Practice to theory to practice: Sharing my story

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In the spirit of this year's conference theme, Sharing Our Stories, this paper introduces some of the milestones and turning points in the author's professional development as a language instructor. The overall aim is to stimulate discussion on a short list of both accepted and emerging theories of learning, especially as related to second language (L2) teaching and the practical implications. One underlying assumption is that existing learning and instructional theories have much to offer the practitioner in terms of both guiding principles and practical prescriptive advice.

　今年の会議のテーマが「ストーリーの共有」という中で、この論文は私の言語教師としての成長過程での重要なターニングポイントを紹介している。大まかな目的は学習に関するすでに幅広く知られている理論と新しい理論両方に関するデイスカション、特にL2学習とその実践での応用について、を刺激することです。既存の学習や教授に関する理論は教師に教育の方向性を与えると同時に実践でどうすべきかの助言を多く提言している。

In the spirit of this year's conference theme, Sharing Our Stories, this paper introduces some of the milestones and turning points in my own professional development as a language instructor. The overall aim is to stimulate discussion on a short list of both accepted and emerging theories of learning, especially as related to second language (L2) teaching and the practical implications. One underlying assumption is that existing learning and instructional theories have much to offer the practitioner in terms of both guiding principles and practical prescriptive advice.

Second/foreign language (L2) learning motivation

One question that nagged me from my early days tutoring English and Japanese in Hawaii during the mid to late 1980s was why some learners seemed to pick up the target language almost effortlessly while others

struggled or stumbled at every turn. In those days, I relied heavily on my own intuition and had almost no exposure to theories of learning or instruction. There are of course a number of individual differences that influence L2 learning, but the one that caught my attention early on was motivation. Later, as I got deeper into my graduate studies, I became aware of the work of Robert Gardner (1985), particularly the distinction between integrative and instrumental orientation. Although Gardner stressed the importance of an integrative orientation, intuitively there seemed to be contexts where an instrumental orientation would take precedence, e.g. learners interested in mastering a language mainly to boost their employment prospects or earning potential.

Another intriguing perspective was the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It seemed apparent to me that extrinsic motivation had limitations, especially with more mature learners, and that one of our biggest challenges and responsibilities as language teachers was to find or design material that is intrinsically motivating. I will get back to this later.

Many readers will be aware that increasing interest in motivation as related to L2 learning has resulted in a growing body of literature and an expanded list of individual differences believed to influence L2 learning. At the same time, important contributions have been made in the form of qualitative studies into L2 learner motivation and attitudes (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001). Together with findings from quantitative instruments (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner, 1985; Clément, R, Dörnyei, Z. & Noels, K., 1994) and proficiency tests, these types of studies have begun to bear fruit in the form of replicable findings with clear implications for the L2 classroom.

One aspect of L2 learning motivation that I have perceived as underrepresented is *demotivation*. The few available findings were reviewed by Dörnyei (2001), and revealed that by far the greatest source of demotivation is teachers, including personality (e.g. lack of commitment to the students or teaching, excessive criticism, and belligerent or condescending attitude), and teaching style (e.g. repetitive, monotonous, insufficient or unclear instructions or explanations, lack of enthusiasm, and inferior use of materials or equipment). Other sources of demotivation were inadequate school facilities, reduced self-confidence, negative attitude towards L2, the compulsory nature of L2, interference of another FL being studied, negative attitude towards L2 community, attitudes of group members, and coursebook. This list hints at the powerful influence of learner attitudes. On this topic, Horwitz (1988) offers the following:

> One can envision many instances where preconceived notions about language learning would likely influence a learner's effectiveness in the classroom. A student who believes, for example, that learning a second language primarily involves learning new vocabulary will expend most of his/her energy on vocabulary acquisition, while adults who believe in the superiority of younger learners probably begin language learning with fairly negative expectations of their own ultimate success. An unsuccessful learning experience could easily lead a student to the conclusion that special abilities are required to learn a foreign language and that s/he does not possess these necessary abilities (283).

Readers are also directed to investigations of attitudes and motivation among Japanese learners of English (Burden, 2002; Brown, Robson & Rosenkjar, 2001; Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001).

What becomes clear from the above literature is that motivation is a multidimensional construct but also that there are practical implications, namely that classroom practitioners need to design both intrinsically and extrinsically motivating elements into their lesson plans and activities. At the same time, we need to uncover potentially harmful attitudes and beliefs regarding language learning, both among our learners but also within ourselves. After all, our attitudes and beliefs will intimately influence the way we manage our classes and the decisions we make.

Classroom community

My interest in affective variables and L2 learning motivation also steered me toward the topic of L2 learning anxiety (Ehrman, 1996; Ely, 1986; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Although I recognized that anxiety can also work in positive ways, it seemed to me that another of our responsibilities was to help strengthen a sense of community among our learners as a way of encouraging participants to take risks with the target language and push the limits of their proficiencies.

Later, my interest in classroom community led me to propose a framework (fig. 1) for conceptualizing the various influences on classroom community (Jones, 2003).
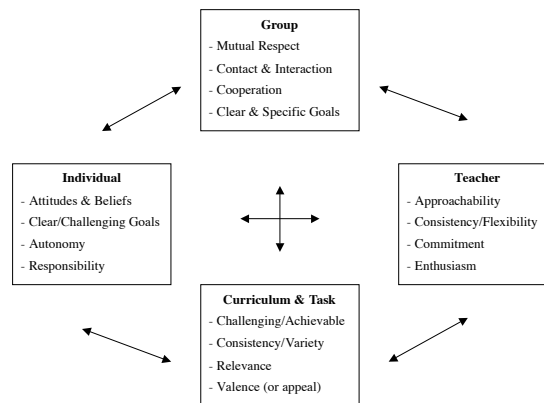

Figure 1. Framework for building classroom community

Readers will recognize that each of the components of the above framework is indeed related to the decisions we make as language teachers day in and day out. Looking back, however, there are several adjustments I would like to make to the above framework, mainly adding Learning Styles under the heading of Individual, and including Theoretical Perspectives under Curriculum & Task. I will briefly touch on these two adjustments before getting to the other theories that strike me as particularly important.

First, many of the following theories of learning are concerned with the learner and the act of learning, i.e. how we learn new behaviors, how we process new information and how we construct new knowledge. This choice of words was deliberate in that the author believes EFL learning does

indeed span the various perspectives on how learning occurs: behaviorist, cognitivist and constructivist. At the same time, increasing attention in EFL circles has been focused on individual learner differences. This trend is at least two decades old and is at least partially the result of increased awareness of the role of affective variables such as attitude and motivation discussed above.

Educators have come to understand that all learners do not learn new information or skills in the same way. Felder (1996) reviews the major learning style models but also emphasizes that "functioning effectively in any professional capacity …. requires working well in all learning style modes." The implications here are that a better understanding of each learner's learning styles will help teachers better design effective instruction but also that learners need to be pushed to develop the styles they have not yet mastered. Readers are directed to Reid (1995) for a more thorough look at learning styles as related specifically to ESL and EFL.

Next, the focus and direction of a course and individual tasks or activities will be intimately influenced by teacher beliefs and attitudes. What do we believe is the nature of language learning? Which theoretical perspective best accounts for how language is learned: behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism? There is no easy answer to these questions, but each perspective seems to have its place. Certain aspects of the target language might best be learned as behaviors, e.g. pronunciation and non-verbal expressions. Other areas can be better explained as cognitive processes, e.g. vocabulary acquisition and syntax. Finally, language learning is not limited to learning new behaviors or being able to process information but also involves using learned behaviors and knowledge in independent and unique ways explained best by constructivist principles.

So, where does all this lead? For me, there seems to be several directions in which we can explore.

Relevant theories

Although I am still very much interested in classroom community, especially as related to affective variables such as motivation, attitudes, beliefs, and anxiety, the field of instructional design has increasingly taken center stage in my research pursuits. One key area in this field is educational psychology and theories of learning and instruction. The following discussion is in no way comprehensive but offers examples of how we can apply useful elements of various theories to the daily practice of language teaching. Readers interested in exploring these theories in more detail are directed to Online Resources (below), especially the Explorations in Learning & Instruction: The Theory Into Practice Database maintained at <tip.psychology.org>.

Multiple intelligences

The seven primary forms introduced by Howard Gardner (1983) should not be confused with learning styles but do add to our understanding of individual differences and why certain individuals will excel in specific tasks. Teachers can (1) help learners discover their own abilities and shortcomings in each of the areas, (2) encourage development of each intelligence, and (3) base assessment on multiple forms of intelligence. In terms of classroom

management, we can design instruction and select activities, tasks, projects, and so forth. that appeal to as many of the intelligences as possible and thus increase the chances for success.

Social development theory

Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978) stressed the important role of social interaction in cognitive development. At the same time, he describes how learners can exceed the limitations of individual learning through social interaction by being pushed into their zone of proximal development (ZPD). The implications here are that learners benefit from interactions with their classmates and teacher and that the most effective and efficient learning occurs within each learner's ZPD. Creating opportunities for as much social interaction should thus be one of our objectives as L2 teachers.

Social learning theory

Albert Bandura (1977) also understood the value of social interaction but emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors and attitudes of others. This theory suggests that observing has value in and of itself and that students do not necessarily benefit from being pushed to perform too soon. Looking back at my own past teaching experiences, I could well be accused of this and need to rethink my approach in this regard.

Situated learning

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1990) argue that learning is largely dependent on the activity, context and culture. They see learners as participating as part of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), first on the periphery but in most cases gradually moving to the center. The pedagogical implications are that learning occurs most naturally in context and that again full participation or performance is not necessary and may even be detrimental in the early stages. The reader will notice how situated learning and the previous two theories complement each other.

Elaboration theory

Another theory that stresses the importance of meaningful context is elaboration theory as proposed by Charles Reigeluth (1992). The seven major strategy components are (1) an elaborative sequence, (2) learning prerequisite sequences, (3) summary, (4) synthesis, (5) analogies, (6) cognitive strategies, and (7) learner control. Implications for the EFL classroom include that we should be designing our curriculum more carefully to insure that simpler versions of the desired task are introduced first and added to later. Also, we can be looking for ways to relinquish some of the control to our learners (Brady, Hadley & Jones, 2005).

Minimilism

The key points stressed by John M. Carroll (1990) are allowing learners to start immediately on meaningful tasks, minimizing the amount of passive forms of training, including error recognition and recovery activities, and making all activities self-contained. Although his work has been mostly focused on human-computer interface and

teaching computer applications, there are implications for the L2 classroom, namely designing activities and materials that don't get in the way of learning. My new approach is to get learners started on an activity within the first five minutes of entering the classroom.

Conditions of learning

Robert Gagne (1985) distinguishes between different types or levels of learning and recognizes that different types of instruction are thus required. The five categories of learning he identified are (1) verbal learning, (2) intellectual skills, (3) cognitive strategies, (4) motor skills, and (5) attitudes. Each of these categories can be targeted by L2 teachers, but the immediate applicability of verbal learning and attitudes fit well with our aim of increased efficacy and productivity. At the same time, Gagne's nine instructional events are useful for designing activities or tasks (Gagne, Briggs & Wager, 1992), and have great potential for the L2 classroom.

Conclusion

Intuitively, I feel many EFL instructors in Japan and around the world approach their job more as an art than as a science. This has definitely been true of me. This is not a bad tendency in and of itself and a wholly scientific approach would of course be misguided. However, I feel there is room for improvement in our field and basing classroom decisions more on sound theory offers potentially high rewards in terms of increased productivity and customer (i.e. learner) satisfaction. Again, the above review is in no way comprehensive and is intended only as a short list of examples of how classroom practitioners can incorporate accepted theories into their classroom repertoire. Although there is still much room for my own professional development, this journey from practice to theory and back to practice has been both enjoyable and enlightening. I promise to keep forging ahead.

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Online resources

Communities of Practice - <www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm>

Explorations in Learning & Instruction: The Theory Into Practice Database **-** <tip.psychology.org>

Howard Gardner & Multiple Intelligences - <www.howardgardner.com>

Learning Styles Network **-** <www.learningstyles.net>

Nine Events of Instruction, The - <ide.ed.psu.edu/idde/9events.htm>

Pedagogy: Learning Styles - <www.cyg.net/~jblackmo/diglib/styl-a.html>

Personality Theories – A. Bandura - <www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/bandura.html>

Robert Gagne - <www.ittheory.com/gagne1.htm>

Vygotsky Resources - <www.kolar.org/vygotsky>