The Challenges to Constructivist Culture in Japan

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This theoretically oriented paper deals with a number of aspects of the Japanese educational system which contribute to question and challenge the value of constructivist culture in foreign language teaching. Issues related to Japanese learners' acquaintance with teacher-centred vernacular teaching models and their ignorance of other set of approaches (1), the hidden enforcement of curricular objectives from the part of the evaluation system (2), and contradictory socialisation goals (3) conspire to limit or water down the effectiveness of constructivist models and approaches, sometimes even detaching them from their original philosophical principles. Practitioners need to be aware of these aspects when planning, implementing and evaluating curriculum, courses, methodological strategies, evaluation systems, methods and instructional techniques alike (4).

この理論的な問題を中心とした論文は、日本の教育制度の多くの側面が外国語教育における構成主義的(constructivist)方法論の価値に疑義をはさむのに起因することを論じる。学習者が日本で一般的な教師中心的方法に馴染んでいること及び彼らが他のアプローチの姿勢を知らないことに関連する問題点(1)、評価システムにおけるカリキュラム上の目的的非明示的追求(2)、社会化の目標における矛盾は構成主義的方法論の効果を制限したり、弱めたりする(3)。そして、時にはそれらを元来の哲学的方針から分離しさえする。カリキュラム、コース、方法論的方針、評価システム、方法と同様の教育テクニックの計画、実行、評価に際して、従事者たちはこれらの側面を意識する必要がある(4)。

Introduction

The constructivist model of teaching and learning, based primarily on cognitive psychology, became mainstream in education in the 1980s. Although there are many variants, constructivism may be defined as an educational culture (or set of philosophical principles) that intends to increase learners' control and autonomy over what is studied and how it is studied as a way to develop learners' critical reflection. It therefore encourages active learning and personal change. Since it believes knowledge is socially constructed by learners (and not merely transmitted from teachers), constructivism fosters group participation, dialogues with peers and teachers, and individual reflection. It is associated with learner-centred approaches

to teaching and to a pool of pedagogical methods such as collaborative, co-operative and problem-based learning.

In language teaching, constructivism inspires at least four teaching models and/or approaches widely used by practitioners: *The communicative approach* (whose focus is authentic communication and meaningful negotiation between learners), *the cooperative learning model* (learners work together toward completion of common tasks), *the process approach* (mainly used in writing classes; learners develop their own understanding of writing as a process), and *the whole language approach* (language is taught as a whole, not through its separate components, using authentic texts and materials) (Richards, 2001).

There are a number of problems that arise from the use and teaching of foreign languages which contribute to convert those constructivist models/approaches into a fragmented collection of instructional methods that fail to reinforce one another, limiting or watering down the effectiveness of constructivist culture. In the case of Japanese educational settings, and particularly the university educational context, the following interrelated problems can be highlighted: (a) a foreign language brings its own set of cultural values, (b) evaluation methods (tests, examinations) which are used to evaluate academic/skill performance may act as a hidden curriculum, silently enforcing their logic, and more importantly (c) the educational field imposes a relational framework which regulates social relationships (vital for learning) according to institutional and even national socialisation goals which sometimes compete with each other. This, in turn, selects and/or overrides teaching-learning models and methods. Context is such a strong power field that may act upon methods up to the point of having them become relatively useless or almost completely detached from the original philosophical principles they were originally drawn from.

Practitioners should be aware of the above aspects when planning, implementing and evaluating curriculum, courses, methodological strategies, methods and instructional techniques alike.

Language: A Cultural Trojan Horse

According to Philipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994), referring to English language teaching (ELT) in a global delivery milieu, the ELT industry exports *western* pedagogical practices that may not be appropriate in other teaching contexts.

Furthermore, Pennycook (1994, p.152) asserts that "teaching practices need to be seen as cultural practices, and thus the promotion of particular teaching approaches is closely linked to the promotion of English and to the promotion of particular forms of culture and knowledge."

European settings are not exempted from cultural issues affecting models and approaches; hence the Japanese case should not be seen as an exceptional one. Different academic traditions and cultures, even if they are immersed in Western tradition, also contribute to select models and methods. Baumeister, Williams and Wilson (2000) go over some of these differences and suggest, for instance, that in continental European educational systems (as opposed to the British educational system) there appear to be much greater concern with maintaining teacher-student's distance and relative status, perpetuating a knowledge-transmission teaching model instead of a constructivist model.

Japanese learners have been taught since preschool to keep distance from their teachers so that the whole class could have equal access to them (Tobin, Wu and Davidson, 1993). Consequently, the teachers' involvement needed to implement

constructivist methods (e.g., approaching students on a case-by-case fashion, helping setting individual learning goals and learning approaches) may be perceived as too intrusive by Japanese learners or as a way that compromises Japanese basic groupism (e.g., by dividing the class in groups according to ability, performance or other criteria). This perception may not be consciously rationalised (nor easily overcome) by learners since *keeping distance* may be already, using Bourdieu's (2000) terminology, a "disposition", that is, learners have incorporated (unconsciously) into their own bodies ways to socially-relate to teachers or superior persons. Teaching using constructivist methods must be seen as an acculturation process, not simply a shift in instructional methods.

Evaluation: The Hidden Curriculum

Evaluation is an important part of the process of validating knowledge. In fact it may effect the shaping of the study programme by setting not only the curriculum's final objectives but also by regulating the limits of valid discourse and its forms of expression or *academic voices* (Escandon, 2002). Bernstein (1977) asserts that formal educational knowledge is realised through three message systems: (a) the study programme or curriculum, which defines what is considered valid knowledge; (b) pedagogy, which defines what is considered valid transmission of knowledge; and (c) evaluation, which defines what counts as valid understanding of that knowledge by the learner. However, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) consider evaluation as the corner stone of the pedagogic message:

> It would be seen that the different types of academic test, which are always, at the same time, institutionalised models of communication, provide

the prototype for the pedagogic message and, more generally, for any message of a certain intellectual ambition (lectures, reports, political speeches, press conferences, etc.). (p. 143)

Evaluation objectives may run against certain methods, and they may do so more when the curriculum has not been made explicit. Courses that are taught in tandem (e.g., one foreign language native teaches *conversation* and one Japanese teacher teaches grammar) may end up being evaluated mono-instrumentally through a single written test. And even if oral aspects of language acquisition were measured, there may be difficulties in evaluating communication skills and other aspects that depend upon learners' creative processes, abilities and approaches to studying/learning, and, even more importantly, on the social settings of the class (e.g., unknown skills may emerge in a learner who receives help from a more knowledgeable peer).

Competing Socialisation Goals

Various constructivist approaches to analysing learning have emerged and been used in the last two decades. Most of them are based on Vygotsky's theoretical construct called "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). In his account of how co-operative learning is soundly based on ZDP, Doolittle (1997) summarises this key concept in the following way:

> Vygotsky believed that an individual's immediate potential for cognitive growth is limited on the lower end by that which he or she can accomplish independently, and on the upper end by that which he or she can accomplish with the help of a more knowledgeable other such as a peer, tutor or teacher.

This region of immediate potential for cognitive growth between the upper and lower of limits is the zone of proximal development. (p. 88)

Accordingly, social-situated theories and approaches to analysing learning abandon the subject of the individual learner and acknowledge the fact that learning is fundamentally embedded in social practice, no matter if it occurs in a formal educational setting or not.

One of the most influential and relevant of such approaches is Lave and Wenger's (2002) notion of "communities of practice" (CoPs). Under this approach learning is the outcome of "legitimate peripheral participation", that is, newcomers become socialised through community practice. They move from periphery to central, expert practice.

In the case of foreign language learning, expertise may run from mastery of colloquial levels of linguistic practice (e.g., conversational language) to mastery of expert levels of academic discourse (e.g., literature and linguistics' academic discourses).

Lave and Wenger stress the fact that "learning is not merely situated in practice--as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the live-in world" (p.59), therefore "legitimate peripheral participation is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or a teaching technique" (p. 62). Nevertheless, when CoPs and other social-situated approaches to learning are applied to formal educational settings, it is necessary to bear in mind that formal education is always concerned with outcomes and therefore legitimate peripheral participation or other socialisation processes are not synonymous with symmetrical access to discourse and cultural resources, even if these communities emerge spontaneously (i.e., are not part of a premeditated pedagogic apparatus). In fact, these theories and approaches seem unable to give an account of other socialisation goals that may participate/interfere in the process and which also help shape the final outcome.

Formal educational settings are not only places where knowledge and/or expert practice are acquired but also relational spaces where "cultural capital" is distributed according to social reproduction schemes that do not correlate with grounded or disinterested performance but with the imposition and legitimacy of arbitrariness (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Furthermore, educational systems like the Japanese tend to stress group socialisation goals even at higher education level, setting (sometimes tacitly) socialisation objectives that may (involuntarily) run against the aim of achieving expert practice from the part of learners. Large classes (of students with mixed abilities, motivations and performance levels), architectural dispositions, and tools that stress teacher authority and knowledge transmission (e.g., teacher podium or lectern, blackboards, fixed writing desks, teacher microphones, etc.) and therefore teacher-centredness not only respond to the goal of making Japanese education massive and accessible to everyone but also reflect a different set of socialisation goals. As Chie Okubo points out, this task is pursued not only at preschool and school level:

> The task of the preschool is to produce *ningen-rashii-kodomo* [humanlike children]. To be fully human is to be not just an individual but also a member of a group. From what I've seen of American schools I would have to say they do a wonderful job of making children creative and self-reliant and individualistic. But as important as those characteristics are, we believe it is also important that children learn how to live as a member of a group. That's the real trick.

To find the right balance between individualism and groupism, isn't it?. . . I would have to say we may go too far in the direction of stressing groupism in our preschools; it is a problem of our whole society because groupism is stressed not only in our preschools but also in our primary schools and junior high schools, and high schools, and universities, and in business and so forth (as cited in Tobin, Wu and Davidson, 1993, p. 68).

Socialisation in CoPs should be recognised as a dynamic and manifold process which is determined by learners' complex relational space. In this process more than one socialisation may take place. This can partly explain institutional systematic discouragement of learners (in most cases tacitly enforced) that present, at an early stage in their studies, enough potential to integrate expert circles or to access upper levels of expertise, not to mention the discouragement of a vast majority of students to access postgraduate studies. According to Ellington (2001), postgraduate school is seriously underdeveloped in Japan "with only slightly more than 7 percent of Japanese undergraduates going on to [post]graduate school as compared to 13 percent of American undergraduates."

Tacit discouragement or the distance institutionally imposed between learners and experts keeps operating unless learners have been selected by institutional authorities to access upper levels of practice mainly associated with the continuation of prestigious disciplinary studies (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), i.e., recruitment/selection for postgraduate studies. On the one hand, the university formal learning setting encourages a particular kind of socialisation so that students can master expert practice in a given field, but on the other hand it keeps students at distance from the circle of experts to ensure

the reproduction of its own autonomy and/or distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

In the field of foreign language teaching this contradiction may manifest in the following aspects: (a) learners are required to go through lower level parts of the curriculum even though their language performance is far superior to those inferior levels (e.g., students who have travelled abroad and have acquired the rudiments of the target language, or are in fact bilingual, are compelled to enrol in basic conversation courses), (b) practitioners try to *lock-step* teach, teaching everybody the same at the same pace, not taking into account learners' diverse approaches to learning, different abilities and performance level, (c) ignorance of learners' cultural singularities and motivations to learn a foreign language, (d) institutions and practitioners cannot make a clear decision about using placement tests for class formation in the belief that it may be detrimental to lower level students (see Shimizu, 2002), (e) lack of opportunities to access postgraduate studies and obscure methods of selection of a few chosen ones based on some criteria other than performance, and (f) lack of clear evaluation policies.

Conclusion

The effects that culture, evaluation and contradictory socialisation goals have over teaching models and instructional methods can be overwhelming. Constructivist models/approaches used in language teaching (such as the communicative, process and whole-language approaches, and the cooperative learning model) may end up being recycled within other models' framework which foster groupism (e.g., lock-step teaching, teacher-centredness), becoming simple instructional techniques, by way of the power exercised by

explicit or implicit curricula and other sociological aspects such as culture, cultural capital distribution and the very same reproduction of the educational system.

Practitioners (especially if they come from educational culture backgrounds firmly rooted in constructivism) should be aware that methods whose application and validity they take for granted might be in fact unknown to Japanese learners and to some Japanese practitioners. Finally, bare application of those methods does not automatically equate with successful or proper methodological performance since those methods operate within a complex relational space of competing socialisation goals and may be substantially altered by social context.

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