

Some Ways to Enhance Learners Involvement to Language Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

What are the major themes running through ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching and research efforts today? Brown (1991) lists four of them: 1) focus on learners — who are they? why are they learning English? 2) focus on sociopolitical and geographical issues — where is English being taught? what effects do geographical differences have on teaching? 3) focus on subject matter — what are we teaching? 4) focus on method — how are we teaching?

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the general trends today in linguistic studies on teaching and language acquisition. I would like to pay particular attention to one of the themes, learners, and to find some ways to encourage learners to get involved in English language class, particularly at the university level in Japan. This paper will take you through the various stages in the curriculum process, from needs analysis to evaluation, and seek chances and ways to get students more involved in learning. As we go through the process, we will also look at other themes — subject matter and method — and particularly look at task-based teaching, learning strategy instruction, and the use of group work. Because of space, I have been unable to provide the concrete examples I would prefer. But I hope that the documentation in this paper will be an aid to those who wish to study further on these topics.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

In any syllabus the very first thing you have to do is analyze learners' needs. Teachers are often guilty of complacency in this area: we think we know what learners need and want, and what they do not; we

assume what they are capable of and what they are not, and so on. But the reality often presents something else. Learners change every year and so do their needs and wants, as their learning environment itself goes through changes. Therefore, teachers need to find out who learners really are and what level they are at. We need personal and linguistic information about and from learners. Diagnostic tests would be useful in finding out linguistic information, for example, the proficiency level of learners : their strengths and weaknesses. Personal information such as needs and wants, motivation and interests of learners can be gathered through questionnaires, interviews, self-reports etc. Along with the information stated above, the information about learner strategy will be very helpful for both teachers and learners to make their teaching / learning more effective. Many empirical studies have recently revealed the importance of identification of learning strategies and the value of strategy instruction for effective language teaching / learning (O'Malley & Chamot 1990, Chs. 5 & 6). To those who are not familiar with methods of diagnosing learners' strategy styles and preferences, Oxford's book (Oxford 1990) will be a great help. It introduces some of the most important strategy assessment techniques : observations, interviews, "think-aloud" procedures, note-taking etc. (pp. 193-200).

As Littlejohn (1983) points out, few learners have any clear awareness of what they need and want to learn and how they wish to go about it. This needs - analysis stage is therefore the important and necessary step for laying the foundation for both teachers and learners to build an effective language program.

OBJECTIVES

Next, objectives need to be set. In most Japanese college classes, teachers (in some cases with the advice of administrators) usually take the central role of setting objectives. There seems to be very little room for learners to participate in this. We need to see some changes here. Teachers may have already set the objectives, but as needs-analysis reveals new information about learners, some adjustments to objectives are inevitable and desirable. In this adjustment process teachers can invite learners to participate. Teachers present what they initially hope to

accomplish in class. Learners, getting some opportunities to do so, present what they really hope to accomplish. Then teachers and learners negotiate what they together will work for. This may seem time-consuming and troublesome, but will be rewarding. Brindley's study (1984) suggests this. Brindley (1984) investigated the needs analysis, and the goal and objective setting practices of ESL teachers in adult class and the reaction of learners to these practices. He interviewed the learners extensively and found that they granted the greater validity to the program when it expressed concerns for learners communicative needs and explicit goals than when it did not. By way of letting learners get involved in objective setting, we need to see learners start recognizing some control over their own learning and responsibility in their learning. This would help to motivate learners and get them more enthusiastic about their studies.

CONTENT

The content of classes is usually pre-determined by teachers as they predetermine the textbooks. There are, of course, some exceptions. Some teachers wish to go along with the process approach as Breen (1987b) suggested, and invite full participation from the students in the decision-making on content. Teachers and learners together thus create the content of classes from scratch. But, in most cases, teachers usually have certain textbooks for certain classes and the content of the classes are decided accordingly. I would like to suggest that, even here, there still remains some room for learners to participate. Keeping the objectives set by teachers and learners in a cooperative manner in mind, in the same manner they can negotiate what to study from the teaching materials. The design of language teaching materials has traditionally given priority to the selection of content. The content might focus on input in a particular target language and specific information about the language and its use. Teachers explain the content of the textbook and what they initially intended to teach. Learners receive opportunities to reflect on the teachers' plans and intentions and make some suggestions and adjustments. Learners may wish to pass on some parts of the textbook or to add some new parts. Learners may also have new ideas about

the content of the classes which would suit their objectives better. Again, inviting learners to help choose the content assures them of their control over and personal responsibility in the learning process.

Teachers also need to put more efforts into finding and using the teaching materials which would be effective not only in giving information learners need but also in promoting learners' interaction in classes. Nunan (1988) acknowledges the importance of interaction. He lists it as one of the key principles for designing language teaching materials, saying that materials should stimulate interaction. Allwright (1984) reported that learners do not learn what teachers teach and sometimes learn things other than the teacher intended. He saw the cause for such phenomena in learner participation. As he points out, it is not the content of a lesson that is the basis for learning, but the process of classroom interaction which generates opportunities for learning.

TEACHING

Now I would like to explore some ways to enhance such interaction among learners in classes. I will particularly pay attention to task-based teaching and strategy training. Task-based teaching is a very effective method for developing student interaction, and strategy training is a way to develop language learning strategies and resources. I will also examine the use of group work as another important way to promote learners' interaction.

Task-based Teaching

Breen (1987a) points out the recent paradigm shift in language syllabus design, from propositional plans to process plans. Language teachers and researchers have long used syllabus types that stress form and function. These types represent knowledge of language, use of skills, and a repertoire of uses, and they focus on the development of accurate and fluent performance. But the current findings in linguistics, and teaching methodology, and the contributions of learners have opened the doors to new syllabi (process plans) such as task-based and process syllabus types. These syllabi are concerned with procedures for communicating, learning, and classroom work, and they focus on de-

velopment of underlying competence in accuracy, appropriateness, and meaningfulness within activities and events. In these process plans, especially in task-based teaching, we find some useful ideas for how we may best plan for classroom work and how we may generate learners' interaction.

Task-based language teaching is basically an approach to designing and implementing a language teaching program based on a unit of analysis, the task. Task-based teaching, simply put, forces students to use language skills to accomplish pre-set tasks. Breen (1987c) defines a task as "a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning — from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making" (p. 23).

In this teaching, the first stage in designing a course is to find out what learners need and want to learn, and then make those needs and wants into tasks. From the list of tasks, commonalities among them are sought out, and pedagogical tasks are created. Learners, then work on the tasks in classes and through the process of engaging in the tasks and interacting with one another, learners acquire the communicative competence.

The recent study of modified interaction also confirms the importance of such interaction for facilitating second language acquisition. Modified interaction takes place when speakers want to communicate to listeners but are not successful in communicating : speakers try to modify their speech to make it more understandable to the listeners. Krashen (1981, 1982) hypothesized that comprehensible input is a necessary and sufficient condition for second language acquisition. But recently this hypothesis has been criticized. Swain (1985) reported that the learners in the immersion programs in Canada received considerable amount of comprehensible input, but learners did not acquire the sort of facility in the target language as the hypothesis had predicted. She suggested that learners need not only comprehensible input but opportunities to modify their own speech to make it understandable to others. Long (1985) also proposed the value of the tasks which would promote conversational adjustments or interactional modifications among learn-

ers for their language acquisition.

Then what kind of tasks would be most helpful in promoting such modifications and facilitating second language acquisition? Long (1981) found that two-way tasks are superior to one-way tasks in generating modified interactions: two-way tasks are those in which all learners in a group have unique information to contribute by way of exchanging information for the task completion; one-way tasks are those in which one member of a group has all the relevant information. Doughty and Pica (1986) reported that "information gap" tasks which requires information-exchange in order to complete the tasks brought significantly more conversational modification than optimal information-exchange tasks.

Teachers should get acquainted with these ideas, the principles of these tasks, and use them in teaching as supplementary materials, if not the main feature of the classes. It would certainly give more variety to the class activities and would hopefully help students get more involved in the class work, and, through interactional modifications in these tasks, learners gain the communicative competence.

Teachers may also want to consider the opportunities for students to create their own tasks. Breen (1987d) reports that there is some gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation of a given task. The students' interpretation of a given task is often shaped by their assumptions of what they should contribute, the view of the nature and demand of the task. Learners tend to impose their own ideas of task purpose, content and method. Students also relate these to their perceptions of language, of language learning, and of themselves. The narrower the gap between learner interpretation and teacher intention is, the greater the chances of achieving the desired learning outcomes are. One of the ways to solve this, as Breen (1987d) suggests, is to let students be involved in task designing. This would tap on students creativity and make the learning process more interesting and meaningful to them. Students can also share each other's tasks and can help each other by giving feedback about the tasks, discussing the gap between the giver's intention of a task and the receiver's interpretation. This participation in task making by the students would give teachers opportunities to find

out whether students really know the objectives of the tasks and the lesson content that they are based on. Learners would have a better idea about the meaning of tasks by actively getting involved in the making process and would be able to work better on other tasks in the future.

Learning Strategy Instruction

As we have included learning strategy as an element of needs analysis, we also need to implement strategy training as an important part of our teaching. We should stimulate language learners to become more self-directed and proficient learners by way of strategy instruction. Learning strategies is a key to greater autonomy and meaningful learning. We want to see learners have more control over their education and improve their own learning.

Nunan (1988) pointed out, in his principles for designing language teaching materials, that materials should encourage learners to develop learning skills. Such instructional materials for second language learners are now available.

Rubin and Thompson (1982) provides us with a set of guidelines, suggestions, and explanations of the language learning process. This was designed to help second language learners become more successful language learners. Rubin and Thompson describe the language learning process, recommend specific learning strategies (14 of them are treated), and suggest helpful language learning resources. Learners can also benefit from the practical suggestions they include for applying learning strategies in different ways. Teachers could develop instructional materials based on the suggested ideas and activities.

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) offer actual instructional materials for intermediate-level ESL learners and help them become more effective and responsible learners. Teachers can benefit from provided models for learner training and information about how to integrate learner training with language instruction. Teachers will also find a variety of classroom activities especially helpful. They include brief explanations of language learning processes, examples of strategy applications, learning process checklists and charts, and pair and group activities as well. There is even a teacher's guide which gives an overview of the back-

ground knowledge of the rationale for learning strategy instruction.

Oxford (1990) gives language teachers — mainly secondary, university, and adult level teachers — very useful information about how to help students become more active, self-directed, and effective learners. This is a great resource book for those who are not familiar with language learning strategy and strategy training. This is a practical and comprehensible guidebook for showing us learning strategies and how to train students in using better strategies. Teachers can gain a large number of practical strategy training exercises in all four language skills and a model for strategy training. Oxford provides concrete examples of language learning strategies and different learning tasks and situations.

Chamot and O'Mally (1990, ch 7) introduce CALLA (the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) which integrates content topics, language activities, and learning strategy instruction. CALLA consists of three components : 1) topics from major content subjects (science, mathematics, social studies, language arts, etc.) 2) development of academic language skills, for example, listening and reading for information, speaking and writing about new knowledge 3) direct instruction in learning strategies of both content and language. Such instructional materials are very useful. Learners can develop academic English language skills through content-based instruction, and also develop understanding and skills in content areas listed above.

With the help of these works done by different researchers, teachers can store up a bank of instructional materials on language learning strategies. Teachers can also develop their own materials using the principles and the ideas presented in these studies. Teachers can adopt mainstream content materials and develop academic language activities and language learning strategy instruction. In order to develop their own materials and implement them effectively in classroom, teachers themselves need a considerable amount of training and learning. But it will be worth trying. Seeing students become autonomous and effective learners of both language and content would be very rewarding.

GROUP WORK

We have looked at some ideas for effective teaching and the ways to get learners involved in classroom learning — strategy instruction and task-based teaching in particular. I also need to pay attention to the way we implement these ideas in classroom. We have already seen that a key to generating conversational modification in the classroom is to use tasks which require information exchange. In their study, Doughty and Pica (1986) also suggest that not only the type of task makes a difference in the degree in generating modification, but the class structure, the way learners participate, have an effect on the degree of modification. They found that group work interaction patterns produced more modification than did the teacher-fronted interaction. Like this study, other empirical studies have also shown us that group work is a great alternative to teacher-centered teaching. Here I would like to look at rationales for supporting the use of group work.

Long and Porter (1985) gives us both pedagogical and psycholinguistic arguments for supporting the use of group work (including pair work) in classroom second language learning. There are five pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in second language learning. First, group work increases language practice opportunities. Learners cannot simply have enough time to practice the target language in a large class where one teacher usually sets the same instructional pace and content for everyone and uses the most of the class period by lecturing grammatical points, etc. Group work can certainly help to solve the problem by giving more time to learners to interact in small groups in class. Second, group work improves the quality of student talk. Teacher-fronted classes limit not only the quantity of learner interaction, but also its quality. In such classes teachers ask a series of known-information or questions in which correct answers are already known to both teachers and learners. It is very rare for genuine communication to take place in these classes. Group work can provide the opportunities for better quality communication. Group work is close to a natural setting for conversation in that learners have face-to-face talk; learners are not hurried to answer the conventional and isolated questions; they can rather engage in more meaningful talk with cohesive and coherent sequences.

Learners can practice a range of language functions taking a variety of roles. For example, working on a problem-solving task in a group, learners can suggest, infer, qualify, hypothesize, generalize, agree, or disagree in the process with other learners in the group. As we have seen in task-based teaching, learners gain the practice for communicative competence by working on tasks. This is especially effective in small group settings. Learners can participate in the practice close to real-life-situation communication in which they exchange information, and need to use language creatively and spontaneously. Third, group work helps to individualize instruction. In teacher-fronted classes it is very hard to take individual differences into consideration. Group work cannot handle all the differences, but certainly can help. Students can work on different materials suited to their needs at their own pace. Fourth, group work promotes a positive, relaxed climate. Learners experience considerable stress when they are asked to answer questions or respond to teachers in teacher-fronted large classes. They do so especially when teachers expect accurate and quick responses from learners. Group work can provide a more intimate and less threatening setting which would help learners engage in more personalized, creative talk without worrying too much about accuracy and speed. Last, group work motivates learners. Group work provides a meaningful language learning environment where learners can involve themselves in classes more, and it also provides a more individual and personal manner, thus motivating learners.

Here, I need to briefly discuss one possible weakness with the more open-ended, task-based group work. It is easy for the teacher, in an effort to encourage freedom in the classroom, to leave assignments very undefined in the manner the teacher wishes the students to accomplish these tasks, how he wants them to work. While some students are able to enjoy this extra freedom and respond with increased creativity, a few will, out of fear of failure, freeze up, and become incapable of doing anything at all. At least initially, the teacher will need to coach these students on the steps necessary to complete the given task. This is not to give answers, but merely to show the students a method that would successfully fulfill the task's goal, to leave the students then to actually

follow those steps on their own. As the students grow accustomed to this method, their need for such explanation should decrease.

There are also psycholinguistic arguments for supporting the use of group work in the second language classroom. We have already seen that Krashen's input hypothesis may not be sufficient for language acquisition, but learners rather need opportunities to modify their speech as well. In a large, teacher-fronted class it is impossible to provide enough such opportunities to learners. Group work can be a solution to the problem. Doughty and Pica (1986) reported that learners get involved in more negotiation for meaning in the small group than in the teacher-centered large class. Negotiation is essential for successful communication. The gap between speaker intention and listener interpretation should be narrowed through the process of negotiating the meaning by re-stating, asking, clarifying, etc. Recent studies suggest that conversation between non-native speakers can offer the same kind of negotiation for meaning as the one between native and non-native can. Porter (1983, 1986) studied the language produced by adult students in task-based class discussions done in pairs. She found that learners cannot provide each other with the accurate grammatical and sociolinguistic input that native speakers can, but learners can provide each other genuine communicative practice including the negotiation of meaning. It is comforting to know that even though native speakers may not be available in the classroom, small group work among non-native speakers is effective as well as with natives. Thus small group work among non-native speakers can provide not only a quantity of language practice but also the important element of conversational modification through the negotiation process in group work.

There might still be some concerns about the use of group work in terms of errors: learners may get influenced by other's errors, and the proper error treatment may be neglected. But the recent studies indicate that these concerns might be unfounded. Learners can correct each other successfully (Bruton and Samuda, 1980); learners do not necessarily learn each other's errors (Porter, 1986).

Thus the use of group work in language classroom has been supported by sound arguments and empirical findings. This is not to deny

the value and effectiveness of teacher-centered classroom teaching, it certainly has an important place in teaching, and is obviously useful for certain kinds of classes. But teachers need to implement the use of group work in their teaching in order to make the classroom more attractive and effective. Teachers should integrate task-based teaching / strategy training and the use of small group work. Long and Porter (1986) suggest that a combination of small group work with two-way information exchange tasks are especially beneficial to learners because they increase the amount of talk, encourage more negotiation work, and help learners gain more comprehensible input. Through implementation and integration of these ideas, language classrooms can be revitalized and can become an active and effective learning place.

EVALUATION

Another important area we need to consider for more student involvement is evaluation. It has a significant place in the active learner participation curriculum as it is the case in Breen's (1987) process syllabus. The key element of this syllabus is its emphasis on evaluation. This is an on-going process throughout the syllabus and makes room for adjustment and improvement in the ever changing language teaching / learning process. Teachers need to continuously gather both personal and linguistic information about learners to continue to meet the learning needs of a particular group of learners. This is very close to needs analysis. The only difference would be that needs analysis takes place initially in the syllabus but evaluation is an on-going process of information gathering. We want this evaluation available in each stage of curriculum, from needs analysis, objective setting, to task and activity selection. Teachers and learners together share outcomes from the work in each stage. Achievements, difficulties and problems are identified and teachers and learners may refer back to the earlier decision on content, methods, activities and so on. Adaptations and alternatives in each stage can be proposed and discussed by teachers and learners. Therefore evaluation is a process to continually seek out the better way to teach / learn the target language and to improve each component of the syllabus. It is up to teachers to figure out how to make room for such

evaluation in their teaching. One way to implement this would be to set aside the final 5 minutes in each class session for that day's evaluation. Teachers could also interview students regularly and find out what they are thinking and feeling about the classes.

CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the ways to take more account of learners in ESL teaching, and the curriculum developing process. There is still much room for student involvement in our current teaching methods. We can be more sensitive to students' needs and wants through needs analysis, then can set or re-set the objectives of a class accordingly. Teachers can include learners in decision-making of the content of classroom and the activities in the class. Teachers need to encourage learners to become more self-directed, self-controlled, and responsible language learners by giving them opportunities to evaluate, adapt, and alternate. Evaluation is essential for giving students such opportunities, and should be available in each stage of curriculum. In the material development and methodology area, task-based teaching and learning strategy instruction can offer us new insights on how we can make classroom work more active and effective. Teachers are encouraged to get acquainted with these concepts and ideas and implement them or add them to their teaching to meet the needs of students. Teachers also need to make a good use of small group work for more learner participation and for more effective communicative language competence practice. We want to see that teachers and students work together in order to make their teaching / learning more attractive, active, and effective by implementing and integrating the ideas presented in this paper.

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