Theories of Language and Language Learning Relevant to Language Program Design for First and Second Year Students at a Japanese National Technical College.

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要　旨

この論文は，日本の高等専門学校の1年生と2年生に対する授業計画を立てることに特に関連している
と思われる言語学習理論を確認する試みである。更に，これらの理論によって，教室での練習のレベルに
非常に影響を与える以下の要素，即ち，

・学習者
・授業計画の内容と構成
・適正な方法と教材の選択
・これらを実行する手順

に関して本質的に考慮すべき点が，結果的にどう導かれるのか，概略し強調しようとするものである。

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify those theories of language and language learning that are believed to be particularly relevant to designing a program for first and second year high school students of a Japanese National Technical College, and to outline and emphasize how these theories ultimately guide essential considerations regarding the learners, the program's content and organization, the selection of methodologies and materials, and their implementation procedures ; factors which all impact at the level of classroom practice.

Introduction

Designing an effective language program is a complex process. Central to this process is a thorough understanding of theories of language and learning, and how these relate to classroom practice. These theories serve to inform us of the wide variety of language acquisition variables regarding the learners, the learning context and the teaching/learning situation (Brown, 1980, pp. 46-58; Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982, pp. 84-94; Ellis, 1986, pp. 9-11), and provide knowledge regarding the widely differing views of what language is, how language proficiency might be determined, and how it is best learnt (Richards, 1986, pp. 16-18). Knowledge of such theories is vital if we are to make informed decisions when selecting from the wide variety of language teaching approaches and methods that subscribe to these particular views, as decisions made at the theoretical level impact on the program choices we make regarding: program content and its organization, teaching/learning activities, learning materials, and the classroom roles we prescribe for the teacher and learners (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, pp. 14-28). In addition, pragmatic consideration must be given to designing a language program in relation to the nature of the learners, the overall curriculum in which it will be taught, the cultural and social aspects of the learning environment, and to the constraints these combined factors will impose on a second-language program of a particular school or institute. (Brown, 1995, pp. 182-187).

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The purpose of this paper is to identify those theories of language and language learning that I believe to be particularly relevant to designing a program for first and second year high school students of a Japanese National Technical College, and to outline and emphasize how these theories ultimately guide essential considerations regarding the learners, the program's content and organization, the selection of methodologies and materials, and their implementation procedures ; factors which all impact at the level of classroom practice.

The reader will be guided through this discussion in order of the most basic theoretical considerations regarding effective program design. I will begin by providing an outline of my particular group of learners and the teaching/learning context. Following this, I will identify those theories of language acquisition and language learning which I believe to be relevant to these particular learners, justifying the importance of these theories by outlining the implications these theories will have when considering a suitable teaching/learning program for this group. Finally, I will advocate a Communicative Methodology through which to teach the program's content, highlighting the provisions this methodology has for taking into account a view of language and language learning that suits the nature, language needs, and learning context of this particular group of learners.

Outline of the learners and learning context

The program will be taught in an EFL context in a Japanese technical high school. It is a context where students' exposure to English is not so great, and in which the major language (i.e. the language used intranationally) is not English, but Japanese. Ashworth (1985, p.117) cites Japan as representative of a country that uses English as an international language. Japan views the English language as an efficient means through which to conduct international commerce and trade, in the transfer of technological knowledge, and for practical purposes of travel and socialization with foreign, English speaking people. I have determined the latter purposes (i.e. English for travel and everyday social communication) to be the most relevant to the students needs, and the most pragmatically teachable content, regarding the time constraints of my lessons within the overall school curriculum.

The learners, for whom the program will be designed, are secondary co-educational high school students of a Japanese national technical college. They are comprised of first and second year students of a three year high school and two year tertiary, technical education program, who specialize in one of either information, mechanical, substance, electrical, or civil engineering fields.

The subject for which the program will be designed is English conversation, which I interpret as involving the development in students of speaking and aural skills, and an increase in lexical knowledge and semantic interpretation ability. The students will receive compulsory instruction in this subject for one hour a week, with a further two hours of compulsory English instruction given by Japanese English-teachers. The learners have previously received three years of English grammar instruction at the junior high school level, with few opportunities to practise conversation.

The program I will teach is part of the Japanese Ministry of Education's 1994 initiative, to increase national high school student's aural and oral proficiencies in English, by providing students with actual opportunities to speak and interact with a native English speaking teacher (Fetter, 1995).

The language program will be taught in classes of between twenty (second year) and forty (first year) students. It will be taught in a curriculum context of one of three English lessons they receive per week, among an average total of 28 hours instruction in other general subjects and five hours instruction in their particular areas of specialization. As the learners will have already entered a tertiary institute, from which approximately 3% will proceed to further tertiary studies, English study for the purpose of tertiary entrance examinations is not given any priority in the considerations of this language program's content.

Theoretical considerations regarding the nature of the learner ·and their implications for language program design.

Our first theoretical considerations for program design should be of the biological, social/cultural, affective (emotional), environmental and cognitive factors that affect the learners, and their implications for program design and classroom practice.

Brown, (1980) categorizes these factors into four domains which are useful headings under which to discuss them, and the implications these theories have regarding program design, selection of a suitable methodology, and classroom implementation.

Physical : This involves the brain and the co-ordination of muscles that control speech, and reading and writing (Brown, 1980; p.46). Regarding neurological development: A belief exists among language scholars that there is a biologically determined period in a human's life when language can be more easily acquired. During this period, it is believed that the brain has great plasticity, which might account for children's apparent ability to learn second languages to a fluent level. Lateralization, the process whereby certain functions are assigned to either the left or right hemisphere of the brain as we mature, has been hypothesized to be the reason for the discrepancy between adult and child language learners. (Scovel, 1969; Krashen, 1973; Guiora et al. 1972a, cited in Brown, 1980, p.47).

This hypothesis of an 'optimal age' has been challenged by research and hypotheses which support the idea that adults perform better than children if that learning occurs under the same conditions and using the same methodology (Cook,1991; Krashen and Terrel,1983). In addition, studies have shown that children of a young age acquiring a second language have greater flexibility in the muscles used to articulate human speech, enabling them to more readily gain phonemic control of a language and acquire native, or near-native pronunciation (Asher and Garcia, 1969 ·cited in Dulay et al. 1982, p.81; Brown, 1980, p.49).

Implications for program design and classroom implementation :

Allowances must be made for these factors. As my students are post-pubescent second language learners, I must assume that their rate of natural language acquisition will be slow, as will be their development of pronunciation proficiency. However, I must also note the research that challenges these notions of an 'optimal age' (Cook, 1991), and consider that by designing a program that attempts to create conditions for language acquisition which closely resemble those of a child learning their first language, the students will have greater success in learning English.

Cognitive : According to Piaget, there are various stages of cognitive development. The most relevant in considering second language acquisition is the change from the 'concrete' to the 'formal operational' stage, which is believed to occur at puberty. This notion of cognitive transition is used by some scholars to support the hypothesis of an 'optimal age' of language acquisition. This change is said to allow the learner to benefit from grammatical explanations, too abstract for a younger child, and allows deductive thinking about the nature of language (Ausubel, 1964, cited in Brown, 1980; p.50; Krashen and Terrel, 1983.

However, it is also believed that formalized thinking brings with it the disadvantages of too much conscious awareness in learning a language; the learner becomes more intolerant of contradictions, and tends to overanalyze and be too intellectually centered on the task of learning - resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed, rather than proceeding one step at a time as younger learners do (Brown, 1980, p.51).

Implications for program design and classroom implementation :

These theories imply that my students will benefit from grammatical explanations, which they will be

able to grasp with their 'formal operational' cognitive ability. This is relevant to my consideration as to what degree language structure can be effectively taught in my program. However, Brown's (1980) warning that this cognitive ability may be accompanied by greater learner frustration and overanalyzing must also be heeded, and needs to be kept in mind during considerations regarding the input (syllabus content and materials), selection of approach and/or methodology, and learning tasks that the program will utilize.

The program I design must present language structure and lexis in a sequenced format that avoids "overwhelming" students. This means sequencing language instruction in such a way that it builds upon prior knowledge gained from previous lessons (including knowledge gained during English lessons taught by Japanese instructors), and selecting learning material at a level of comprehensible input to avoid frustration among learners. Also, this material and the method of teaching it should be interesting to students, and the program's content should be perceived by them to be relevant to their immediate language needs.

Affective domain : This domain includes many factors of emotion that might be relevant to second language learning, and which are very relevant to the attitudes that students will bring to the classroom regarding English study and teacher/learner role- expectations:

Egocentricity and Attitudes Toward Target Language and its Culture/People

Guiora et al. (1972b,- cited in Brown, 1980, p.53) state that the 'language ego', the identity a person develops in reference to the language they speak, may account for problems that adults have in learning a second language. They believe that adults, as a defensive mechanism to protect this ego, cling to the security of their native language.

Adults are also thought to be more aware of the attitudes directed toward races, cultures and languages than children are, and negative attitudes have been shown to affect the learning of languages in older children and adults - prompting claims that identifying with the target language group is an essential factor in the second-language learning process (Brown, 1980, p. 55; Giles and Byrne, 1982; and Gardner and Lambert - cited in Nakata, 1995, p.17).

Although many Japanese learners can see the utilitarian benefits of English language study, there is still a persistent view that the inevitable adoption of the cultural knowledge that such study entails will result in them being perceived as less "Japanese". Lafayette De Menthe (1994) sums up this rationale:

"They believe, and rightly so, that any Japanese who spends enough time studying English to become reasonably fluent in the language will also have absorbed a great deal of the psychology that goes with the language - and to that extent is less Japanese." (p. 39).

Implications for program design :

The implication here is that my program needs to include material that emphasizes the importance of English, and its benefits, as an international language, used within a variety of countries and cultures. These materials should also contribute toward an understanding of how useful English is for the more pragmatic purposes of international travel, and within their future careers as a means of gaining up-to-date technical knowledge within their particular fields of expertise. Furthermore, a learning context needs to be provided that eases self-consciousness among learners, by providing learning opportunities within pair or group situations and a more flexible approach to error correction by the teacher during such activities.

Motivation :

Gardner and Lambert (1972 - cited in Nakata, 1995, p.17) distinguish between instrumental (i.e. wanting to learn a language for utilitarian reasons) and 'integrative (i.e. wanting to interact to become like native speakers of the target language) motivations for learning a foreign language. Murphey

(1995, p. 34) offers an alternative view of motivation by claiming that beliefs and identity are strongly linked to each other, and to motivation, and that language learners who develop a positive identity as being speakers of the target language also alter their beliefs about their capability of acquiring that language successfully.

Implications for program design :

In addition to providing material that emphasizes the more practical advantages of learning English as an international language, material should also be provided which emphasizes cultural aspects of English-speaking Western countries such as America or Australia. In doing so, learners with 'integrative' motivations for learning English will be accounted for in the program's content. In addition, role-models, (preferably young Japanese learners of English who have acquired English abilities to a reasonable level in an EFL setting) should be introduced in the form of guest speakers, or through written or visual materials - to reinforce the notion that it is indeed possible to learn English successfully within an EFL context.

Teacher/Learner Role Expectations :

My group of learners will have had three or four years of prior English instruction under the widely used, traditional language teaching method 'Yakudoku' or 'Translation/Reading, within an education system influenced heavily by Confucionist thought regarding education (Gorusch, 1998, p.11; Stapleton, 1995). 'Yakudoku' is characterized by the formalized learning of prescriptive grammar rules, vocabulary and sentence structure. McVeigh (1995, p. 8) notes that such a system has caused students to regard knowledge as a list of discrete data, where attention to form is most important. Such a method has been criticized for not developing in learners a style of learning that focuses on abstraction (i.e. the ability to perceive the total field of language holistically - thought necessary if students are to acquire a language to a high level, especially in regard to lexis (Allen and Corder, 1976, pp. 48-51; Lewis, 1993, pp. 105-108).

Implications for program design :

Such a method of learning will have instilled in my learners certain expectations regarding their roles and the roles of the teacher. Acknowledgement of the traditional Grammar -Translation method as that through which my students have been learning English, is vital to my program's design as it will greatly affect my choices regarding the selection of an appropriate approach or methodology through which to teach it, and forces me to consider the suitability, in regard to my learners, of the types of learning activities that such methodologies entail. Many modern teaching methodologies are based on learning theory that advocates a greater participatory role to the learner in the learning process (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.23). If I decide to choose from among such methodologies, I will need to initially program activities that reflect, to some degree, the more teacher-centered learning of the Grammar-Translation method, to smooth my learners' transition toward more learner-centered and teacher-independent learning activities that these modern approaches and methodologies advocate.

Linguistic : Research confirms the idea that children use the same cognitive and linguistic processes to acquire both their first and second languages (Ravem, 1968; Milon, 1974; Natalico and Natalico, 1971, Dulay and Burt, 1974a; Ervin Tripp, 1974; Hansen-Bede, 1975, cited in Brown, 1980; p. 56). Chomsky's view of an independent language faculty enabling the analysis of language structure, termed the 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD), has been offered as a means of explaining the way children go about acquiring language, and his view has been extended to explain that the same process occurs in second-language acquisition and in adults, although this faculty is thought to diminish with age. (Allen & Corder, 1967; Richards, 1973 ·cited in Yalden, 1983, p.6).

More recently, the hypothesis of an 'Universal Grammar' has gained popularity, which explores the notion of 'core rules' that are found in all languages (Ellis, 1986; p.15).

It is believed that adults try to formulate rules based on the linguistic information available in both

the L1 (first language) and L2 (second language), and this has given rise to the notion of first language interference in adult learners of second languages. However, other language scholars believe that such 'language transfer' need not be seen as disruptive to language acquisition, and may be limited only to those non-core features of language that are not in agreement with a universal rule. In such cases adult learners will try to interpret a rule by referring to equivalent rules in their L1 (Ellis, 1986; p.15).

Implications for program design and classroom practice :

The acceptance, or rejection of the notion of an innate linguistic ability in learners, will seriously affect program design regarding teacher/learner roles (and the provision of activities that conform to these roles), content, learning tasks, error correction, and also regarding methodological selection.

The Chomskyan viewpoint of language learning sees the learner as an active participator (hypothesizer, analyzer and tester) of language, who applies analytical and cognitive reasoning to the structure of language. This contrasts with the more traditional Behaviorist view, based on B.F. Skinner's model of learning known as 'Operant Conditioning' (from which structural-grammar learning methods originated), which views the learner as a passive recipient of language - an imitator of stimulus in the environment via reinforcement ((Brown, 1987, p.63; Palmer, 1928, p. 24).

Acceptance of the Chomskyan view has great implications in regard to program design, as it advocates the provision of:

a) language activities and learning tasks that require the students to apply their innate language processing abilities by testing hypotheses and drawing conclusions about language structure.

b) some degree of freedom regarding error correction, by viewing error as a natural result of this hypotheses testing process.

c) a humanistic attitude toward learning which advocates a more equal teacher/learner relationship, with the teacher adopting the less authoritative role of facilitator to the learners.

I do not advocate subscribing wholeheartedly to either of these two major views of language learning for any particular group of learners, as there is still no conclusive opinion about how we learn language, and because different learners have different abilities and preferences toward the way they learn language effectively. Instead, I advocate what Richards (1986, p.158) terms "informed eclecticism". That is, a borrowing of activities and procedures form a wide variety of methods that reflect both of these major theoretical views of language acquisition, which can be shown to relate specifically to the objectives of my language program - as determined by my students' needs and other previously stated considerations.

However, I believe the majority of my program's content should be based around one mainstream approach or methodology which best suits the language needs and nature of my learners, takes into account modern theories of language learning, and best reflects my own personal view of language and language proficiency. This will enable learners to become comfortable with the roles, content and learning tasks, as advocated by this one particular methodological framework.

Having fully considered the nature of the learners from a theoretical view, and having also considered the two main theories of language learning that form the basis of modern language teaching methodologies, and the roles and provisions they impose on the teacher and learners, I am now ready to proceed onto the next stage of my program's design : That is, the selection of a suitable methodology, or methodologies that meet my program objectives, and which address the previously mentioned implications regarding the nature of learners, and the major views of language and language learning.

The three major theoretical views of language and language proficiency that inform current approaches and methodologies in language teaching.

Richards (1986, pp. 16-17) outlines three of the major theoretical views of language and language proficiency which inform current approaches and methodologies in language teaching:

a) The Structural View - where language is viewed as a system of structurally related elements through which meaning is encoded. This view implies that language proficiency is measured by the level of mastery over the elements of this system (i.e. the mastery of phonological and grammatical units, grammatical operations, and of lexical items). Methods and approaches representative of this view are : The Audiolingual Method, Grammar-Translation, Total Physical Response, and The Silent Way.

b) The Functional View - where language is viewed as the means through which we express functional meaning. This view implies that language proficiency is measured by the level of ability at achieving communication for a variety of functional purposes (e.g. to invite, to solicit help, to express doubt etc.). Methods and approaches representative of this view are: The Communicative Approach and English for Specific Purposes.

and c) The Interactional View - where language is viewed as a means of creating and maintaining social relations. This view implies that language proficiency is measured by the ability of the learner to achieve these socially interactive purposes. Methods and approaches representative of this view are: The Functional-Notional Approach and The Genre-Based Approach.

Of these three views of language and language proficiency, I believe the Communicative Approach best suits the functional needs that I have identified as the most beneficial to my learners (i.e. English for the functional purposes of international travel and social, everyday communication), and the most effective method of increasing oral and aural proficiency, given the one-hour-a week time constraints imposed on me by my learners' total curriculum. In addition, this approach offers the following provisions for adjusting aspects of the program's design to account for the biological, social/cultural, affective, and cognitive factors that affect my learners, while also allowing me to take into account major modern theories regarding language learning:

Provision of meaningful activities that replicate the processes of communication

A distinguishing feature of Communicative Methods from other language teaching approaches and methods is the emphasis that is placed on the learner to do things actively with language, rather than just learning about language (Finnochiaro & Brumfit, 1983, p.18). These methods are based on the belief that language is dynamic and complex, and that only by practising communication activities can we learn to communicate (Nunan, 1989, p. 64). Advocates of these methods distinguish between the knowing of language forms and rules, and being able to use these appropriately and effectively in communication, and uppermost in the minds of these advocates when designing syllabus or tasks for the language classroom is how to achieve communicative abilities in learners (Johnson and Morrow, 1981, p. 12).

Benefits to my learners

By engaging learners in meaningful activities that replicate the processes of communication, and by allowing learners to guess at meaning via clues within the context of these exchanges, students are given opportunities to hypothesize about language structure and develop strategies needed to negotiate meaning, using all of their linguistic knowledge. That is, in accordance with Chomsky's theory of a 'Language Acquisition Device', other linguists' notion of a 'Universal Grammar', and cognitivist theories regarding language acquisition, this approach makes allowances for the possible existence in learners of innate language ability by providing learning contexts similar to that of children learning their first language - utilizing task-based, learner-centered activities that require the learners to test hypotheses and draw conclusions about language structure.

Provision for multi-syllabus design

At the level of syllabus design, the ordering of language learning is determined by perceived students' needs (Nunan, 1989, p.194). Following a needs analysis by the teacher, the syllabus content is determined, and may include some or all of the four basic patterns of organizational framework for organizing a communicative syllabus as outlined by Savignon (1983, p.140): structural, notional-

functional, situational or a combination of two or more of these. Swan (in Johnson and Morrow, 1981, p. 42) warns against using any one syllabus around which to organize teaching, believing that although easily manipulated structures can be learnt directly through communicative exchanges, more complex structures require isolation and drilling before learners can utilize them well. He advocates that language teachers base their teaching on as many syllabuses as possible, as it is still not known how people transfer the knowledge gained in lessons to language performance (p.44).

Benefits to my learners :

The flexibility that this approach offers in regard to organising content around a multi-syllabus design, enables the teaching of topics and functions, selected according to the perceived language needs and interests of my learners, while still allowing learners ample opportunities to study and practise more complex structures in isolation via drilling. Such flexibility will allow me to initially design teacher-centered language learning activities which conform to the traditional teacher/learner role expectations of my learners, while enabling me to gradually implement more learner-centered and teacher-independent pair or group language exchange activities to foster communicative competence. In this regard, this method enables me to design language learning activities which take into account both of the major views of language learning, a Behaviorist view and a Chomskyan view, by allowing me to design language learning activities which conform to both of them. Furthermore, by selecting functions and topics that incorporate high-frequency situations that learners will perceive as relevant to their communicative language needs, students will be further motivated to practise acts of communication and will come to realize what language structures are necessary in the performing of such acts.

Provision of flexibility regarding error correction

As the principle focus of communicative methods is the development of learners' communicative ability, errors are dealt with flexibly at different stages of the learning process (Nunan, 1989, p. 64-65). This loosening of error monitoring is considered justified on the basis that it encourages learners to use language without destroying their confidence when attempting to express something when unsure of the proper language usage. Nunan (1989, p. 65) asserts that such attempts are " a vital feature of using a foreign language." However, a contemporary issue regarding Communicative Methods is whether it is more efficient to provide learning tasks that require learners to focus on form, rather than expecting learners to acquire these aspects of language automatically in the learning process (Nunan, 1989, p. 66; Johnson and Morrow, 1981, p. 13; Swan, in Johnson and Morrow, 1981, p. 42).

Benefits to my learners

Flexibility toward error-correction is necessary to ease self-consciousness in my learners and to avoid them feeling frustrated and overwhelmed by their foreign-language learning (thought to be the bi-products of formalized, cognitive thinking that cause tendencies to overanalyze and be too intellectually centered on the task of learning {Brown, 1980, p. 51}). In addition, when considering the enormous incongruencies that exist between the English and Japanese languages (Thompson, 1991), and between Japanese and Western communication styles (Miller 1995, p. 46), as well as the notion of first language interference in adult learners of second languages (Ellis, 1986, p. 15), a flexible attitude toward error correction can be seen as vital to alleviating stress in my learners toward their learning. Incorporating a multi-syllabus design for my program that allows for isolating and drilling of more complex language structures will, I believe, address the above concerns regarding the loosening of error monitoring.

The interactive relationship between theory and practice

Although a knowledge of theory regarding language and language learning provides the teacher

with a means of making and justifying informed decisions regarding program design, it is only at the level of classroom practice that these decisions can be truly justified. The classroom provides a context for testing the validity of these theories as they apply to my particular group of learners, and allows me to adjust aspects of the program that, although theoretically valid, may require modification to account for practical considerations at the level of practice.

Flexible adaptation of teaching approaches and methods must be made that conforms to my own interpretation of theories regarding language and language learning, and to the realities of such practical considerations as class size, student needs, and the social/cultural context in which it will be taught.

Although theory informs the teaching and learning considerations of my program, implementation of this program allows me to put these theories to the test and reflect on my ability to put them into practice. Essentially, theory and practice are interactive - just as theory serves to inform practice, practice serves to test the validity and effectiveness of theories, as they apply to my particular teaching/learning situation.

Conclusion

Consideration of theories of language and language learning is essential to the task of designing a suitable language program for its learners. Program design is greatly enhanced through the acknowledgment of such theories, as this knowledge provides greater focus toward considerations given to variables that might affect the learners in its implementation, which ultimately guide any further considerations made regarding program design. At the level of selecting a suitable methodology through which to teach a language program, an understanding of these theories better informs us in making this selection by providing us with a greater understanding of those views of language, language proficiency and language learning that underpin them.

This paper has attempted to outline this relationship between theory and practice in second language teaching: Major theories of language and language learning, perceived by this author to be the most relevant to Japanese first and second year students of a Japanese national technical college, have been presented and their implications for program design and practice have been discussed. A Communicative Approach through which to teach this program has been proposed, and those aspects of this methodology which take into account major views of language and language learning have been highlighted to justify this selection for this particular group of learners.

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