研究ノート

Communication Beyond the Classroom

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To some extent this title is a little misleading. This paper does not ignore what happens inside the classroom. Rather, it suggests that the attitude and mindset of the teacher has considerable influence on how students will eventually become successful learners and communicators once they move beyond the confines of the traditional educational setting. Moreover, the assumption is made that being a better learner certainly facilitates, if it is not in actual fact a prerequisite to, becoming a more successful communicator.

Over the past decade some major changes and developments have become apparent in the teaching of English at university level in Japan. The more traditional approach, where relatively short passages were studies in great depth, with an emphasis on grammar and translation, is becoming less common. Certainly, with an increasing number of native speakers now employed as both part-time and full-time members of staff, a "different" approach has, perhaps, become inevitable. Curriculum reforms and new guidelines from the Japanese Ministry of Education have both contributed to and resulted from an increasing pressure to modernize. Universities have, rightly or wrongly, felt more and more obliged to sell themselves; offer programmes and courses that appeal in an increasingly competitive market place. The pressure to appear relevant and progressive is keenly felt. And it is evident in the choice and selection of course titles that are typically being offered in relation to the study of English. The words *grammar* and *translation* are currently out; *oral* and *communication* are in. Indeed, *communication* has become something of a buzz word in the field of English Education.

A brief glance at the new Oxford University Press ELT Catalogue advertising English textbooks for use in Japanese universities confirms this emphasis on innovation and, in particular, communication. This "really is a book for international communication," boasts one advertisement. "Extra communicative activities...for each unit," cries another. Another goes further, claiming to cover everything from "language analysis to free communication," while one more promises to be not only innovative and highly practical, but also "focuses on non-verbal communicative strategies and the appropriate use of language...for truly successful interaction." The advertisement that proudly offers "a syllabus that focuses on communication...to develop fluency as quickly as possible," is very typical of what is currently on offer.

Whether the move away from the more traditional and academic study of English to the current emphasis on a practical and even vocational approach to English teaching has come about as a result of a considered change in the philosophy of English education at Japanese universities, or has crept up unsuspectingly in a sea of political and economic change, is something of a moot point. The fact remains that change has come about, and that change is here to stay.

A large portion of the typical university English curriculum is now concerned with this notion of communication. What, however, is really meant by "communication?" Is not the development of an ability or skill in communication synonymous with linguistic competence and fluency? Is there, in fact, anything really new in the way in which English is taught at Japanese universities that might distinguish it from the basic curriculum of any competent language school?

This paper seeks to address these questions and consider how a university English course might act as a stepping stone on a path towards a more general enhanced approach to long-term / life-long learning. Indeed, the notion is advocated that successful communication beyond the classroom is ultimately a more meaningful indication of how successful communication is within the classroom. Thus the contents of a university-level course should be focused on producing long-term results that become apparent outside and beyond the classroom environment.

Japanese university students that enroll in an English communication course, whether the focus of that course is oral or written communication, invariably arrive with preconceived notions and expectations about what will and should take place. Most will have already had several years of learning English, some of which may well have been taught by a native speaker. Most will also have already decided whether or not they like English and, perhaps more importantly, whether they consider themselves to be any good at English; a high correlation generally existing between the two.

One of the dilemmas facing the English teacher at university is trying to devise a programme that not only satisfies both the students' expectations and those of the English Department, but also one that can be justified in terms of its academic content. The university is not, after all, a glorified language school. Its objectives should be different. Trying to compete is inappropriate, and were a university to do so, the disadvantages a university has over a language school would become quickly apparent: the students of language schools are typically more highly motivated, willing to study for fairly intensive periods, and usually have some kind of clearly defined goal; university students often have little say in whether or not to attend a particular course. They are required to complete a minimum number of credits. The typical course is limited to about twenty-five classes during the course of a whole year, and few classes probably last the whole of the ninety-minute allocated time period.

Many universities have dispensed with their *conversation* classes simply because such a title seems to lack academic credibility. Certainly, *Oral English and Communication Studies* has considerably greater panache and an air of scholarly respectability for an academic institution. However, improving a course title does not, by itself, make for a better or more worthwhile course.

Setting a realistic, worthwhile and achievable goal for a university English course requires a teacher to do so within the framework of what he or she understands to be the purpose of higher education. In a recent submission to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, the University of Hull in the UK attempted to set out a definition and the overall purposes of Higher Education. One of the first questions it posed was: *What features are, or should be, distinctive of higher education as opposed to other levels or forms of education or training?* — the same question, in fact, that was asked earlier in relation to the university English course and that of the language school.

In response, it proposes that:

Through the interaction of teaching and research, higher education should develop the intellectual capacity of individuals, together with their confidence and self-reliance. It should encourage intellectual vitality, and aim to produce people who think critically.

It goes on to suggest that in addition to their main subjects and chosen disciplines:

It is increasingly important that they [students] *should become interested in disciplines apparently remote from their own... Graduates need the ability to seek knowledge in new fields as interests and patterns of employment change.*

Fine sentiments indeed, but how exactly do they translate into the day to day business of teaching English to Japanese undergraduates? How does the conscientious teacher encourage Mr. Maeda (who is sitting at the back of the class with his hair dyed blond, having shuffled in twenty minutes late, minus a textbook, paper or any kind of writing implement, and who is now attempting to catch up some much-needed sleep after an all-night mahjong session) to become a critical thinker, eagerly seeking new knowledge? How can we transform the Mr. Maedas of this world into successful and self-reliant learners and communicators when the most elementary communication skills appear beyond their grasp even within their own language?

In the light of what appear to be sometimes insurmountable difficulties, it is easy, as a teacher, to become complacent. While the University of Hull can point out that, at the very least, students need:

...transferable skills, the ability to think imaginatively, a wide intellectual curiosity, the ability to communicate well on paper and in speech, [and] *fluency in IT...*

...it is all too easy to confine our goals to more pragmatic concerns: Mr. Maeda needs to get through this course with enough points to ensure that he won't be back again next year repeating the class. And Mr. Maeda himself realizes that as long as he does put in an appearance a sufficient number of times and does at least the bare minimum of work, he will probably graduate in four years with the satisfaction of knowing that he can demonstrate to any would-be employer that he has the ability to get into a good university.

Perhaps a good start is to consider what recent research findings have to say about the nature of learning and teaching, and whether or not an appropriate theoretical framework exists within which we can identify practical implications for making teaching and learning more effective. It is important not to see this as a divergence or distraction from the main theme of this paper — communication beyond the classroom. The basic tenet is that until we can be clear in our own minds, as teachers and educators, about how we conceptualise learning, and how that conception can influence our students, then trying to devise new or different methodologies in the hope of producing particular outcomes, is a little like putting the cart before the horse. At the very least, we will be working in the dark.

One person who has made a considerable impact recently on the way in which educational psychologists and teachers view learning is John Biggs (1991, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Biggs & Collis, 1982; Biggs & Moore, 1993) from the City University of Hong Kong.

Biggs's (1991) model of learning, based to some degree on an earlier model of classroom interaction developed by Dunkin and Biddle (1974), postulates three interacting components: the first consists of factors that the student brings to the learning situation — prior knowledge, abilities, motivation and conceptions of learning; the second relates to the actual learning process itself and the adopted strategies and approaches to learning (Entwistle, 1998); and finally, the product of the learning and the learning outcomes.

In 1993, Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993) conducted a study in which they examined conceptions of learning held by students enrolled in a Social Science module within the Open University in the United Kingdom. The responses (conceptions of learning) to open-ended questions such as "What exactly do you mean by learning?" were categorized as follows:

(a) Increasing one's knowledge;
(b) Memorising and reproducing;
(c) Acquisition for subsequent utilization (applying);
(d) Understanding/Abstraction of meaning;
(e) Seeing something in a different way; or
(f) Changing as a person.

The first two (or three) conceptions of learning have been classified as those which reflect consumerist, reproductive or atomistic views about knowledge; the latter three being more reflective of constructivist, transformative and relational views of knowledge (Biggs, 1991; Marton, et al, 1993).

This distinction between a consumerist and constructivist view of knowledge has further been described as a reflection of a quantitative versus a qualitative orientation (Biggs, 1991, 1996a; Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 1996; Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997), although this is, as Roche (2000) suggests, rather simplistic and misleading:

People who describe their conceptions of learning as "increasing knowledge" or "memorizing" typically describe learning or knowledge as having a particular quality or qualities... Thus, it's not purely "quantitative". Similarly, those who seek to "understand" would happily acknowledge that learning involves understanding "more things", as well as understanding things "better". Clearly, these are quantitative dimensions of qualitatively different constructs.

Of course, before students can develop an understanding of something or form an opinion, they require a certain number of *facts*. Similarly, students of English need a minimum vocabulary and knowledge of basic English tools before they can proceed. The problem identified by Roche (2000) is when:

... you are only concerned with facts [or English words/phrases] *without the intention of gaining meaning or developing as a person. Rote or surface learning then becomes an end rather than a means to developing understanding.*

This brings us on to the approaches and strategies that students adopt in a learning situation. At one end of the scale is what has been termed a **surface approach,** characterized by rote learning and memory, and resulting in a superficial understanding of material that is quickly forgotten; in contrast is the **deep approach**, where material is thoroughly understood.

*The **surface approach**, primarily motivated by desire to complete the course and relying on memorizing factual information, with a rote learning process, resulting in an outcome of mainly superficial understanding.*

***The deep approach**, primarily motivated by an interest in the subject, aiming for an outcome of thorough understanding of the material. This is usually achieved by one of three learning processes. The **operation learner** relies on logical, sequential approach, proceeding cautiously from one idea to the next. **The comprehension learner** aims directly for broad outlines of ideas, using analogies and fitting the knowledge into their own personal world view. The **versatile learner** combines both operation and comprehension processes, aiming for deep understanding buttressed by a sound factual knowledge.*

*The **strategic approach** is mainly motivated by the need to compete and better others, achieving high marks and using any process conducive to this, usually resulting in a variable level of understanding depending on the requirements of the assessment procedure. These students 'play the system'.*

(Newble & Cannon, 1991)

An interesting study comparing Japanese and Australian students was conducted by Purdie, Hattie and Douglas (1996) in which conceptions of learning and the use of learning strategies was examined. Additional conceptions of learning were identified as being a duty or social obligation and as developing social competence. Although both were more common among the Japanese students, cultural differences that appeared in the study did not support the common stereotypes of 'the Asian student' as being more likely to rote-learn, or be a passive recipient of information handed down by the teacher.

Students, then, that have essentially *Consumerist* beliefs about learning (i.e., acquiring knowledge and memorizing) are much more likely to adopt and use surface approaches to learning, leading to relatively superficial and fragmented understanding. Those that have *Constructivist* beliefs about learning (i.e., understanding, seeing things from a different perspective, changing as a person) are more likely to engage in deep approaches, which lead to more meaningful and integrated learning outcomes.

The view of learning held by the teacher — the beliefs, thoughts and judgments — can have a considerable influence on teaching (Pajares, 1992). Two recent studies (Powell, 1996, Maor and Taylor, 1995) have both indicated that constructivist beliefs about learning held by the teacher are more likely to result in more effective teaching. Roche (2000) warns, however, of the danger of making predictions or generalizations based on such limited samples. He concedes, however, that:

"Although these studies are flawed, they provide good illustrations of the empathy, innovation, and use of effective teaching strategies that are based on constructive approaches."

He goes on to list the guiding principles of constructivism (Brooks & Brooks, 1993):

1. Pose relevant problems
2. Structure lessons around 'big' concepts
3. Value students' point of view
4. Adapt curriculum to students' prior knowledge

5. Assess authentically

It is one thing to appreciate at a theoretical level how and why these principles reflect a constructivist view of learning and teaching, and why it is important that they be implemented, but quite another to actively apply them in our everyday teaching. It seems quite clear that if we want our students to be better learners and better communicators they need to be motivated to recognize the value of education for its own sake.

Many institutions of higher education in the UK have recognized that extrinsic motivation is often more evident than intrinsic motivation — the idea that "if I successfully complete this course it might eventually lead to a better job" rather than "this is worthwhile and valuable for me to learn and understand." And of course, if the assessment procedures and course requirements allow students to get away with strategies that encourage only surface approaches to learning, then one can not expect students to change and develop as individuals or learn how to become better learners. Harkin (1998) laments the fact that in Britain the emphasis on vocational education has left many learners with knowledge (facts) that they do not really need, or that can be easily looked up, but without the knowledge (understanding) necessary to equip them for adult life. He gives an example to illustrate the point:

The Managing Director of an electronics firm interviewed about the training received at college by his apprentices said, "The courses seem to have a lot of detail that [The students] can find out from any reference book in ten seconds... We have details but the obvious we don't have." For him, the 'obvious' included communication skills and German, because much of the firm's output was exported to Germany and his engineers needed to install and service it.

What the Managing Director was actually complaining about can be explained within this framework of a constructivist view of learning, a point Harkin is quick to make when he criticizes the fact that such views have, as yet, had little impact on education:

Drucker (1985) pointed out that education has remained largely unchanged in three hundred years, despite fundamental changes in science, technology and human beliefs. Constructivist theories of learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1986, 1996) and ideas about the nature of human cognition (e.g., Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1995) have hardly touched education.

One of the challenges frequently commented on by English teachers in Japanese universities is the problem of motivating students who seem to lack intrinsic motivation and don't have an abundance of extrinsic motivation either. However, regardless of what the student actually brings into the classroom in terms of expectations, prior knowledge, experience and attitudes, the teacher is in a position to exert considerable influence. Of course, what teachers do primarily is communicate. Stubbs (1983) explains it like this:

...a person cannot simply walk into a classroom and **be** *a teacher: he or she has to* **do** *quite specific communicative acts...social roles such as 'teacher' and 'pupil' do not exist in the abstract. They have to be acted out, performed and continuously constructed in the course of social interaction.* (P.99)

It is important to remember here that communication does not refer simply to verbal utterances or even body language. It is much wider. How the teacher behaves, sets up the classroom — even the clothes he or she wears and the image that is presented — all these things communicate to the students.

It is interesting how the dress code of teenagers sends quite strong communicative messages out to observers. The baseball cap worn back-to –front and the baggy trousers definitely *say* something. (Personal experience has led to the conclusion that there might, in fact, be a correlation between the direction of the cap and the amount of inherent intelligence and potential communicative ability — the further towards the back of the head the cap is pointing, the less there is.)

It is perhaps an obvious point to make, but encouraging communication beyond the classroom firstly necessitates successful communication within the classroom. Education is not a static affair of which students are passive recipients. As Zimmerman (1989) has pointed out:

Learning is not something that happens 'to' students; it is something that happens 'by' students.

There has to be an element of negotiation between all the participants and an agreement about what learning is and how it should take place. Students can be made to change their perceptions about what they are doing and why. With a methodology that has its basis in modern constructivist pedagogy, the relevance and significance of education becomes more apparent. Papert (1993b) summarizes it this way:

The kind of knowledge [students] *most need is the knowledge that will help them get more knowledge.* (P.139)

So far, this paper has talked more in theoretical terms. Certainly it seems clear that whatever we decide to actually do to help our students become better communicators, the first step is to examine our own conception about learning and teaching. The next step is to devise ways from a constructivist perspective to encourage our students to develop their own constructivist conceptions of learning. So are there any immediately obvious ways in which we can do that to enhance learning and ultimately greater communication?

Japanese students invariably have more English within then than they realize or are prepared to admit. What is often lacking is the confidence to use what already exists. One of our priorities as teachers should be to encourage our students to take risks. Encourage them to live a little dangerously. This involves providing opportunities to be wrong and make mistakes without jeopardizing their position, their marks or the course in any way. There is a natural tendency for students to gravitate towards the centre where there is a group consensus and an agreed set of expectations — where it is safe. We need to stir them up and encourage them to move away from the centre ground, and live on the edge. This will inevitably mean a learning environment that is not so controlled, but is adaptable and flexible. Rather than doing the thinking for our students we should be encouraging them to do it for themselves. Effort is going to be required on their part if they are to be successful in such an environment.

It might be argued that in the somewhat stereotypical view of Japan, what seems to be most important is ultimately a consensus or agreement rather than the process by which that consensus has been reached. Classroom discussions are often geared towards the 'correct' answer, which presumably has the teacher's prior approval. From our constructivist view of learning, it is not the final solution or agreement that is important but the argument and discussion itself. Critical thinking and analysing — seeing things from a different viewpoint or new perspective — these are the activities that distinguish our course as a university course. The teacher may structure that process to some degree, but he or she is not there to control it, merely to facilitate the process. The teacher's role is not necessarily one of final arbitrator. The teacher is not there to provide the answer — indeed, there may not even be one.

One of the courses that has recently been implemented at Waseda University is the On-Line English course. Links have been established with universities in Malaysia and Thailand, and students have the opportunity to communicate with each other via a computer terminal. Whilst the communication is limited primarily to writing (a real-time chat programme is used), students are able to see each other in a small window on the computer screen by use of a computer camera mounted on the top of each terminal.

Clearly, a course of this kind has great potential for a teacher with a constructivist view of learning and teaching who is trying to promote communication beyond the classroom. The very nature of the course means that interaction between students has already moved beyond the artificial dialogues of an English text book, as well as beyond the physical parameters of the English

classroom. The students are engaging in *real* communication with students from a different cultural background.

The argument throughout this paper has centered on the belief that appropriate conceptions of learning and better approaches to learning are going to make for better communication. Part of that process is encouraging students to be more reflective about how they learn and approach their studies. In a cross-cultural situation where they need to relate experiences to other students abroad, the Japanese students are forced to become more introspective and interpretive about the activities in which they are engaged, before they can explain them to anyone else.

The course is still very much in its infancy. Some of the initial feedback from the students who took part, however, has been very encouraging. As well as the obvious comments related to the opportunities to meet new people and make foreign friends, there were some comments that indicated students had engaged in more reflective and challenging learning:

"Explaining things about Japan made me think about my own country more."

"I learnt things about Japan as well as about Thailand."

One activity that students engaged in prior to even meeting their Malaysian or Thai partners was to consider some of the limitations and potential problems of communicating over the Internet. Trying to apply the previously listed principles of constructivism, it is possible to see how they might be applied in this case:

1. **Pose a relevant problem**

   The problem concerned trying to communicate a feeling or emotion in the absence of all the usual tools on which we generally rely to get our meaning(s) across — facial expression, body language, variations in the voice (tone, range, volume, pitch). There are unique difficulties having a conversation that is not verbal but written. Are the symbols available on the keyboard sufficient? Is it possible, for example, to be sarcastic on a computer screen?

2. **Structure lessons around 'big' concepts**

   How much of our understanding in a communicative interaction is dependent upon verbal content? Is the growth of IT and the reliance on less direct means of communications a harmful trend? Are we becoming less skilled at communication? How do we define and evaluate 'effective' communication?

3. **Value students' point of view**

   Group discussions evolved around students' motivations (why some had chosen Thailand and other Malaysian students); why they thought the course was worthwhile and valuable (it was an elective course); and what was the best way to proceed and what was the rationale behind any particular methodology. And perhaps most importantly, at least from the students' perspective, what should students be required to do in order to pass the course? Although discussions were done primarily in English, it was deemed preferable to allow students to use Japanese in their groups rather than have some members not contribute simply because they could not express an idea in English.

4. **Adapt curriculum to students' prior knowledge**

   Some students had considerable experience using computer-based chat programmes in Japan. Nearly all students had experience sending messages via mobile telephones and communicating through electronic mail systems. Certainly, all students had engaged in conversational activities all their lives, but few had thought about the concept of communication and how it might be defined or how language-dependant it might be. Talking about 'talking about English' in English was, for many of the students, a new challenge.

5. **Asses authentically**

The final category (assessment) is crucial if we are to ensure that the approaches we want our students to adopt towards learning are actively encouraged. If we use assessment procedures that encourage student to engage just in surface learning — memorizing facts to be regurgitated at the end of the semester in a test — then we can hardly blame them if that is what they do. It is all-too-often the case that the stated intentions and objectives of the teacher are not aligned with the assessment procedures of the course:

Nobody can blame students for adopting surface approaches to learning if all that is required of them to be 'successful' (as far as the teacher and the institution are concerned) is to complete the low level cognitive activities demanded by the level of assessment. The conceptual gap created by the failure to encourage a deep approach to learning not only remains intact, but it is concealed by an assessment procedure that basis its criteria for success on purely low level cognitive activities, regardless of what the overall intentions of the course are purported to be. Many students thus function at university level under the guise of being competent autonomous learners, when their survival is, in fact, made possible by the failure of higher education to demand that they actually operate as such. (Hooper, 1996)

This final question of assessment may require quite a radical departure from the norm. There may well be bureaucratic restrictions within which a teacher must operate. Getting students involved with the decisions about assessment, and structuring activities so that students end up practicing how to become better learners and communicators, must be a priority.

Feedback that we give throughout the course will communicate to our students messages:

...about university values and beliefs, about the role of writing in learning, about their identity as a student, and about their own competence and even character. (Ivanic, et al., 2000)

Encouraging students to initiate conversations outside the classroom is part of this learning process. When Mr. Maeda arrives late and tries to sneak in the back of the class without so much as a word or even making eye contact, it is important that he is not allowed to do so — not because of any rule about attendance, but because by remaining silent we condone and even endorse a behaviour that is the very antithesis of the educational philosophy that we are claiming to espouse.

Enhancing communication beyond the classroom is not simply about devising new ways to create practice opportunities for those learning English, nor even about trying to be more interesting and inventive in the classroom to keep students' interest. It is about making radical changes in our students' perceptions of learning and their conceptions about education. It is about encouraging appropriate strategies for learning. Those are the things in the long run that will make a difference. Those are the things that will produce good and successful communicators.

None of this is intended to give the impression that students don't need to know basic facts, nor learn and remember things. Vocabulary is necessary, understanding the rules of grammar is necessary, and being able to write a sentence without childish mistakes is necessary. We do, however, have the chance to make a considerable impact on the students with whom we come into contact.

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