

Communication, Ethics, and the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concepts of communication and ethics as they are viewed from and relate to language teaching in Japan today.

Communication is apparently being conceptualized in radically different ways than in the rest of the world. Although the official pronouncements are close to the internationally accepted norms, the reality in the classroom is very different.

Ethics is not today an issue and despite a sense that language teaching is not succeeding as well as it could there seems to be little urgency about employing the pointers that the research cited here have provided.

The paper concludes that for language teaching to develop and become integrated with the wider world there is a necessity for language instructors to become aware of the issues involved and for a discussion of what the issues stand for and how they should be dealt with in our classrooms.

Introduction

Language learning occupies an important position in school curricula around the world, and also in Japan, due to the growing international integration and ease of communication among countries. In Japan there is general agreement that knowing a foreign language is an asset and that schools should play a role in the acquisition of foreign languages. To achieve this, much effort and thought is invested in language learning as a school subject and in searching for ways which will make the study more effective and productive.

One aspect of this interest in language learning is a constantly ongoing, wide ranging discussion concerned with how language teaching and learning should take place and with what constitutes language teaching and learning. Here numerous opinions and ideas offer insights and struggle for recognition in the market place. One reason for the multifaceted discussion seems to be the limited concern participants show in defining and agreeing on the concepts and scope of matters discussed when evaluating language teaching and learning.

Particularly, the discussion of abstract concepts in language teaching is bedeviled by perceptions and attitudes that are generally not explicitly stated but which discussants

assume to be general despite obvious disagreements. The language teaching profession offers a number of methods and approaches which come with reasonably clear rationales, and which offer advantages in classroom use. The implementation here does not always adhere to the premises however, making an evaluation of the relative merits and contributions to language learning of various classroom approaches difficult, but providing justification for most opinions proffered. This lack of common reference and the superficial analysis of phenomena is perhaps a cause for the multitude of opinions swirling around most matters related to language learning, at least in Japan.

The concepts to be taken up in this paper, communication and ethics, both fall into the category which suffer from a lack of agreed upon definitions, and perceptions of communication and ethics differ greatly from instructor to instructor, situation to situation, and commentator to commentator. Generally no contributor to this discussion fails to claim allegiance to "communicative" concerns, while few take clear notice of ethics.

This paper will first discuss the concepts separately, attempt to develop definitions for each of the two concepts and explore the implications of the concepts as revealed through the definitions. Then discuss what an awareness of the concepts and their implications would mean for Japan and our shrinking world in the 21st century.

Communication

In general, communication can be defined as: to impart knowledge of, or to make known (Urdang, 1975). In terms of language learning and language use, this may be rephrased to mean that, for humans, communication is to interact with the environment in some manner. This may happen in direct face to face contact or less directly by conveying information through print or other media.

Communicative competence has been defined as knowledge of the underlying grammar of a language, understood in the widest sense (Hymes, 1972). Communicative competence with this definition encompasses a knowledge of all forms of the language and an ability to use this knowledge in situations where information exchange or acquisition is required.

An instructor trying to apply such definitions to the classroom would be able to see most activities taking place there as communicative. Writing communicates the ideas of the writer to a reader, and speaking offers a listener the opportunity to understand what is being said. At the same time the reader or listener is communicating by understanding and responding to what is read or heard. Some activities may concern only specific aspects of communication, but all are potentially communicative and represent facets of communication which language learners could benefit from exposure to.

The above concept of communicative competence has not always been accepted outside the circle of scholars who were responsible for the introduction of communicative teaching.

Other conceptions have involved a stress on explicit grammar knowledge (Brown, 1980, pp. 241-2) and the ability to repeat and flexibly replace elements of sentences (Fries, 1952).

In Japan, the language teaching profession, and indeed society at large has not fully adopted the definition of communication above. Many seem to subscribe to narrower definitions, which consider communication to be limited to speaking (verbalizing) a foreign language. Such a conceptualization of communication in language teaching may be unique to Japan.

Among Japanese, the scope of communication is occasionally limited even further, to that of Japanese foreign language learners speaking to what is termed "foreigners," in and out of Japan.

These narrower definitions of communication differ markedly in scope and when expressed through the activities of language teachers, they will strongly affect what is taught as communicative in foreign language classrooms.

Restricting the communicative label to speaking seems counter-intuitive as it would deny communicative value of other media than the voice. It would also categorize much of what presently goes on in language classrooms in Japan as non-communicative and so *perhaps in need of replacement, in the light of present day Ministry of Education policies* as will be outlined in the following.

Further limiting "communication" to Japanese first language learners speaking to people who did not learn Japanese as a first language would make the foreign language appear as a bridge between two distinct, inherently incompatible entities. It would also rationalize away the need to speak the foreign language in the classroom when both teacher and students are Japanese. When however a "foreigner" is perceived to be present the use of the foreign language would however become acceptable, maybe even required.

The two limited concepts of communication (limiting it to speaking or to Japanese speaking to "foreigners") would also seem to single out the spoken language as qualitatively different from other language skills in the learning of the language. This would seem contrary to the experience of successful language learners, who use all knowledge related to the foreign language to contribute to achieving mastery and communicative competence.

The narrow conceptions of communicative competence would seem to be potentially disruptive of classroom language studies. They would single out different aspects of language learning *for differential treatment and so leave the student unprepared for using the language as an integrated skill.*

The potential for such an outcome alone would stress the need for adopting the wide definition of communicative competence and make sure that it is reflected in classroom work.

One of the chief arbiters of language teaching and also of the discussion of the scope of

language learning in Japan is the Ministry of Education which publishes guidelines for foreign language teaching in both junior and senior high schools (Mombusho, 1988, a & b). In recent years the Ministry has been in the process of changing the curricula of junior and senior high schools to make communication more central to the teaching and learning going on there.

As a result, the concept of communication in its several meanings has received much attention among teachers as well as in the publications put out by and under the auspices of The ministry of Education.

In these publications, the narrower definition, that limiting communication to speaking, is occasionally proffered (Wada, 1988), although the more central "Course of Study" (Mombusho, 1988 a & b), which delimits the scope of school subjects, is more inclusive in its use of the term communication. The Course of Study appears to adopt the wider definition, that which consider language use in all its manifestations as communication.

It must be noted that this is not a new development, the previous edition (Mombusho, 1977), published prior to the recent ones stressing spoken language, also included communication in this meaning and required language teachers to teach communicatively at government schools.

This would seem to show that the Ministry of Education basically has adopted the wide definition, but that it is aware of the existence of the narrow one. It may be that an urgent task for language educators is to become more insistent that narrow definitions of communication be opposed and wherever possible stamped out.

Ethics

Ethics is rarely discussed in language teaching. In Japan ethics is taught as an independent school subject where ethical concerns are limited to considering the duties and requirements of citizens in respect to the state.

Handbooks and encyclopaedias related to language, language learning, and language learning research do not have entries for ethics.

Phillipson (1992) provides a subsection on the ethical aspects of EFL "aid" (his quotation marks). The references quoted there all point to ethically questionable consequences of foreign experts, curricula, and models being imported as part of aid and assistance conceived and designed in donor countries.

At a specialist conference on large classes in Karachi, ethics was the focus of a presentation by Coleman (1991), evaluating ethical issues in pursuing research relevant to large class teaching, a common language learning situation in many countries.

Coleman listed a dozen potential ethical conflicts that could arise in conducting

research into teaching language in large classes, and was concerned with the conflicts evolving out of research, raising expectations to levels that might be impossible to sustain. Large classes are generally considered difficult to teach and language teachers appear to feel uncomfortable with this kind of language learning environment (LoCastro, 1989). Coleman worried that scholars (researchers) who concern themselves with this kind of class situation would be seen as privileged purveyors of ideas engaged in preaching to less privileged classroom teachers.

A further potential conflict could arise if research into large classes reported findings that were unacceptable to sectors of the language teaching community. It might be that the large class language learning environment could be found unsuitable to language learning, or that findings would lead to a defence of practices and situations which are considered indefensible by practicing teachers.

While Coleman points to the seriousness that ethical concerns potentially pose to language learning, the limited attention paid to ethical issues in the literature leaves us without clear references for thinking about ethics in foreign language learning.

It would seem that with the potential ethical concerns listed above it will be necessary to establish guidelines for what ethics involves in the classroom and in curriculum concerns.

Ethics is generally defined as (Urdang, 1975) : conforming to the rules and standards of right conduct. However, ethics enter into language teaching in many forms and guises, as shown by Coleman, and considering the state of knowledge of language learning it would seem productive to replace the word "right" in the above with a phrase like "responsible and recognized." Including "responsible" would potentially make the individual instructor the arbiter of ethical standards in the classroom and "recognized" would require the instructor to base the standards on accepted practices and findings.

This definition of ethics would require language teaching to conform to the rules and standards of responsible, recognized conduct, both professionally and socially.

To achieve this, ethical language teaching would have to pay attention to the goals of students and curriculum planners, consider the findings of research into language learning and language teaching, as well as show respect for the norms and impositions of the surrounding society and the immediate environment where the language learning takes place.

At the classroom level, a teacher's perception of student benefits would guide the teaching, requiring the teacher to pay attention to the materials used, the methods that are employed and the outcomes that are aimed for.

In selecting suitable materials the teacher would look at the interests of students and adopt materials that will be found interesting and acceptable to society. Procedures for conveying the material would be those that have proven effective (here in-classroom experience becomes valuable), and methods of evaluation would exclude tests that do not

fit the material and goals.

The need to evaluate outcomes at the classroom level is generally accepted and particularly the findings of Buck (1989), Redfield (1994), and Strain (1994) seem pertinent to a discussion of ethical issues.

Buck (1989) conducted a study of results of pronunciation tests and correlated these with measures of listening and general competence in the foreign language. The scores of (paper) tests explicitly inquiring into student knowledge of pronunciation correlated negatively with student scores of proficiency. The conclusion here must be that such tests are not measuring language ability.

Redfield (1994) attempted to determine if students in college could read, and according to the standards used, they could not, despite more than six years of reading instruction. The study considered reading comprehension and on no measure did the students reach levels of ability which could be considered acceptable, and while the school may claim that they were reading with comprehension, or have learned to read in English, the results did not support such an assertion.

Strain (1994) tested students on grammar ability after entry into college and found a decline in ability during two years.

These three studies are not conclusive and replication would seem in order. However, they cast doubt on the validity of pronunciation, reading instruction, and English in general as it is taught in many situations in Japan. This is unfortunate, and deserves serious attention and it seem to cast doubt on the ethics of the language teaching profession, where the implications of these findings are not heeded. If students are taught and tested in a manner that is irrelevant to showing their linguistic competence it becomes urgent to determine what aspects of present day practices need replacing and with what.

Language education, Japan, and the future

The above has shown that the concepts discussed here, communication and ethics, are in need for a more rigorous and data based analysis and evaluation. Making clear what the concepts mean and evaluating them in relation to standard practices could potentially lead to considerable changes in our understanding, and establish a higher degree of objectivity in evaluating foreign language instruction.

For foreign language education in Japan to become a model of good teaching practices it seems urgently necessary to pay serious attention to matters like those brought up here. With clearer baselines and an appreciation of these and other similar concepts, we may be expected to gain a better understanding of the work that should take place in foreign language classrooms.

A discussion of this kind would seem to be a basic necessity if we are to make language

teaching relevant to student and societal needs in the next century. This would also be essential for Japan to become an active contributor to the progress of the language teaching profession. The great effort that all readily invest in thinking about how to arrange language learning would seem to make such a reevaluation of practices and concepts fairly simple to initiate.

With the discussion of language teaching brought on a more solid footing it will be possible to look beyond basic classroom teaching, and qualitative concerns can be taken up more profitably. These would include the place of culture in English taught internationally, the linguistic standards that should be taught, and the extra-linguistic needs of our students.

This is a revised version of a paper given at the 24th annual conference of the Communication Association of Japan at Tama, Japan, June 25-26, 1994.

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