"From EFL to Content-Based Instruction: what English teachers take with them into the sociolinguistics lecture."

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Abstract

This paper describes the teaching of sociolinguistics to Japanese and Chinese 2nd grade students in a college in Japan by a teacher trained in English as Foreign Language (EFL). It shows how the native speaker EFL teacher employs a methodological combination of teacher transmission and student collaboration as an effective means to teach this particular content-based subject to non-native English speakers using primarily English as the instructional language. This methodological hybrid is argued as being influenced by the teacher's EFL background towards student input in the lesson, resulting in a syllabus which integrates student beliefs and experiences about the use of language in society and employs multilingual collaboration among students in the lecture itself. This version of traditional lecturing and student interaction, termed here as "collaborative dialogue" (Swain, 2000, p. 97), has succeeded in, firstly, raising the general class level of comprehension and, significantly, lowering anxiety about interaction in class. Additionally, it has resulted in pooling student input about language use to create a rich, contrastive perspective on basic sociolinguistic topics.

1. Introduction

This paper describes the content-based teaching of sociolinguistics to Japanese and Chinese students at a 2-year college in Japan. Firstly, it briefly outlines the syllabus in terms of its aims, means of evaluation and the rationale for its topic choice. Then it describes the main focus of the paper, that of the methodology chosen to teach the

syllabus, a combination of transmission and collaboration. A discussion and some conclusions concerning the concept of collaboration among students in this teaching context then follows.

2. Syllabus

2.1 Aim of the course and evaluation

This course intended to help students understand some of the basic aspects of how language is used in society. Students were evaluated on a mid-term test (20%), an end of term test (20%), participation in class and homework (40%), and attendance (20%).

2.2 Syllabus and rationale

The syllabus focused on 12 themes in two parts (lessons 1 to 6 and lessons 8 to 13), taught over 15 weeks, as illustrated below in table 1:

Table 1. The sociolinguistics syllabus

1. Introduction to Sociolinguistics,
2. Gender,
3. Age,
4. Ethnicity,
5. Social class,
6. Regions,
7. Mid-term test of lessons 1 to 6,
8. Language and culture,
9. Forms of address and Politeness,
10. Image and association,
11. Speech acts,
12. Discourse,
13. Nonverbal language,
14. End of term test of lessons 8 to 13,
15. Course review and student feedback

The teacher's objective in compiling this syllabus was to encourage student input in the form of their own beliefs and experiences for each topic area. This was intended as a necessary Japanese and Chinese contrast to the teacher-led input which often took the form of mostly anglo-centric examples. Providing time each lesson for student-centered perspectives was seen as a means to redress this imbalance and make the lesson input more relevant for the student population.

In terms of the specific break-down of the syllabus, the first part of the 15-week syllabus (lessons 1 to 6) was so devised as to give students a background knowledge into the basic areas of sociolinguistics. This was with particularly reference to the use of English, Japanese and Chinese languages in societies in which they are used. i.e. their use in the world as first, foreign and second languages. The way men and women speak, and finally, the effect of social class systems and region on language were also addressed as essential components in this first part.

The second part of the syllabus (lessons 8 to 13) shifted the focus on to giving students a broader perspective on how to investigate the concept of "culture" (using cultural models and analogies), how politeness and terms of address are expressed and used in social relations, how images carry different associations across cultures, how language can be analyzed through its various speech acts (introducing pragmatic and discourse awareness), and finally, how non-verbal language (gestures) differs across cultures.

In summary, the syllabus contents were arranged in order to give students insights into the way they use language in society and how it can be perceived by others (perlocution) within the same region or country and in other countries. The course also attempted to enable students to become mini-researchers into language through the practical use of speech acts and interactional coding in discourse analysis, supporting that analysis by means of interpretative frameworks (cultural models like Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1977 and Holliday, 1994). Research into the course content was taken from two sources, in English by Holmes (1992), *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics,* and also in Japanese by Tanaka and Tanaka (1996), *An Invitation to Sociolinguistics*. This reference to both English-language and Japanese resources gave the teacher access to some information which was less anglo-centric in nature,

providing the teacher with examples of sociolinguistic use of language in the Asian context.

3. Methodology: Transmission and collaboration

The course was taught in simple English with some Japanese. Students were encouraged to use their preferred language in group and pair activities and discussions, meaning that Japanese and Chinese were not regarded as forbidden languages in the classroom. The language of lecturing, although primarily English, frequently switched between Japanese, English and Chinese for subsequent group and pair work among students and Japanese or English for interaction with the teacher. The purpose of this multilingual approach, often manifesting itself in code-switching between languages, was to lower the anxiety of communication with the teacher in a foreign language. Although the objective of the course was to increase awareness of sociolinguistics, the by-product of this process could be argued as one which had the potential to improve student to student English communication skills.

Following this content-based, rather than linguistic, objective, much emphasis was placed on student collaboration. This is fundamentally what I, the teacher, perceived as having carried over from EFL training and practice. It was a transfer of beliefs about instruction (or perhaps better expressed, the construction of knowledge) from EFL into content-based teaching which focuses on the students not simply as recipients of knowledge, but as co-constructors. This is taken from my experiences in multi-level EFL classes where student elicitation of lexis and grammar and the exchange and student collaboration to negotiate meaning are standard practice. These EFL-influences manifested themselves in the following ways:

1. After teacher content-matter transmission: The lesson was staged so there were regular pauses for recapping (about every 10-15 minutes), firstly by the teacher and then by students in the language of their choice. The initial teacher-led recapping entailed a highlighting of key concepts and lexical items. The following student to student summarizing was essentially a repeat of the teacher recap session in which students compared notes and summarized the last 10-15 minutes of instruction to each other in pairs or threes. Such recap sessions were perhaps, though to be fair not exclusively, seen to part of the sensitivity of EFL teachers towards the linguistic

uptake of the class.

2. During student-to-student collaboration: After teacher transmission and the subsequent recapping sessions, practice on various mini tasks to reinforce, and even introduce, new themes was conducted in pairs or groups. This involved comparing kanji which integrates the character for woman, watching clips of Japanese dramas to identify gender-related language, and even creating cockney-rhyming slang sentences etc. After this, results of collaboration were shared between groups and, as was frequent in this class, written on the board so that all students could learn from each other. An example of a typical exercise requiring analytical thought and collaboration to reinforce a theme introduced by teacher transmission was in lesson 3 on ethnicity where "creoles" were the focus of study. Students firstly briefly studied the following information on Tok Pisin, the language of Papua New Guinea, and filled in the missing lexis. In the first case, this entailed guessing the linguistic construction of Tok Pisin verbs (adapted from Holmes, 1992).
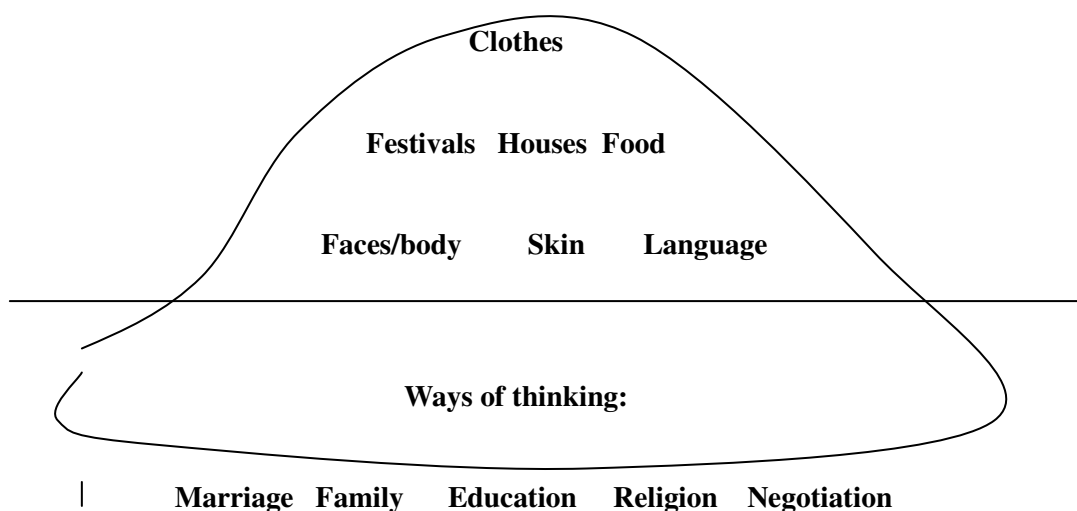
Tok Pisin	*English*	*Tok Pisin*	*English*
Bik	big	bikim	make large
Daun	low	?	make lower
Nogut	bad	?	make bad/spoil

Then they were required to translate Tok Pisin into English:

Tok pisin	*English*
Gras	Grass
Mausgras	Moustache
Grasbilong fes	Beard
Gras bilong hed	?
Gras antop long ai	?
Pisin	Bird
Gras bilong pisin	?

In lesson 8 on language and culture, in contrast, student collaboration entailed filling in Geertz's (1973) iceberg. This was actually in place of the normal teacher-led introduction of a theme on cultural models in which the following instructions were given:

Geertz said that what we see is above the waterline. What we cannot see is below the water. What do we see and what don't we see when we meet people from different cultures? Write them in the following iceberg:

Clothes

Festivals   Houses   Food

Faces/body   Skin   Language

Ways of thinking:

Marriage   Family   Education   Religion   Negotiation

In lesson 10 on image and association student collaboration was focused on finding colour-based associations in their own culture and comparing them with the given associations from the UK and those of other students in the class, forming a UK – Japan – China contrast, as below:

Colour	UK	Japan	China
Black	Depression **Humour** **In credit**	Depression **Noble**	**Evil** Bad luck
Red	Angry Embarrassed Danger	Angry **In debt (akaji)**	**Good luck** **Beauty** **Loyalty**

	In debt		

3. *Homework collaboration*: The last 15 to 20 minutes of every lesson was taken up by a recap of the same lesson in the form of a homework sheet. This was basically a varied repetition of the main hand-out in which students formed different pairs or groups and worked through the homework questions. They consulted each other while I (the teacher) could monitor. This was a relaxed part to the lesson which was used to assess the students' comprehension and uptake of the lesson in a non-formal atmosphere. The homework was encouraged as a collaborative effort, although each lesson the groups were changed for variety of student input. If not finished by the end of the lesson, this homework was to be continued either individually, or in the same group at home.

At first, students seemed surprised to be allowed to consult each other and even copy work. They were made aware, though, that they were to be assessed on not just the correctness of answers, but also their effort to collaborate positively with each other, i.e. to discuss the answers together and not simply to plagiarize. Active students were evaluated more highly than passive ones in this stage, even though their answers were not necessarily perfect. Examples of the homework set show standard comprehension-style questions as in lesson 4 (Appendix 1), yet in others, for example in lesson 1 (Appendix 2), students were encouraged to use the knowledge and apply it actively by watching and analyzing a TV programme of their choice.

4. Discussion

This mixture of teacher transmission and student collaboration has drawn several observations. Firstly, taking a sociolinguistics course in English with a native-speaker lecturer has brought students into a new "academic discourse community" (Gaffield-Vile, 1996, p. 112) where the language is more specific than that learned in General English classes taken with native speaker teachers of English at the same institution. This lexical challenge necessitated regular recap sessions after teacher transmission in which concepts and their related lexis were clearly summarized and outlined on the board. This is a direct influence from the linguistic sensitivity acquired as a result of

being an EFL teacher. It may not be exclusive to EFL teachers, but is nevertheless a useful tool for content-based lecturers to possess in English-medium instruction.

In this course, there was a requirement to adopt a more autonomous mode of learning. Students needed to think critically about various sociolinguistic themes and were informed that they were to be evaluated on their active participation in class. This was outlined to the students at the start of the course as being important since student input in terms of experience and beliefs could be shared with others, providing a valuable contrastive and student-centred element to teacher-led input. This moved the lesson content from what Biggs (1993, p.104) terms as "surface to deep learning", in that it became more relevant to the students' own, local context. Miller (2002) argues that such a local contextualization of lesson content is essential in aiding comprehension in second language lectures.

On a note of caution, though, passing responsibility over to students to provide their own lesson input in a lecture, as well as assisting other students in comprehension, may be perceived as imposing a western approach of "learner autonomy" on to Japanese and Chinese learners (Sinclair, 1997). Perhaps, for some students, attending a sociolinguistics class is assumed as carrying the responsibility of listening individually to a transmission of knowledge, taking notes (or not), and being assessed on one end of term test or essay. This expectation was quickly challenged, and even slightly resisted at first, when collaboration was required.

In response to the potential criticism of imposing a western mode of learning on to the class, however, collaboration in what Senior (1997, p.3) calls "bonded" groups and Miller (2002, p. 149) as "communities of learners" can be seen as an effective way to check and enhance comprehension. This is like a new study skill which encourages cognitive flexibility (Mohammed, 1997), a change from the expected mode of learning in lectures. The process of working in pairs and groups in a lecture was quite new for most students, although for those who had experienced EFL classes with foreign instructors, the shock may have been lessened. Perhaps the encouragement of the strategy of "social mediation" (O'Malley et al, 1985; Oxford, 1990) to achieve comprehension and relevant student-centred input was associated more with the lecturer than the lecture itself.

In terms of the perception of pressure on students who normally dislike speaking directly to the teacher, as also observed by Flowerdew (1998) in research in Hong Kong, there has been a marked trend among most students to more readily express themselves in group work with classmates. This form of interaction was clearly helpful in lowering anxiety in a content-based class with a foreign lecturer. Of some note here was the contribution of the mixture of Japanese, Chinese and English used in class which has taken the emphasis away from the forbidding 'English only' focus as in EFL lessons or 'Japanese only' in other content-based lectures. In this sense, multi-lingual collaboration represents an "affective strategy" in learning (Oxford, 1990), one which admittedly was not intended as a new strategy, but as a practical means to enable students to converse with each other. In retrospect, this leads to the course being seen as "sheltered content-based" (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989), one which has accommodated linguistic weaknesses among the students, yet has simultaneously yielded greater student input than a class limited to one language of communication.

Finally, for most students, according to the end of course questionnaire feedback, this specific sociolinguistics focus has been more motivating in comparison with general EFL courses at the college and has embraced more student input into the lesson than other content-based courses. It can argued that the collaborative approach has encouraged stronger students to provide "cognitive-related assistance" to weaker students (Mohamed, 1997, p.166), and has helped all towards a verbalization of knowledge in "collaborative dialogue" (Swain, 2000, p.97). This has led to a sustained high level of comprehension among most students for the duration of the course.

5. Conclusions

This paper has illustrated how multi-lingual collaboration in a sociolinguistics course has created an active atmosphere where the discussion and negotiation of content-based meaning, or "collaborative dialogue" (Swain, 2000, p.97) in "communities of learners" (Miller, 2002, p.149), have been evaluated as being motivating to the students. It is argued here that such interaction is necessary in the teaching of

sociolinguistics, firstly, as the subject-matter in the syllabus is best enhanced by student experiences and perspectives, and secondly, since it raises and sustains the general level of comprehension for potentially challenging themes. The evaluative framework has also contributed to this motivation, since it is based on active participation in this process rather than accuracy alone. This methodologically hybrid approach to teaching and learning is argued, in this case, as being a direct influence from the language-sensitivity and group-work orientation in the EFL training and experiences of the instructor. Future courses must, however, take into consideration the academic culture shock of the demands on students of the interactive lecture which requires students to adopt a student-centred, collaborative learning mode.

6. References

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1 Lesson 4: Social Class and Regional Differences

Today we have studied about social class and regional differences in the world. Think about the following questions:

1. What is a prestigious way of speaking in the UK?

2. What is the regional dialect in Liverpool?
3. Give an example of a regional dialect in Japan?

4. What type of English do 15% of English people speak?

5. What is diglossia?

6. How does change happen in language?

7. When we change our way of speaking in another region, it is =

8. What countries are the "Inner Circle" of English?

9. What circle is Japan?

10. What are some "loan words" from English into Japanese? How about Portuguese?

Appendix 2 Lesson 1: Gender homework

In the lesson today we studied about gender differences, sexism and PC language. For today's homework, I want you to watch T.V.. While you are watching T.V., make a note of any program in which there is sexist language or a gender difference in language between men and women.

Note the following:

Program name/type (drama, comedy etc)	
Channel, time/day	
What language was used which shows gender differences or sexism?	
Who was speaking (their age, job, dialect etc)?	