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The Learning Environment and Student Motivation

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Abstract

In Japan, for the most part, learning English takes place in the formal setting of the classroom. Opportunities for communicative exchange with native speakers of the language are limited. Yet, despite this context, emphasis is still placed on communicative ability for 'real-life' situations at the expense of context-based English that would be more appropriate and relevant to the Japanese setting. This essay makes an argument for emphasizing context over communication as a necessary step towards achieving greater relevancy for English in student's lives.

Keywords: Context, Communicative Language Teaching, Motivation

Few would deny that communicative competence in foreign language teaching is a worthy goal. Communicative competence though is too often associated, either explicitly or implicitly, with native speaker proficiency. Leaving aside for a moment the rather thorny theoretical debate as to what or rather who exactly a native speaker is, the presumption is that competence in English is best measured in terms of its usage in an English speaking country. This can be seen in the increasing emphasis placed upon corpus-based studies of English grammar, concordance research and textual analysis. Critics bemoan the artificial nature of textbook and classroom English and how it fails to correspond to 'real world' use of the language. This is not in dispute. What is contentious though, is the underlying assumption that 'educational' English should correspond to the English used by native speakers. From this perspective English as a foreign language is primarily concerned with what Hymes termed "the performed rather than the possible" (1972:31), that is, evaluation of proficiency is considered solely in terms of the performance of native speakers and not other users of the language.

Yet, if we examine what is taught within the classrooms of Japanese universities, we realize that in certain crucial respects it cannot help but fail to be in accordance with actual language use. Actual language use occurs naturally in what may be considered the social world, motivated by the need for communication, the expression of identity both communal and individual and determined by the differing contexts in which the communication takes place. By contrast, the English used in the foreign classroom setting does not occur naturally. It is akin to other subjects on the curriculum, disassociated from the rhythms and patterns of everyday life, discontinuously placed on a timetable, fitted into a schedule that is first and foremost determined by administrative convenience rather than educational concerns. Additionally, in a predominantly monolingual society like Japan, there is no natural social or individual impetus to use the language so that within the classroom a high degree of artificiality surrounds the usage. This in turn has important implications for the creation of student motivation and the necessary contrivance of usage context. All this is done within a restricted unit of time – the class, at the behest of a central controlling authority – the teacher, towards a directly measurable outcome – the test.

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As can thus be seen, the English learnt in the classroom is a far cry from the natural conditions in which the language is used. Much as we would like to introduce ‘actual’, or ‘real’, or ‘authentic’ language use into our classrooms, it is simply impossible to replicate the sociocultural conditions in which native speakers use the language. You can, to some degree, modify classroom context so that it more closely mimics reality, but as Widdowson points out “the closer you try to get to user authenticity, the more contrivance you will have to resort to, for you have to somehow reconstruct the original contexts and make them accessible, while at the same time making them appropriate to the learning process” (2003:112).

There is a curious contradiction, if not outright paradox, at the heart of this. For pedagogic purposes ‘reality’ is taken to be the goal of language learning and this striving for content and materials appropriate to realistic English usage drives much of teaching methodology, yet at the same time, the context in which much if not all of this learning takes place is within the classroom. However, the classroom is too often conceptualized as being ‘divorced’ from reality, lacking validation in terms of context and communication. But what, one may ask, is so unreal about the classroom? It is all too real for the students who must go there day after day. Until they graduate the classroom is, for better or for worse, the focus of their lives. So, instead of conceiving of the classroom as an artificial and arid place, we need to recognize that it is, in fact, a social construct possessing its own contexts and purposes, its own legitimate reality. In terms of English language teaching we need to conceive of English that is “appropriate for use within the classroom on its own contextual terms and for its own purposes”.

This then, raises the question of what kind of language is appropriate for courses that teach English as a foreign language. Widdowson (2003) has suggested two guiding parameters for determining language appropriateness: the educational objectives to be achieved and the process necessary to get there. With respect to the objectives to be achieved, emphasis on native speaker-like fluency or pronunciation is unrealistic and often demotivating, as students realize that such a standard is beyond their ability. What is within the student’s range of capability is to acquire sufficient knowledge of English from which further learning, if so desired or necessary (i.e. for personal or professional reasons), can subsequently take place. Such an approach emphasizes the possible rather than the ideal situation. It recognizes that there are pedagogic limitations imposed on the formal teaching of English within Japan and so does not attempt the fool’s errand of trying to be comprehensive and all encompassing. Rather, the aim of English language teaching should be to identify those factors most relevant, motivating and possessing the greatest

potential for subsequent realization by the students. Thus, for students in a technological university like Muroran Institute of Technology, it stands to reason that there should be a greater emphasis on scientific or technical English as opposed to the works of Shakespeare.

This naturally leads us on to examining the related questions of what kind of language needs to be presented in class, and how does it need to be presented? Firstly, the English taught in the classroom has to engage the learner’s attention and interest: it has to be made ‘real’ for them rather than simply being appropriated from an idealized and remote ‘native speaker’ context. In other words, it has to have a relevancy to their lives as lived now, as third level students in the English language classroom of a Japanese university. Secondly, the English must be of a type that can be learnt from. Relevancy is in and of itself not sufficient: the language must also serve the purpose of learning.

Now, all this may sound like a critique of communicative language teaching (CLT) and in a way it is. The main focus of CLT is, as the name suggests, upon communication; be it as a teaching process or educational objective. Broadly speaking, CLT is concerned with the teaching the meaning, functionality and use of language in a learner-centered manner, utilizing ‘real-life’ tasks, situations and roles in order to develop learner’s communicative proficiency in English (Yoon, 2004). This in itself is admirable, but the problem arises in how CLT is positioned vis-à-vis the teacher and learner. CLT is after all communicative language teaching and implicitly prioritizes teaching methodology to the detriment of the context in which it takes place. This emphasis by CLT on what the teacher must do suggests that the solutions to the problems faced by teachers of English within Japan (e.g.: large class sizes, unmotivated students, rote learning, solely exam-orientated) are primarily methodological in nature as opposed to contextual. The perhaps unintended, but certainly underlying, premise of CLT is that this approach will work no matter where you are and no matter what the context. Unlike the previously outlined approach to English language teaching that first and foremost conceives of methodology as subservient to the student/situation context, in CLT communication per se is held to be the ultimate goal of English teaching and this in turn determines the methodology to be used. By relegating context to a position of secondary importance it erroneously suggests that CLT will work anywhere – that “the methodology is king, and the magic solution for all our pupils” (Bax, 2003:282). By focusing attention on what the teacher should do, CLT inevitably draws attention away from the context in which the teacher is teaching and the students learning.

For Japanese students of English, one of the biggest criticisms that can be directed at CLT is that it

presupposes that the English learned for ‘real-life’ tasks will be actually be used in ‘real-life’ situations. Yet, for the majority of Japanese students this is patently not the case. This, I stress, is not to say students do not use English, but the specific English they use or need to use can differ greatly from the generalized task-based English found in most textbooks. Again to take the example of the university I work for, Muroran Institute of Technology, students here have minimal opportunity to interact with native speakers of English, but the nature of their technical and scientific studies exposes them to a wide range of English-language publications. Thus, from the learners point of view, it makes little pedagogical sense for their studies if the methodological task set for them is to adequately communicate “their plans for the weekend” when in their own studies they are addressing such topics as aeronautics or spin-spectroscopy.

This highlights another area of English language learning that is often overlooked in the all-encompassing drive towards communicative competency, namely the cognitive dissonance that arises within our students due to the overwhelming difference in their ability to clearly express their thoughts, opinions and beliefs in Japanese as opposed to English. Asking a 20 year old university student to talk about what he or she did last weekend in order to practice the usage of the past tense may be a justifiable methodological goal, but from the point of view of the student, the English sentences he or she subsequently constructs may be embarrassingly simplistic and thus loathe to be uttered. It also presupposes a willingness or motivation on the part of the student to actually speak out in the first place. Standard CLT based textbook exhortations to “ask a friend” or “practice with a partner” assume a willingness or motivation on the part of the students to naturally engage in such activities. Indeed, a major weakness of many current TESOL textbooks is that in catering for such diverse publishing markets as Africa, Asia and America, the content gets watered down to a bizarre international hybrid of seemingly randomly chosen topics and situations. The other extreme, of course, is the textbook published in Japan for Japanese students but containing a distressingly large amount of Japanese explanatory text. In both cases no attempt is made to discover what the students want to learn – the publisher’s presupposition takes their place. Student motivation is assumed. Yet, as anybody teaching English in the Japanese classroom can attest, such willingness to learn is elusive, if not often completely absent. English language learning in Japan, unlike in China for example, does not have a single overriding economic or educational rationale. In many other countries fluency in English brings with it status and the opportunity to ascend the employment ladder. In Japan such considerations are less important particularly for the majority of graduates who end up working in small

to medium size companies that have little or no need for the English language.

Rather motivation has to be inculcated in the students within the admittedly difficult context of a compulsory classroom setting, in obedience of an externally defined curriculum towards a mandatory test. This is no easy thing to achieve but neither should the easy option be chosen of simply dismissing the students as being “unmotivated”. Rather, we could begin by looking at the academic goals we impose upon students and thinking long and hard as to whether they correspond with the student’s own goals for studying the English language. At the start of each term teachers are required to specify their teaching goals for their classes yet, more often than not, these goal descriptions are quite distinct from the goals the students are actually pursuing during those same classes. Indeed according to research conducted by Dornyei (2001), most students do not really understand (or accept) why they are involved in a learning activity. The ‘official class goal’ (i.e. mastering the course material) is often replaced by the more prosaic but understandable goal of merely doing the minimum necessary to pass the end of term exam.

There is no one ‘magical’ way of rectifying this situation but in searching for a solution we should, I contend, begin by focusing on the relevancy of what is being thought to the learner’s lives. As McCombs and Whisler (1997:38) succinctly put it: “Educators think students do not care, while the students tell us they do care about learning but are not getting what they need”. Indeed, 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. After all, most universities’ curricular topics and learning activities (particularly preparatory courses for taking tests such as TOIEC and TOEFL) are selected primarily on the basis of what Japanese society believes students need to learn, not on the basis of what students would choose if given the opportunity to do so. Ostensibly, English language courses in universities are established for the benefit of students, but from the students’ point of view their time in the classroom is devoted to enforced attempts to meet externally imposed demands. To remedy this, somewhat if not fully, teachers must make a conscious effort to discover, understand, and integrate as best they can students’ learning goals into their teaching curriculum. Again we are back to the theme of relevancy – to the students, to their studies, their lives, their futures and enveloping all of this the context in which the language learning takes place: the classroom. But we can only discover these relevant factors by actually initiating discussions with the students about language learning and what, if indeed anything, it means to them. This is, I am all too aware, easier said than done, but I would also contend that unless it is done, we will continue to be confronted in

our classrooms with the dispiriting sight of unmotivated students unaware of why they are there in the first place.

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学問環境と学習者モチベーション

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概要

日本では、英語を学ぶ場合、そのほとんどが教室で行われている。英語のネイティブスピーカーとコミュニケーションする機会は、極めて稀である。たとえそのような状況でも、日本の場合、適切な文脈を理解できる英語教育の方法を取る代わりに、ネイティブスピーカーのように話せることを目的とした、実用的な状況を学ぶことが、まだ重要視されている。以下の評論は、日本で英語を学ぶことにおいては、コミュニケーション力を育てるより、文脈を読み取る力を育てる事の方が重要だと考える。そうすると、英語を学ぶ学生達の生活に関連がある英語が、実際的な目標を確実にすることができるだろう。

キーワード : 文脈, コミュニケーション言語教育, 動機