

Redefining and broadening communication in the classroom

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要 約

この論文は、学生とりわけ日本の学生が語学の実力を発揮するうえでしばしば示す、見過ごすことのできない弱点について考察する。こうした弱点は、学生が今まで受けてきた語学教育にその要因があるのではないかと特定して論じる。問題は一部には、学生が習熟してきた応答方法（機械的な言い回しによる受け答え）に起因するので、ここでは語学の授業において、会話に具体的や本当らしさ（決まり文句でなく、文字どりの意味で臨機応変に応答する）を必ずくわえることにより、今まで習慣的に身につけてきた学習方法のもつ束縛から学生を解放することができるのではと考える。

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the performance of language students especially in Japan often displays serious shortcomings. It determines that these shortcomings may be caused by elements in the language learning that students have been subject to. The problems are partly caused by learned responses and the paper argues that adding a requirement for specificity and verisimilitude in language production offers the potential of releasing the students from the constraints of the already learned ways.

The Problem

One of the first exercises I try in my reading classes with first year English students looks like this:

Write a 3.

Draw a triangle around the three.

Draw another triangle around the first one.

Write a 6 over the triangles, and a 5 under them.

Underline it all with two straight lines, and

Write 'Great' between the straight lines.

When told that this is the assignment, students are puzzled about what to do. One first reaction is to look at the second line and ask what the 'three' is. Most however give up and await further instructions. After they get started, then in line five they may draw ever so many triangles round about on the paper, and finally express wonder at how difficult it is to read in English.

When I try this as a listening exercise, first asking everybody to get pen and paper ready, and then start with the first request ('Write a three'), pens stays firmly off the paper and initially there seems to be no awareness that the instruction should be carried out.

In a writing class an assignment may be entirely ignored and instead students may write away as they imagine or wish. When doing dialogues it is common for students not to listen to what the partner has said but carry on saying what they deem appropriate rather than respond to the partner. The partner often does not appear to notice that there has been no communication and continues in the same pattern.

Visitors from Mars, checking in on any of this may very well wonder what is going on, and when students tell these well traveled Aliens that the assignments are difficult, it would not be surprising if they (the Martian visitors) wonder what the difficulty is. They may even wonder how this could be construed to be difficult.

The above are situations from classrooms but the 'unnatural' reactions to English above appear to transfer to the real world. This is supported by observations of students using English for real when abroad and from reports of problems that students have experienced using English outside the classroom.

Written instructions are often ignored until they are pointed out and it becomes impossible to deny that they have been observed. When asked to look at specific things, or act in specific ways these English learners often do not do as instructed. This is relatively harmless when shopping, but when there are dangerous situations to attend to, words addressed to such English users may fail to avert accidents. When listening to public address announcements more effort may be invested in asking others what was said than is spent on concentrating and attempting to listen to the message. In conversations, information elicited from others is not attended to and communication breakdowns are common.

The background

Trying to understand what is going on in the situations described above, a number of points need to be made clear. The students know a lot of English, and they are ready and eager to invest further effort in their language learning. They are not trying to create difficulties and their earnest incomprehension at why their reactions or lack of reactions should give rise to comment cannot be doubted.

To try to understand why commonly accepted linguistic norms appear to be ignored in

this manner would seem to benefit from looking at how students have been taught before they arrive at where they meet this kind of incomprehensible exercise / challenge. This could tell us something about how the students learn to see the 'foreign' language English, how they have been told to see it by their immediate surroundings, and maybe how they see themselves as users of English.

The above examples show that students have a poor realization that utterances in English need to be attended to like utterances in the native language. It may be the impression that English is something one listens to respectfully, and that an overt response has to await a sign from above that a response is acceptable or necessary. When using English students seem to assume that comprehension of the information content need not be considered important, others can be asked to interpret. In speaking, strings of English, irrespective of relevance, are assumed to represent conversation.

Students of English in Japan will have heard a very large number of negative and discouraging comments related to their ability to learn or gain useful knowledge of the language. The near constant reliance on rephrasings into Japanese by language instructors would also seem to imply that English will not work without the support of the native language.

Further, there may be social advantages with showing reticence about knowing English, as it may embarrass others, not equally well endowed. This may affect the goals and expectations students have for the foreign language.

It may be that the teaching of coordinated actions, responding to what has been heard, or responding to the information content of an utterance has been lacking in the language training so far. Students may not be aware that the foreign language, English, requires responses and that communication is largely created by those participating in activities and that it does not await the approval or permit of a central authority.

Summing up, the interplay of a number of factors seem to give rise to a less than 'natural' attitude towards English. This may arise from the schooling that the students have been subjected to and from the social mores of the surrounding society. The following will briefly consider how the language learning background may be the cause of some of the problems, and the paper will offer suggestions that should help eradicate the inefficiencies shown / experienced by students.

The language learning so far

The teaching environment that students have graduated from often involves very large classes where at least the teachers are not comfortable when student activity goes beyond very structured activities. Such classes are characterized by a minimum of student participation via set responses, and very little student initiated language activity.

In such classrooms, little attention is paid to the world outside the classroom. No con-

trast is made between the English of the textbook and the external world. Reading in English takes place in a textbook where the situation surrounding a text and explanations of the content are everywhere available in the native language, maybe even to the extent that the parts which appear in English could be removed and the original intent would still be understandable.

In listening activities, student attention is centered on advance knowledge of what will be said (often provided in the textbook), and when a speaker makes a mistake or deviates from the script students 'know' what should have been said and react to what should have been rather than to what actually was spoken. Speaking is approached as the mouthing of set phrases or dialogues that have been memorized, and no practical effort need be expended on actually listening to what has been said. Writing is centered on grammatical accuracy and no effort is made to impose reality on the written word.

Modern English teaching makes much of fluency and accuracy, but this often seems to be implemented as smooth delivery and accurate pronunciation. There is much less attention paid to making sense, providing specificity and verisimilitude. The poor connection there is between the English of the classroom and the world appears to work against an unproblematic acquisition of English.

The above may seem an overly harsh evaluation of the students' language learning background, however the limited individual attention that is the reality in many classrooms makes the above more common than one could wish. One indication of this is that the unnatural student reactions listed at the start of the paper would be meaningful and effective coping strategies in this kind of language classroom.

We may also ask how 'the profession' and professional literature deals with these failures to achieve communication. In a recent ambitious attempt at providing a complete framework for communicative language teaching (*The Tapestry of Language Learning* by Scarcella and Oxford; 1992, Heinle & Heinle) this issue is not directly addressed.

Disregarding the language produced by student may perhaps be justified by the framework being addressed at teachers in small classes, where individual attention is the norm and where it is practicable for a teacher to go beyond the textbook as student needs arise or as common sense dictates, however such a situation is rare, at least in schools in Japan.

Considerations for overcoming this

What we observe in students may then occur for reasons that to the student are reasonable and rational. The reactions can be seen to be learned responses and as a result one way to improve on the situation for students, would be to have them learn other more efficient responses.

The problems outlined above may be arranged into three areas of concern: students not

attending to the message; also, students expecting help from others rather than relying on themselves, and students ignoring the information content of a situation.

Teaching to get students to overcome the learned, unconventional communicative behavior would seem to benefit from providing instant feedback to ensure attention; individualizing the study to make it impossible to easily rely on others; and to decrease reliance on the native language by making the foreign language speak for itself and so encourage attention to what is going on.

Such teaching would allow the instructor to know how students respond to the material taught (and give instant feedback), the language used can be clear and largely culture free (made to reflect the needs of each student in a teaching situation), obviating the need to be overly concerned about cultural distinctions and fine points other than 'simple' comprehension (the verisimilitude of the message). Thus, insisting on dealing primarily with matters at hand, there will be less of a 'recreational' urge to just drift along, and the matters dealt with will take on increased importance.

When stressing message specificity in this paper, it does not mean that the 'traditionally' taught language skills and knowledge like fluency, culture, and accuracy can be dispensed with. This paper does however not directly consider these other skills but argues that they are not sufficient to prepare the students for real language use. Moreover it is possible to devise activities and exercises that center on this missing element, as will be detailed next.

The solution

There are a number of practical ways of alleviating the shortcomings detailed above and the following will outline exercises that may be used to explore what it is possible to achieve in instilling more commonly acceptable linguistic habits.

The exercise presented at the start of the paper presents a pattern that can be elaborated and developed for use in reading and listening exercises. This exercise presents a number of requests for action that the student has to respond to in writing, from read (visual) or heard (aural) input.

With many students in a class, such instructions should be presented in a number of variations, and I usually prepare a dozen variations. This allows individualization, and when students are helping each other they have to read what the instructions for each student are.

Using such exercises for listening makes it attractive to provide requests where the responses vary for different students. Students can be asked to write down the number of pencils they have or the number of items on their desks, and then this number may be used to develop the exercise further, like:

'Please note down the number of pencils in your pencil case, if it is smaller than

three write the number out in letters, if it is larger than three write just the number; if you spelled out the number of pencils, then over the middle letter please draw a triangle. and if you just have a number on your paper, not spelled out, put a circle around it.

The 'dictation' can then continue in this manner.

This kind of exercise can also start with a picture, a table or some other printed matter. Then the students can be asked to mark or add to the picture / table in specific ways. I often use a calendar at the start of a course and have students mark important dates, and generally detail how the class will progress. When using props of this kind it is simple to walk around and check that students do it right. With a little care there are no ambiguities in the instructions and everybody can (has to) get it just right.

Here it is possible for students to look at how their neighbors did, and especially the first few times this approach is used, the instructor may want to repeat the instructions liberally, and maybe even display them on the blackboard.

When used with complex tables, or to orient the students in their textbook, much useful language is learned, and the instructions can be self-contained. Exercises like these require that students listen carefully to each instruction, and it should be impossible for them to guess what the next instruction could be.

In groups, students can also give instructions of this kind to each other. This may lead on to students discussing what the meaning of statements is. Asking students to address instructions at their peers is perhaps best kept for when students are used to do such exercises and have done them a number of times, so they know what specific statements should result in when translated to the paper.

The reverse exercise is also possible: accurately describing a picture, graph, or table in writing. Then having fellow students read the output and critique it would help sensitize everybody to the connection between written messages and the wider world outside the classroom.

In these kinds of exercises students have to pay attention to what they hear or see. The literal meaning or content becomes the basis for the responses. The students are listening, reading, and writing and they have to make sure that the content is comprehensible and coherent.

In speaking exercises students can also be asked to take notes of what information they elicit from their speaking partners, and this information can then later be handed in or presented in some specified format. This way students have to listen to what they hear, and they will often make sure that their speaking partners really grasp what they themselves report. Students only talking to or dealing with very good friends should probably be prevented.

Summing up

A number of shortcomings in the linguistic achievements of EFL students, especially in Japan, were pointed out. The main problem was found to center around student output not being sufficiently specific and focused on the information content of messages. It was determined that this may be due to well learned strategies that the students have picked up in the classroom, and suggestions were made for how to break out of these ineffective linguistic ways.

As stressed above, students know a lot of English but their inability to apply this knowledge in actual situations is a strong indicator that something is amiss. However this student behavior appears to be learned, and so it should be possible to replace the unfortunate learned ways with others, encouraging more commonsensical attitudes when using English.

The above offers a number of suggestions that would encourage considerable specificity in the linguistic output of students. Achieving this aim will often need reinforcement by the instructor, but an exploration of the above suggestions will inform instructors of approaches that would work in their teaching environments and this would lead to new ideas for enforcing such very overt, meaning centered use of language.

The acceptance of less than complete comprehension in spoken language seems to handicap students unnecessarily and be a quite serious matter requiring urgent attention. When insistence on comprehension is not made in the classroom it is doubtful if students will become prepared for communication in the foreign language.

This is an expanded version of a paper read at the 1997 meeting of the Communications Association of Japan at Junshin Women's University, Nagasaki, June 14-15, 1997.