

Educating the Educators of Tomorrow

Brian Berning

Abstract

Today's students and tomorrow's teachers are facing challenges that without proper preparation and support will face struggles at odds with what is required for teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Japanese context. Our jobs as educators at the University level requires so much more than just the transmission of the English language. As educators and more importantly role models or templates of EFL educators we must model, practice, and transmit to our students the best practices and theoretical basis of how and why we use certain pedagogical tools/methods in the classroom. These include the ideas of self-motivated learning, content learning methodology, student centered language lessons, assessment methods, and the idea of proximal learning between not only student and teacher, but peer groups as well (Vygotsky, 1978). Included in these ideas is the idea that language and culture are inseparable, constantly evolving and massively varied based on cultural context. Not to be forgotten is the current mandate for English education via English in principle. This has been an almost decade long call (MEXT, 2014) that all current and future teachers must be prepared to act on. The development of methods and tools our students can use to teach varying levels of students from junior high school (JHS) through high school (HS), using English as

the primary communicative instrument is vital. As well as, the ability of young teachers to transmit these ideas to the already established teachers can make this idea of English education through English possible. To accomplish this educators and students must work together to produce, practice, and present (PPP) content in the classroom that can be applied directly or could be used to create content and lessons for use in their future careers. Only by learning not only the how, but the why behind these ideas can future educators apply these ideas to educate the next generation of EFL learners.

Intro

This paper primarily covers the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing education. While these domains cover different aspects of language, with various tasks and content based activities, they all fall under the same methodology of producing, practicing, and presenting one's knowledge gained in the classroom. The ideas of content based, proximal-zone learning, teacher guided lessons applies to each of these disciplines. In addition, each of these disciplines overlaps and while speaking/listening and reading/writing are separate classes, aspects of all four disciplines are found each class. This cross training is not only important but creates a much more authentic learning experience where students can access all their acquired knowledge in each area to apply to working through a given task. In addition to the content of the class students are also exposed to best practices in the class room as model/performed by the teacher. Also covered directly and indirectly in the content of the class is the

idea of intercultural understanding and cooperation, which serves an important role for studying abroad, developing relations with exchange students, working with assistant language teachers (ALT) in their future careers, travel abroad, tourism in Japan, and working/collaborating with overseas peoples. As well as lessons that cover concrete practical and theoretical information, motivating students, and making them aware of the relevance of a certain lesson or the overall content/thesis of the class is important. This comes down to making the classroom a cooperative learning environment where all actors have a stake in the lesson and create and contribute to the classes goal of one practical second language acquisition (SLA) and two the theories (why) and methods used in SLA.

Practical SLA

The underlying goal of the speaking/listening and reading/writing classes is to improve the student's English ability. This is measured several ways; in class assessment by the teacher, TOEIC, EIKAN, IELTS, TOEFL, etc... Therefore, this is the first and primary goal of the class to improve the student's English ability and hopefully this will be reflected in not only the standardized tests, but in-class assessment and the overall confidence students feel in their ability to use the language. While this is the primary goal of the class let us not discount the importance of the transfer of SLA methodology important for future teachers and cultural understanding that pervades the content of the lessons.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The lessons used in speaking/listening and reading/writing are based on the ideas of CLT. In the Japanese context of TSURU University it is important to not only engage students with interesting content, but content that is both meaningful and motivating to the student in the classroom. This means tailoring content that fits the context of the students and fits their current and future needs. To do this requires not only the planning and expertise of the teacher, but a reliance on student's creativity and ability to look outside of the classroom for ideas. Teachers must be able to skillfully present an idea or task, but it is the role of the students to produce, practice and present the idea fully formed with only minor guidance from the teacher. This PPP is a fundamental idea of the class and is woven into lesson throughout the semester. In this way students take responsibility for their own work, while at the same time practice future skills they will need as Japanese teachers of English (JTE). These include researching an idea, group planning of how to execute an idea, practice and repetitive learning to understand an idea fully, and finally presenting that idea in a way that is interesting and compelling to their peers and teachers. The idea of compelling relevant lessons that fit the context of the students, classroom, local environment, and purpose of the class is meant not just to give the best education possible but to create an environment that motivates and builds interest in all participants in the classroom (Cowie & Sakui, 2012). In the end, these are the

skills needed in a teacher of EFL to research, evaluated, practice, and present/teach content to others. Taking an English concept be it grammatical, informative, cultural, or practical then researching, practicing and presenting what was learned students can better internalize this information, and see how it applies to their real-world context.

Practical Examples:

Flipped Classrooms: where students are asked to teach a grammatical point, or practical conversation to the classroom. Students must research, prepare, then give a lesson, as if they were teaching the class. This allows not only covering a wider range of materials but allows students to master an important aspect of SLA.

Cultural Ambassador: where students must research and present an aspect of their own culture to the class as if they were relating it to a non-Japanese speaking person. This helps deepens cross cultural understanding by putting students in the others position, and can explore how to best present their own culture to people from another culture.

Local Language Teacher: students become linguists and teach follow students their local language verities, by creating a lesson to familiarize the classroom with the vocabulary. This lesson develops not only teaching skills, but widens students understanding of cultural differences within their own country.

Reporting on a Text: students work collaboratively to read and summarize a

text in English, and then comment and report on it. Using English texts students can use proximal learning to build on each other's knowledge in the act of comprehending, processing and reporting on an English text.

Team Writing: students collaborate on a single document each working on one aspect of it. This requires team work, active reading and interpretation of others idea, and writing to seamlessly combine each other's work into a single document. Collaboratively working on a document increases students oral and written output when they explore, and negotiate how the text should be written.

Process Writing: Students work with each other to write, and edit a paper over several days. Drafting, writing, and editing. This requires a two-way dialogue and reflection on what was written.

By the end of the year students should have not only improved their language ability but have experienced in practice the CLT method. While the lessons covered in class might not directly apply to the JHS and HS context with effort from the students/future teachers they could easily adapt the tasks they performed in these classes to their future EFL classrooms.

SLA in Theory

The goal of these lessons at Tsuru University is not only to improve our student's English ability, not only to give them fundamental knowledge of English language teaching, but also to give a basic idea of the theory behind these methods. These classes in no way present or teach

theory explicitly but they do hope to answer the students underlying question of why do we, why should we teach using CLT and English as the primary language of instruction. It is my opinion that students who know not just the how but the why that a certain method is promoted over another they will in turn be better motivated, and more likely to use and understand the method in the future. This applies to writing/reading as well as speaking/listening courses.

To do this theory is presented in the guise of a communicative lesson showing the benefits of one method compared to another. By completing these activities students can judge for themselves the efficacy of a certain method and hopefully better understand how to not only preform a task, but also create a tasking using a certain method/theory.

SLA Theory in Practice

Student Centered/Teacher Centered: CLT relies on students actively preforming in classes, and one why to do this is creating a student-centered classroom. To demonstrate this, students are given various tasks some administered by the teacher, and some run independently by the students. By doing this, students have a better idea of different ways a classroom can be run, and how even when not fully direct by a teacher, students can learn and work together to complete a task with little to no direct teacher intervention. Another benefit of this students communicative output can be maximized when the teacher is removed as the primary focus and students can communicate directly in the target language with each other.

English via English: The idea of how to maximize English input and output is currently under debate and a prime issue for current and future teachers (Gregory Glasgow, 2014). The University classroom is a perfect candidate for experimentation and teaching of methods to maximize English for JHS and HS classrooms. Students can be reluctant to using English only, and even more confused on how to implement it in the classroom. It is vital that as educators we demonstrate methods and the ideas behind how to implement English via English in the classroom. Since this issue is far from settle even by MEXT these initial English classes can really set the standard for best practices going forward.

So, while the classes Speaking/listening and Reading/writing are not explicitly designed to teach theory they are deeply saturated with it. While practical knowledge is important students should know the why an activity is done, so they do not just robotically preform it but understand it and can then apply that knowledge to create new tasks that can be applied to their future careers. As a part of a liberal education we should provide our students with not only tools but the knowledge of how to create new tools for the future.

Cross Cultural Understanding

Learning and teaching a language is fundamentally a cross cultural activity. Our students come to the university basically bilingual, but it is our job to not only teach English, but to teach the culture and create motivation to better explore and

understand that culture. Exploring and understanding the various cultures associated with English are important motivators as well as important for understanding native speakers pragmatic meaning. This can be accomplished by using realia or modified realia in the classroom. Allowing students to find and use current media from English speaking countries as a part of the lesson can be a major motivator. Encouraging culture exchange via study abroad, or working with exchange students can also be an important tool. All of this helps in the development of a student's English including a deeper understanding of the diversity of peoples and ideas from cultures and contexts other than their own. In the end, a better understanding of other's cultures can lead to better teachers. For one these teachers can better motivate their students, and pass on a better understanding of other peoples. A better understanding of other cultures and people can also greatly help when working with ALTs. In fact, many Japanese EFL teachers will work with people from other cultures in the form of ALTs. Understanding English cultures should allow for greater collaboration and better lessons in general when working with ALTs. It must be noted that future teachers must also be confident in their role and knowledge gained in University to be competent JTE and must be able to fulfill this role with or without ALT assistance (Sutherland, 2012). This will hopefully lead to less misunderstandings, and better utilization of ALTs in JHS and HS classrooms.

The point is cross cultural understanding is not a minor issue but an intrinsic part of

English education. Therefore, it is important that we as educators make it a primary topic covered both explicitly in tasks looking at other cultures, and implicitly in the fact that I as a non-Japanese educator I am an ambassador of my culture.

Summary

What I hope this paper presents is that we are not just trying to create future teachers set in a mold we have devised. Students that go through this program should be exposed to the idea that it is up to them to take our ideas/methods and put their own creative energies into them. This should be a virtuous circle where ideas are continually reflected on and changed, improved, and adapted to constantly varying contexts. What works in a university classroom might not work in the JHS and HS context but the underlying ideas/methods can be used to create compelling content for differing contexts. This is what we hope to create students/future teachers who are up to the challenges of ever changing circumstances, who have the tools, and knowledge to continually learn, research, and create new ideas to meet their every changing world. Of course, this is what a liberal education is meant to do create people who can think and work for themselves, but it does not hurt to give them as much knowledge and practical examples that they can then carry forward to their future classrooms.

References

- Cowie, N. & Sakui, K. (2012). The Dark Side of Motivation: Teachers' Perspectives on 'Unmotivation'. *ELT Journal, Vol 66/2*. Oxford University Press.
- Glasgow, G. (2014). Teaching English is English, 'in principle': The national foreign language curriculum for Japanese senior high schools. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning, 9(2)*, 152-161
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (2014). English education reform plan corresponding to globalization. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/_icsFiles/afiedfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf
- Sutherland, S. (2012). 'Real English' In Japan: Team Teachers' Views on Nativeness in Language Teaching. *Journal of English Studies, Vol. 10*, 175-191
- Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.