

The Effect of Dogme ELT on Japanese University EFL Oral Communication Classes

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1. Introduction

When assigned a third-year, elective, six-member 15-class Japanese University Oral Communication EFL class, the realization that using the course textbook would probably be an issue was a very clear one. Dörnyei, [1](2001:63) makes the situation clear: "one of the most demotivating factors for learners is when they have to learn something that they cannot see the point of because it has no seeming relevance whatsoever to their lives." As expected, the students did express dissatisfaction regarding the use of the ascribed class textbook, citing reasons similar to Dörnyei's above that the textbook topics were not interesting and lacked relevance. The small number of students participating meant that Dogme ELT, with its reputation of being free from textbooks, was a viable option, but at the same time total abandonment of the stakeholder sanctioned textbook was not. The challenge was to find a version of the Dogme ELT approach, maybe a "Dogme Light" that could be situated in the teaching context in question.

After a brief review of both Dogme ELT, and the Japanese EFL context this paper will discuss how the approach was situated in the specific teaching situation of this researcher / practitioner. The opinions of the learners collected through a short Likert-type questionnaire will be presented and discussed with some thoughts on future improvements that could be made in the specific context of a Japanese university EFL context.

2. Dogme ELT

Dogme ELT, or Dogme as it is also known, takes its name from the Danish "Dogme 95" film movement that dismissed modern cinematography's over-dependence on technical effects favouring instead the basic telling of a story set in the moment. For ELT, this means questioning over-reliance on a "coursebook method" ([2]Thornbury, 2013b) and classroom technology, equating to excessive teaching materials and aids. Instead, Dogme focuses on the present relevancy of learner-produced content allowing the syllabus to emerge from that i.e. a kind of *Teaching Unplugged*, which is also the title of the book by Meddings and Thornbury [3](2009). According to Thornbury, [2](2013b), Dogme was "an attempt to revive strong Communicative Language Teaching and task-based learning" the reputation of whose principles he believed had been damaged by overuse of materials and their return to a traditional, grammar-based syllabus. In the so-called "communicative" classroom this meant there was an abundance of grammatical terms and very little actual language use between the learners themselves and their teachers. The extent of Dogme's identity as a "grammar-free approach" will be examined in section 2.3. Dogme challenges the teacher to resist the "pre-packaged materials" and instead exploit the language emerging from the learners' "needs, interests, concerns and desires" to foster real communication embodying a learning methodology rather than a teaching one.

Meddings and Thornbury [3] (2009), explain how Dogme manifests itself through the neither prescriptive nor proscriptive three precepts of conversation-driven; materials-light; and a focus on emergent language.

2.1 Conversation-driven

Conversation, the primal human interaction, is vital to language learning. Conventionally, conversation is practised after grammatical accuracy and vocabulary building have been taught, contrary to a natural learning context where the acquisition of a full grammar follows earlier attempts with nascent conversations. In this way, the authors claim Dogme, like task-based learning, emphasizes fluency activities for producing learner language analyzed post task. Furthermore, Dogme takes a discourse view of language, with conversation generating whole texts rather than the less frequently occurring discrete sentences analysed in a traditional grammar syllabus with its verb tense perspective. These conversational interactions provide the necessary output on which feedback can be based (i.e. a focus on emergent language - see below). CLT requires the exchange of supposed meaningful interaction often through artificially designed information-gap activities. Conversation in a Dogme lesson, however, focuses on real interpersonal communication between the learners, and importantly the learners and the teacher. Dogme utilizes conversation as a context for verbal scaffolding or “instructional conversations” which are more effective than normal teacher-initiated question-and-answer interactions observed in traditional classroom talk. Conversation, then, is both a model of use and a means of language appropriation. It might be argued that conversational register is casual and informal and inappropriate for learners engaged in ESP, EAP, or exam classes. For this reason, Thornbury [4] (2013a) revised the term conversation-driven to "text-driven" learning with the texts originating from the teacher or ideally the learner, thus allowing for the inclusion of instruction requiring a more formal register.

2.2 Materials-light

Being controversially "anti-materials" has been the stance that has probably shaped Dogme's identity the most. Focusing on the political as well as the pedagogical, rather than promoting other forms of communicative competence by addressing local needs, textbooks supposedly only push a mix of "grammar McNuggets" (decontextualized grammar), and Western values, adding further to the globalization of culture. The authors assume, perhaps incorrectly, that learners have no interest in cultures other than their own, and that they should analyze commercial texts to adapt them to their own culture and language traditions with teachers selecting only locally produced textbooks. This adaption seems redundant when time might be better employed producing learners' and teachers' own texts. Abandoning a textbook altogether is the ultimate option to embracing full learner-empowerment, and Thornbury [2] (2013b), believes conversation flourishes when allowed space through the act of putting down the coursebook. Importantly, to the teaching context at hand, the authors do accept the ubiquitous use of stakeholder-sanctioned textbooks and make allowances for this, by stating, perhaps contradictorily, that modern textbooks can provide plenty of opportunities for interaction within carefully chosen topics and freer practice tasks.

Completely textbook-free Dogme contexts may therefore be rare, especially in a Confucian-tradition culture such as Japan with its reliance on a teacher-centred pedagogy.

2.3 Focus on Emergent Language

The authors argue that instead of “covering” an externally imposed syllabus, Dogme is a process syllabus “uncovered” or emerging from within the learner to be further negotiated and evaluated by both teacher and learner. By starting from a communicative need and allowing grammar to emerge as a by-product of communication rather than a taught random grammatical item in a prescriptive linear process, the authors believe communicative competence grows in an organic way. Dogme identifies closely with being task-based, with accuracy emerging from fluency, but differs in its focus on spontaneous interpersonal-conversation rather than planned tasks. Any focus on form is in response to an actual need occurring in communication, so from this perspective, Dogme is hardly “grammar-free” and consequently its appeal to more traditional Confucian-tradition learners is viable. Furthermore, merely creating the conditions for language to emerge is insufficient. When language does emerge, it needs to be worked on by the teacher in unison with the learners, and effectively “scrutinised, manipulated, personalised, and practised”. Furthermore, this focus on form is what “triggers a shift in the system” i.e. the learner’s interlanguage, with ever accumulating fragments (formulaic language) allowing greater communicative participation rather than the construction of “perfect” grammar in “well-formed sentences” preferred by a grammatical syllabus ([2] Thornbury, 2013b). Elsewhere in the literature this approach to L2 learning is validated. Ellis, [5] (1998, cited in Thornbury, 2002) states that allowing learners “ownership” of classroom discourse by processes such as topic initiation, is the way learning opportunities can be created, and uses Vygotskian Social-Cognitive theory to emphasize the importance of classroom discourse and its manifestation with relation to affecting acquisition. Maximum learning can occur when learner output is scaffolded by the teacher in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and indicates the necessity for learners to control classroom discourse. The teacher is able to gain insight into what the learner can produce by themselves by analysing language contained in the ZPD which subsequently informs the scaffolding required to assist the learner to use and internalize new language.

3. Dogme and Communicative Language Teaching

According to Richards and Rogers [6](2001) a general set of principles of CLT learning theory includes: language learnt by communicating; authentic and meaningful activities; a premium on fluency; communication produced through integrative language skills; and learning from trial and error through creative communicative risk-taking. As a CLT approach, Dogme embraces all of these.

As previously mentioned, Dogme identifies with the strong version of CLT which uses English to learn English, which Thornbury [7](2015) labels “a core tenet...and captured in the term

fluency-first". Krashen's theory, that language acquisition relies on unconscious communicative language use as opposed to learning as a result of a conscious attempt to understand grammar through instruction, is not directly connected with CLT but his principles have been evident and perhaps guide the stronger "grammar-free" approach. Dogme, however, despite its supposed affinity with "strong CLT", does not match the stronger grammar-free label exactly, as a reactive focus on form is required as previously mentioned.

4. Dogme and its Cultural Appropriacy

The cultural appropriacy of the communicative approach is something that has received more attention in recent years as its influence finds its way into non-Western pedagogical contexts. In Japan, for example, traditionally the teacher is viewed as "an expert and leader" due to a cultural expectation of teacher-centred learning, and there is a need to qualify a definition of "communicative competence" in the Japanese EFL context ([8]Hedge, 2001). As Dogme is an approach and not a method, it lends itself to being flexible to the context at hand: a single version of Dogme does not exist. The Dogme practitioner, fulfilling the dual roles of teacher as expert, and embedded participant, is able to provide appropriate feedback and input to be delivered with precision, and immediacy as a situated pedagogy relevant to the teaching context.

4.1 Japanese Learners' Attitudes and Opinions to Dogme ELT

With Dogme still being a relatively new pedagogical approach there is a dearth of published material relating to possible directions in which research could be carried out. Regarding Dogme in a Japanese EFL context, only two studies appear to exist. To investigate Japanese learners' attitudes and opinions to Dogme, Worth, [9](2012), conducted a study with nine Japanese adult learners in a mixed level, voluntary EFL context. Secondly, Rushton [10](2015), studied the opinions and attitudes of Japanese EFL learners to Dogme on a corporate compulsory language training program.

In Worth's study, learners were participating either as a hobby or for TOEIC preparation and exposed to both Dogme and conventional textbook lessons as a comparison.

Worth reported that the learners felt a Dogme-based approach gave speaking opportunities, whereas textbook speaking incidences were not considered "natural". Dogme, however, was viewed solely as speaking practice or "free conversation" with textbook lessons not equated with speaking, but rather with grammar input. Interestingly, grammar from the Dogme-based lessons was not identified by students as an element that had been learned or even practised. This raises questions as to how Worth dealt with emergent language in the Dogme lessons. He states: "It could be argued that when specific grammar points are taught using a Dogme approach they need to be made explicit **on occasions...**" (emphasis added). While Worth retrospectively acknowledges some importance of making explicit any efforts to provide grammar input within a Dogme lesson framework, it would seem reasonable to surmise that opportunities for dealing with emergent language were not fully taken in order to "scrutinise, manipulate, personalise, and practise" it. Simply providing conditions for language emergence is insufficient, ([3]Meddings and Thornbury,

2009). Worth feels the learners identified the lesson as "free conversation" which once again suggests feedback i.e. explicit attention to form, was minimal, if existent at all. It is debatable whether this study reflects accurate learner attitudes and opinions to a Dogme approach as outlined in Meddings and Thornbury [3](2009).

Furthermore, the learners considered a combination of both Dogme and textbook-based lessons, as being the most suitable: grammar with the textbook; speaking practice without, or in this case "Dogme". Worth noted that as the Japanese EFL learners had accepted his version of Dogme, there was therefore a call to develop the approach rather than question it. He found that Dogme was valued by the learners, but only because it was used in conjunction with textbook-based lessons: Dogme for speaking; textbooks for grammar. Worth observed that Dogme practitioners promote Dogme as a replacement for textbook-based lessons rather than as a complement. Here "complement" most likely means "alternative" as it was unclear whether there was any connection between the textbook lessons and the Dogme ELT lessons Worth taught. Worth used activities in the "task bank" contained in Meddings and Thornbury [3](2009) "to initiate the conversation" although it is unstated exactly which activities were used.

Meddings and Thornbury [3](2009), acknowledge the mandatory nature of textbooks in most teaching contexts and suggest "a compromise" by minimising grammar and focusing on "interesting topics and interactive tasks" - using the textbook to contribute to the class rather than the other way round. For a Japanese EFL context, this would seem to be the most probable model taking into account its previous traditional pedagogical context.

Rushton [10](2015) examined attitudes and opinions of Japanese EFL learners to Dogme in a corporate compulsory learning environment. Using a Dogme approach to achieve learning outcomes was judged positively, however, an expectation of learner autonomy with regard to the lesson direction i.e. content, was minimal with general deference to the teacher's informed decisions, preferred. Dogme's reactive focus on form was welcomed by the learners and fitted well with traditional Japanese learner expectations of a teacher's role as leader and expert. They also generally felt they could acquire more language from their direct interaction with the teacher rather than a textbook. The data also suggests that while some negativity was attached to textbooks, they were generally required by learners to provide an official, artefactual framework for a syllabus. Communicating directly with the native speaker teacher was a strong motivational factor. Furthermore, with some level of teacher-coercion to add credence, learners were positive about using the L2 to engage in productive tasks successfully. Generally, learners felt that speaking was the best way to learn a language and this would fit with Dogme's "conversation-driven" precept.

4.2 Dogme on an elective Japanese University EFL oral communication course

A gap in studies evaluating the attitudes and opinions of Japanese university EFL learners to Dogme ELT on a English course clearly exists. The previously mentioned, 15-lesson elective university course (Spring 2019 semester) had as its own mandated course book Cutting-edge Pre-intermediate third edition, from which the first four units had been selected for the course and

appeared in the official university syllabus. The 14-unit textbook, only required for two semesters in one single academic year, did have the potential, however, for available material from the first seven units if required, as the second (Fall) semester, had been assigned Units 8 through 11.

Total abandonment of the textbook was not an option as not only had it been officially listed in the syllabus, students had already purchased it for approximately ¥3,500 (US\$35) and as previously mentioned in Rushton(2015), Japanese learner expectations prevailed about the inclusion of the textbook even if only in an archival capacity.

5. The Dogme Lessons

Prior to the course commencing there had been a decision made on behalf of the teacher/researcher to try and apply a Dogme approach as much as possible over the duration of the course. Initially, the second lesson, as with the first lesson, used the textbook and its accompanying exercises, however, it also included a short informal feedback session from the students to gauge the suitability and interest level of the material. It was noted that student interest in the course book exercises was lacking with generalized claims that the themes and topics were not relevant. Without mentioning the term Dogme, they were asked, if instead of following the textbook exercises verbatim, they would like to try lessons where conversation was central to the time spent in class. Full agreement was gained but with the caveat given by the teacher that the textbook would be used in some way, even if only indirectly.

The Dogme approach was implemented in three ways: the adaption of a textbook lesson; student-generated topics; and stand-alone activities, which in this case were taken from the activities bank in Meddings and Thornbury [3](2009). What follows are some examples of how these various interpretations of a Dogme approach were implemented over the remaining 13 lessons.

5.1 Lesson 3 - adaption of a textbook lesson

The grammar focus of Unit 1 was a review of questions with present simple tense and frequency adverbs. On pages 12/13 the activity entitled *Do a 60-second interview*, is presented as a reading activity (an interview with actress Frieda Pinto) and then a listening activity with a recording of two students carrying out a similar interview using some question prompts from a “Useful Language” section on the themes of personal information, interests and family, and the future. It is a typical Unit 1 textbook activity which assumes the beginning of a course with inter-student unfamiliarity, with questions providing a good opportunity for a Getting-to-know-you style task. However, in the context in question, being third year students such basic information was very likely to be known already. Students were handed a blank A4 sheet of paper and asked to write their name at the top and divide the page evenly into three separated by the headings: personal information, interests and family, and the future. Individually, students circulated the papers filling out as many known details about the person in question that they could remember. Papers were returned and students then checked that the information about them was correct making any factual adjustments where necessary. Students made pairs and then exchanged their papers with the task of asking further questions to clarify given information e.g. You have two sisters. Who is the oldest?/Which one is

most like you? Or, to ask a new question about a piece of information on the profile. This was repeated for two or three points before changing partners. During the student interaction the teacher circulated and joined the conversations as a teacher/participant, providing input and correction, where necessary and noting any new lexis input on blank A4 paper. This was also the time when new language followed Thornbury and Meddings (2009) directive of being “scrutinised, manipulated, personalised, and practised”. At the end of the lesson, the new lexis was written on the board, explained, and students were encouraged to note down anything they thought was interesting and wanted to learn. From lesson 4 onwards, every lesson began with a review of noted lexis from the previous class in pairs with attempted personalized examples with some possible expansion into a short conversation.

5.2 Lesson 4 adaption of a textbook lesson

The lexical area of Unit 2 page 20 is *Feelings*. Page 20 has a graphic showing 12 expressive faces with blank spaces underneath for lexis to be inserted from a list of feelings adjectives (stressed, excited, disappointed etc). A photocopy of the faces was presented to each student and in pairs they were asked to suggest emotions for each one. The suggested answers were given and compared with their own ideas. Following this, the prompt, “I feel ... when... was provided. Students were instructed to select three or four of the emotions and think how they would complete the sentence making brief notes for each one. They were then instructed to ask the question “What makes you _____ ? inserting one of their own chosen emotions in the blank. In this way, a conversation could be started with a partner. Once again, the teacher participated providing input and correction as necessary with a plenary feedback session at the end where new lexis was shared on the board and noted by students for a review in the following lesson.

5.3 Lesson 5 adaption of a textbook lesson

The theme of pages 20/21 is *Describe a first or last time*. Students were asked to access the internet at <http://iteslj.org/questions/whenwasthelast.html> which gives a list of questions beginning with When was the last time you...? and select two ideas from the list and use them as presented (last time) or changed to “first time” or any other adaptations they wished to make to the content of the questions, or provide their own question. Students were then provided with the prompts: *I'll never forget the first/last time I... It was about (five) years ago. I was about (age) at the time*. They then made notes to prompt themselves when they were speaking. In pairs they began conversations with the teacher/participant monitoring and providing both correction and input. Once again lexis was presented to the class and notes taken by the learners.

5.4 Lesson 9 student-generated topics

Due to there being only three students in the class on that particular day, the students were given the task of initiating their own conversations based on their own topics. This was slow to get started which as stated in Rushton (2015) demonstrates that Japanese learners are not used to taking responsibility for their classroom conversational topics, instead, preferring to defer to the teacher to

provide the topic. On this occasion, the teacher as participant was able to initiate conversations from questions, the answers to which were based on student topic input.

5.5 Lesson 13 and 14 Teaching Unplugged Activities bank

i. Headlines

The students were instructed to think of a real story from their own lives no matter how mundane, and write a headline for it. Examples from the book include, Shopping disaster, Weekend traffic horror, and Tennis triumph. After the language was checked by the teacher, students paired up, displayed their headline and were interviewed by their partner.

ii. Slices of Life

A large three-segment pie chart was drawn on the board and given the title “My week”. The segments were labeled Like, Don’t like, and Don’t mind. Students then talked about their week so far with regard to the three labels with a partner.

iii. Memory Stars

A five-pointed star was drawn on the board, inside each point of the star the words sight, sound, touch, smell and taste were written. Students were directed to write a word or phrase that evoked a memorable experience for each particular sense, for example, in the point labeled “sight” - A view of Kobe Port from Mount Rokko, and so on for each of the other senses. Students formed pairs and asked each other about what had been written.

iv. Three wishes

Five concentric circles were drawn on the board. In the inner circle was written Me, then Family and friends, then My work/school, then My town/Neighborhood and in the outermost circle, The World. Students were instructed to write a wish for three of the circles. The language used was checked by the teacher and then circles were exchanged with a partner who responded to their partner’s wishes with comments, similarity or difference of opinions and asking questions.

The above four activities were joined by the teacher as a participant with feedback being given and emergent language being noted for further practice. These activities clearly had no connection with the textbook and seemed to be the most successful in terms of student motivation, engagement and volume of language produced. Therefore, in a university setting, unlike a corporate one, the total abandonment of the textbook may be possible.

6. Research question / Questionnaire results and discussion

The aim of the research was to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Japanese university students towards the perceived benefits of Dogme ELT as a means of improving their English on an elective Oral Communication course.

To ascertain the students’ response to Dogme over the 15-week semester a Likert-style questionnaire was distributed (see appendix). The results of the questionnaire (N = 6) are presented and interpreted below:

1. I enjoy using textbooks to learn English.

Five of the six students showed some level of disagreement with the statement.

2. Speaking in class without a textbook is the best way to learn English, and 11. I really communicate well when there is no textbook, and 12. People learn a language by speaking it.

All six students agreed which would endorse Dogme's conversation-driven premise.

3. The teacher gives me better ways to say things in English than the textbook, and 6. I learn more phrases and words from my teacher than from a textbook. and 8. I want to learn English that native speakers use. and 10. I want the teacher to correct me and provide the right phrases.

The native speaker teacher embedded as participant being able to provide immediate input and correction was welcomed by all six students.

4. Doing a lesson without a textbook gives me a feeling of accomplishment, and 7. My motivation increases without a textbook.

All students were in agreement that completing lessons without the apparent need of a textbook added to their feeling of accomplishment which is surely a positive thing for their L2 learning motivation.

5. No textbooks, makes the communication relevant to the learners.

A unanimous agreement here with the ability of students to shape the themes of the lesson by self input despite being initially prompted by the teacher providing sentence prompts for the students to complete with their own ideas. The lesson framework was established by the teacher but the details i.e. the personalization of the language was the students' responsibility.

9. I like to know what the lesson is about at the beginning. This statement refers to a standard teacher-fronted lesson where the topic or theme is provided by the teacher.

Two thirds of the students (4) preferred to know what the lesson was about at the beginning of the lesson although two disagreed with the statement.

7. Conclusion

It can be seen that Dogme ELT is a viable approach for students on an elective Japanese university EFL Oral Communication course. Students appreciate the immediacy of native speaker teacher feedback and input and the effect on L2 learning motivation is self-evident from the data collected. The class size, however, is not usual for a Japanese university setting and further research is required with larger classes. Furthermore, it is important to investigate other combinations of variables such as both non-native teacher led and compulsory courses. Both larger numbers of students and a compulsory course mean that oral testing becomes necessary to standardize the grading process. How this would be achieved using a Dogme approach is yet to be considered and further research is clearly required. It is hoped that this can be investigated in the above context in the very near future.

8. References

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9. Appendix

Bilingual Likert-style questionnaire to ascertain attitudes and opinions regarding Dogme ELT.

自分の考えが、書いてある文にあてはまるか、あてはまらないかを1から4の数字に丸をつけて答えてください。

Strongly disagree 非常にあてはまらない	Disagree あてはまらない	Agree あてはまる	Strongly agree 非常にあてはまる
1	2	3	4

1. I enjoy using textbooks to learn English. テキストを使っの英語学習は楽しい。	1	2	3	4
2. Speaking in class without a textbook is the best way to learn English. 授業中、テキストを使わずにしゃべるのが英語の学習に最適だ。	1	2	3	4
3. The teacher gives me better ways to say things in English than the textbook. テキストよりも、先生の方が英語でのより良い表現方法を教えてくれる。	1	2	3	4
4. Doing a lesson without a textbook gives me a feeling of accomplishment. テキストを使わない授業で、達成感を感じることができる。	1	2	3	4
5. No textbooks, makes the communication relevant to the learners. テキストが無ければ、コミュニケーションが学習者次第になる。	1	2	3	4
6. I learn more phrases and words from my teacher than from a textbook. テキストよりも、先生からより多くのフレーズや単語を学んでいる。	1	2	3	4
7. My motivation increases without a textbook. テキストが無い方が、学習意欲が湧く。	1	2	3	4
8. I want to learn English that native speakers use. ネイティブが使うような英語を習得したい。	1	2	3	4
9. I like to know what the lesson is about at the beginning. レッスンの初めに、レッスンの内容を知りたい。	1	2	3	4
10. I want the teacher to correct me and provide the right phrases. 間違いを直してくれて、正しいフレーズを教えてくれる先生がいい。	1	2	3	4
11. I really communicate well when there is no textbook. テキストが無くてもとても上手にコミュニケーションをとることができる。	1	2	3	4
12. People learn a language by speaking it. 外国語は話しながら習得するものだ。	1	2	3	4