of racial harmony and inclusion. Rather, I will say that some of the dynamics Laurie Olsen (1997) describes in her book, Made in America, show up in some form at Mills High School.

Olsen, who describes the existence of a symbolic relationship between where certain groups hang out and their role in campus life, would find Mills High School an accurate reflection of her theory. The entire middle of the school is an open courtyard with grass, scattered tables and a small stage and amphitheater where music is played from speakers everyday at lunch. The popular students (football players, cheerleaders, student government, and preppies) all cluster around the stage area of Center Court as it is known. Skaters and students who participate in drama stick to the grass field behind the amphitheater. A large portion of the popular people, the skaters, and the drama students are all White. As at Olsen's Madison High, the ESL students, along with other correspondingly low status groups, are out of sight and out of mind of the English speaking majority student body at Mills High School.

## Content Context

Prior to teaching the content of this case study, I had been observing the class for the first five or six weeks of school. My Master Teacher taught the Chapter 5 textbook unit on hobbies. Included in that unit were several grammar patterns, but only one dealt with what I call "short form" constructions?verb and adjective conjugations made so that the verb or adjective can be inserted into a more complex sentence structure. The Master Teacher does not really teach in a style that highlights any sort of essential questions, but rather seeks to create realistic

situations that force the students to use language. She also attempts to make review exercises more hands-on and interactive, with middling success. Often she uses the OHP to give the students practice sentences which they then copy down and translate either from English to Japanese or vice versa. Before I took over the class, I was given the Chapter 6 unit on food and told to create a unit plan for it. Given what I had observed in the class up to that point, I decided I wanted to try something that was different from what the students had done so far, as well as being something that I had experienced myself at Stanford during the summer quarter. That something was Peer Teaching. Peer teaching involves two sets of information, each of which is taught by one student (or in this case, by one group) to the other student. I saw it as a way of approaching the material I wanted to cover in a way that put the onus on the students to teach each other and help each other. In particular, I was hoping to teach patterns that would enable students to express their opinions and desires, as well as reporting the words of others. In all three cases, the pattern requires some use of short form structures. I was building up to a culminating activity where the students would create, film and present (using video editing software) a skit of their own set at a restaurant. Obviously, the ability to express one's own opinions and desires is crucial for adult life in any country. In Japan, the ability to do so without being offensive or rude is even more important, and the patterns I was planning on teaching the students would allow them to do just that?express their opinions and desires in a culturally approved mode of expression.

## Student Context

I teach 28 students, 27 of who are either juniors or seniors. 27 of them are of varied Asian heritage and descent; some having English as their second language. There are 14 female students and 14 male students. The class is divided between 19 third year and 9 fourth year Japanese students, so there is a very large disparity between the strongest fourth year student and the weakest third year student. Interestingly enough, one of the strongest students is a third year student. This student (Julia) is a self-described foreign language lover. She is taking Spanish as well as Japanese. Furthermore, one of the weakest students in the class does poorly not because she lacks the capacity to do the work, but because she chooses not to do the work. This fourth year Japanese student (Alexis) and senior told me herself that she has chosen to focus on her demanding (and required for graduation) English class. She mentioned that originally she did not plan on taking a fourth year of Japanese but her counselor talked her into taking the class. Given that she does not need to pass the class to graduate, and is already set on her course of attending a local junior college next year, she is quite clear about her options and choices regarding how much effort she can put into any of her classes. I mention Student A and Student B in particular because they figure prominently in some of

my interactions with the class during the course of the unit, and I have asked them to review this case study and to offer their comments on how they received the lesson. Juxtaposed between these two ends of the spectrum are students of varying degrees of motivation, interest, and previous training in the subject of Japanese language. As I look around the class I can see the two quiet male students who never talk (to me or anyone else), but ace every test or quiz I put in front of them. I see the loud basketball player who struggles, but works hard and has an affinity for kanji (Chinese characters). Similar to her is the third year Japanese animation aficionado who barely squeaks by but whom I feel will be the one student (if any) of the class who will go and live in Japan for an extended period of time. I could provide similar stories about virtually all my students. Although the class, at a glance, seems quite homogeneous in its Asian orientation (no pun intended), it is in fact rich in diversity of a different nature.

## Intended Scenario

I planned to teach several grammar patterns that require the use of short form verb/adjective/noun conjugation. For example, the short form of the verb "tabemasu" (to eat) is written/spoken as "taberu." Specifically, I wanted to teach the students the "I think X" construction, the "I want/want to do X." construction, and the "He/She/They want/want to do X." construction. I had planned several activities designed to help the students teach each other the new patterns, but each one depended on the students already having a degree of mastery over short form language. I expected them to have a fair degree of mastery over the short form simply because I felt it to be an essential part of the language. I myself was taught it (albeit at college) in my first year of study. "How could a student make it to third (or even fourth) year Japanese without having a firm grasp on so essential a concept?!" I thought to myself later. Also, I expected the students to enjoy the variety of exercises I had prepared, through which they would learn the necessary grammar patterns. Given that they had never experienced peer teaching, and had yet to do a video project this year, I figured my unit would go well, if only due to its novelty and variety. I did not really think that they would struggle with peer teaching, as I thought it to be one of the more straightforward strategies I could apply that was still somewhat student centered, less detailed and complex than, say, jigsaws. Previous group activities seemed to work well. Several students told me they enjoyed activities that allowed them to interact with their peers. I had observed them working in pairs prior to this lesson, and that type of class-wide activity presented no great challenges for them that I could detect. I figured I would be able to use peer teaching as a type of pair work writ large. Needless to say, the lesson did not go exactly as planned.

## Interactions

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On the second day of the unit, I taught the students one of the easier grammar patterns for the chapter. It did not require short form. I first gave them some comprehensible input in the target language by telling them a short story about my home stay in Japan. From that story, I had them deduce the particular construction for the pattern. I then explained the grammar pattern in detail on the board using example sentences and then I gave the students some practice sentences of their own to work on individually. I then had individual students go up to the board and write their answers on the board. I went over them, asking other students to explain why the sentence was correct or not. On the whole, the students performed this exercise quite well. Four out of the five sentences written on the board by five different students were correct and in need of no changes. The fifth sentence had a mistake with the verb form, and the student quickly corrected it, saying, "Oh yeah, I forgot to put it into past tense." Even his correction demonstrated to me that he was thinking about the structure of the pattern. The pattern was not too difficult, and I believed they had digested the day's lesson. After we had finished that section of the lesson, I handed out a sheet detailing my lesson plan for that specific segment of class. I told the students, "Teaching does not just happen. Before I came to class today, I thought about what I wanted to say, and I thought about what I wanted you guys to do to practice the new information. This sheet shows the steps I took in teaching you today. Tomorrow, you and your groups will be doing the same thing I did today." I left it at that for the moment and moved on with the rest of the lesson. I remember looking around the room at this point and seeing a few blank faces. I remember hearing one student say, "What DID he just say?!". I noticed Julia, my best student nodding her head with a slight grin on her face, as if to say, "Alright. Something different where I get to learn and show what I know." Of course, these impressions are colored by the speed at which I made them as well as by the intervening several months. I thought to myself, "They may not totally get it, but that's okay because I'll explain it tomorrow. Also, a little uncertainty might get some of the more disengaged students to raise their mental antenna and become curious about what's coming next." It is that sense of curiosity that I try to foster in my classes. On the other hand, I realize now students expect structure and transparency on the part of their instructor. It is okay to have the students guessing a little bit, but too much of it and the students will come to the conclusion that the captain of the ship is lost or did not know where he wanted to go in the first place.

The next day, as part of the class schedule, I wrote the words 'peer teaching' on the board. When I came to that point in the lesson, I reminded the students of my words the day before. I then gave them a blank sheet listing and explaining the steps to be followed in creating a mini-lesson that each group would teach to the other group. In my class there are six groups of five or four students each. I told the class that groups 1, 3, & 5 would teach the I want X/He wants X pattern, while

groups 2, 4, & 6 would teach the I want to do X/He wants to do X pattern. They would have one day to prepare their lesson, and then the next class period would be spent actually teaching the lesson to their corresponding group. I asked if anyone had any questions, and was met with silence. Perhaps I should have known the jig was up right then and there? accompanying the silence was none of the usual pre-activity shifting of seats or talking to neighbors. When students know what to do, they usually set about doing it even before the instructor gives the go-ahead. So I said, "Alright, let's get to work. I'll be walking around to check your progress and to answer any further questions you might have."

Right away, I could see there were problems because most groups did not open their books or any other source for actually learning the pattern they would be required to teach. The noise level in the room rose to an impressive level as 28 students asked each other, "What are we supposed to do?", "Do you have your book with you?" and "How do we teach the pattern if we don't know it?" I spend at least five minutes going around from group to group reminding them to read and use the lesson plan sheet. A fairly strong student asked me with a pained look on her face, "Sensei, what are we doing?" Normally, such a comment coming from a poorer student would have peeved me, but coming as it did from a student who paid attention and took notes, the question raised tiny beads of sweat on my forehead. Once the students grasped the idea that there was a way they could teach the pattern, once they had learned it, they set out to learn the pattern. Slowly at first, and then with greater frequency, hands began to shoot up around the room. I began to get questions involving the various conjugations of the verbs and adjectives in the pattern. Some groups began to write practice sentences, but when I looked the sentences over I noticed that while they had used the pattern in the correct context, the short form portion of the pattern contained errors. I saw this same mistake repeated in other groups' work. I began to realize that I might have asked the students to bite off more than they could chew.

The final wake-up call occurred while I was explaining something to a group. I used the phrase "short form" and received empty, blank stares from the students. I then asked, "You guys have had this before, haven't you?" One student replied no and the other student, Student A, spoke up and told me, "Well, we had it last year (her second year), but it was toward the end of the year and Sensei just rushed through it a little, you know?" I couldn't believe it! They had only just been exposed to short form constructions at the END of their second year!? Needless to say, I was a bit miffed at their teacher (no longer at this school) for giving such short shrift to such an essential part of the language. From that moment on, I set about changing the ways in which we would finish the peer teaching project, as well as the ways I would teach every class from that day forward.

## New Interactions

I slowed down the timetable for the actual teaching activity, and instead devoted the next day's class to reviewing short form conjugations. I also passed out a worksheet/organizer on short form that I had created the night before to help them with their short form. As I was also starting each class asking random students quick questions about short form conjugation, they developed a greater ease with changing a verb from masu-form (*tabemasu* ) to short form (*taberu* ). Then again, they also exhibited continuing difficulty with doing the same process for adjectives. Nine times out of ten, if I gave a student a verb, she could put it into short form. However, if I gave her a full sentence using the new grammar that required that she incorporate the verb short form, she would make a mistake in the short form. To combat this, I gave them one homework sheet solely on short form and then another homework assignment where they could apply short form to make example sentences of their group's pattern. For the most part, the students completed both homework assignments to my satisfaction. I developed the habit of pointing out the short forms in every exercise, reading, and new lesson I used in the class. Usually, I would say, "Ah yes, once again, short form rears its ugly head. You've got to know this people. It's not going to let you get away. When you get to Japan, short form will be your bread and butter."

Finally, the peer teaching got back underway. This time, when I said, "Go," the students actually gathered together in their groups and began talking to one another. I walked around listening to the bits of Japanese being spoken. I would also stop momentarily at certain groups and ask a student which pattern he was responsible for. If he said A, then I'd ask him a question about the B pattern to check how well he had been taught by his peers. Often, I would ask the student if he thought he had it. When he replied with a confident yes, I would ask my fairly simple review question. Instantly the smile would drop away and he would look around at his fellow group members. At this point I would usually say out loud, "If there's one student that doesn't know the pattern, then your group is not done teaching the pattern. No one is done until everyone is done." As I walked away, I would hear students saying, "Arrgghh! Alright, now what don't you understand?" or "Okay, let me explain...." The completed forms I received from each group reflected, for the most part, the most rudimentary aspects of patterns A and B. I knew that they had at least covered the basics, but I worried if they had truly grasped the patterns. For the rest of that unit, when a student came to me with a question about either pattern A or B, the first thing I asked them was which pattern had they taught. Invariably, I found students had more completely mastered the pattern their group had taught, versus the pattern that had been taught to them. This evidence leaves me with a semi-satisfied feeling. All of the students developed some level of understanding through the peer teaching activity, but none of them

developed a comprehensive understanding of *both* patterns. On the subsequent unit test, students scored fair to high on that particular section of the test. I suspect that the students realized that I had devoted a large amount of time to these two patterns, and therefore it would be in their best interests to make sure they knew it for the test.

## Reflection, Analysis, & Connection to Theory

In my opinion, this case is a case about a novice teacher's failure to properly uncover the depth (or lack of depth) of students' prior knowledge. Like Professor Shulman said when referring to Norman's iceberg model (1980), "Most of it is below the water where you can't see it, and yet that's the part that can sink your ship!" True enough, my perfect unit plan was derailed to some degree by my inattention to finding out what students already knew. I could have saved myself some worry and trouble by simply giving the students a short quiz or review assignment for homework that tested their knowledge of short form. Such a formative style of assessment is crucial in discerning students' development in any subject, be it Japanese or Math (Black, 1998). In the future, I will give some form of pre-assessment that will help me inform my teaching of a new concept. However, this case is not just a case about the students' lack of prior knowledge of a vital piece of a foreign language.

Viewed from another angle, it could equally be considered a case of a novice teacher attempting to expose his students to a new pedagogical device without adequately exposing them to how and why it is supposed to work. Returning to Norman (pp. 44-45), "The choice of model is critical. Thus you should make sure that your students understand the prototype. It does little good to explain topic A in terms of topic B if the student does not understand topic B... The teacher must be concerned with selecting a prototype that suits the learner." If I had the lesson to do over again, as I will next year, I would do several things differently. I would definitely remove the third person construction from the "I want X" and the "I want to do X" patterns. Having to change the pattern just to describe a third person's desires really hindered the students' grasp of the basic difference between wanting an object and wanting to do an action. Further, I would do one or more peer teaching exercises in pairs with an easier topic or grammar point. I believe this would better scaffold the students into a full-blown group peer teaching activity. Another possible step I would most likely take would be to analyze the prospective patterns for any sub-patterns to which the students had not yet been exposed. Of course, I will definitely need to check with their former teacher concerning short form. By doing so, I will avoid being caught by surprise when the students cannot produce something I assumed they had already internalized. Then again, just because a previous teacher has exposed them to a pattern does not mean the

students have actually mastered it. I would do well to remember this in my own teaching and prepare my students in a way that any subsequent teacher they have will no cause to curse my teaching or lack thereof. I will confess that I considered trashing the peer teaching aspect of the unit completely on the second day when things began to go wrong. I will go even further to confess that I am still looking for another way to teach these patterns, a way that helps the students really learn what they need to know in order to make continued progress toward proficiency in Japanese.

I subscribe in part to Collins' idea of cognitive apprenticeship insofar as he recommends the benefits of modeling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploration. My peer teaching lesson attempted to incorporate some of these aspects. However, I did not incorporate them fully nor correctly in my opinion. The question arises as to whether or not they are applicable to an advanced Japanese class. I would warn other teachers from blithely trying to use any method of instruction haphazardly or piecemeal. To put it another way, I do not yet truly understand what it means to use certain methods. I have not yet been exposed to enough models of peer teaching in a foreign language classroom to be able to recreate a successful experience. I believe that many of my STEP classmates might sympathize with my plight, given that we are currently too busy *trying* to teach to actually learn *how* to teach. A quarter or a semester of observing a CT does not make one ready to use the all the techniques employed by said CT. To paraphrase, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Either drink deeply from the spring or else do not taste it at all, for small draughts tend to intoxicate, and it is only in drinking deeply that we regain our senses."

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