Original Article

A Case for Practical English Education at the University Level

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As Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology continues its drive towards the goal of improving Japanese citizens' communicative competence in foreign languages, at a time when there is an ever greater squeeze on contact time for English lessons, there is an increasing need for language teaching methodologies which can achieve more with less. To that end, this paper advocates for practical instruction in English courses. With reference to the literature, the case is made that practical instruction in the form of various active learning pedagogies can work towards not only primary course objectives such as gains in language and content knowledge and skills, but also towards less tangible but equally desirable goals such as enhanced social and cognitive skills, and various affective factors.

Keywords: Active learning pedagogies, Project-based language learning, Content and language integrated learning, Content skills, Cognitive skills

Introduction

While it is true that many Japanese people have little or no interest or need to use a foreign language communicatively, there are many others who are actively seeking to become more communicatively proficient in one or more foreign languages for professional, academic or social purposes. The release by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of its Strategic Plan (MEXT, 2002), Action Plan (MEXT, 2003) and subsequent Courses of Study for English at elementary, junior and senior high schools (MEXT, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) evidence the realisation that it is no longer enough to know about a

language. These policy documents put a greater emphasis on the need for Japanese people to be able to use foreign languages communicatively in practical, real-world settings. Furthermore, this capacity should be developed across not only all four language macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), but also related sub-skills such as using questions or applying appropriate textual organisation and genre conventions. These policy documents did however still recognise the importance of language knowledge, predominantly grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation, which have traditionally been the primary foci of foreign language study. This intended shift in focus from predominantly language knowledge to an emphasis on practical language communicative competence is in response to the perceived need to prepare Japan to meet the challenges of internationalisation and globalisation.

To meet this demand for higher communicative proficiency within practical settings, foreign language teachers have responded by attempting

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to implement pedagogies such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) and other forms of Active Learning (AL). These all share many of the principles of language teaching and learning central to the Communicative Approach. Indeed, van Lier (2006, p. xiii) sees all forms of AL as "flow[ing] from the same ideological and pedagogical well", one in which the learner's active cognitive, social and linguistic participation are key to enhancing their practical communicative language proficiency. A discussion of the extent to which this pedagogic shift has been successful or not, and the reasons why, is beyond the scope of this paper, but it forms part of the line of argumentation to acknowledge that this shift has been implemented with varying degrees of success at different levels of Japan's education system.

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for foregrounding education that places a much greater value on developing practical communicative competence without completely overlooking the need for language knowledge. It does not specify any particular domain or profession because the case presented here can be applied to almost all, if not all domains.

A Multitude of Options

Learning by doing has been a central tenet of apprenticeships worldwide for centuries. More recently, such practical instruction within mainstream education has been termed 'Active Learning', but this covers a very wide range of pedagogic options from which a teacher interested in making language and/or content instruction more practical can choose. The not exhaustive list below shows the diversity of AL options, each with an example of literature demonstrating its use:

- problem-posing: Freire (1970);
- problem-based learning: Savoie & Hughes (1994), Barell (2007);
- investigative research: Kenny (1993);
- investigative learning: Fried-Booth (2002);

- exploratory learning: Legutke (1984, 1985);
- negotiated language learning: Legutke & Thomas (1991), Eyring (2001);
- cooperative learning: Fushino (2010);
- collaborative learning: Davey (2001);
- action-based learning: Waddill (2006);
- experiential learning: Carter & Thomas (1986);
- holistic learning: Blanton (1992);
- project approach: Diffily (1996);
- project-work: Hardy-Gould (2003);
- project-oriented approach: Carter & Thomas (1986);
- project-based learning: Wood & Head (2004);
- project-based language learning: Kemaloglu (2010), Simpson (2011), Moritoshi (2017).

This diversity demonstrates the flexibility inherent in AL teaching such that, with due consideration, one form or another can be tailored to meet the needs of almost any teaching context while also accounting for institutional or other limitations. This flexibility is one of the strengths of AL pedagogies which make it relatively simple to introduce practical education into the classroom.

Language Knowledge

To grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation which are traditionally the foci of foreign language courses, should be added punctuation. Despite the fact that this component of language knowledge is important in making a writer's intended meaning clearer (Truss, 2003), it might be considered to be largely neglected, even at the degree level.

Children naturally acquire their first language (L1) through exposure and opportunities to generate, apply and continually refine their understanding of its forms and functions as they grow. Formal language lessons are unnecessary to grasp the basics by the time children enter school. Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1985), Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1998) and Monitor Theory (2003) go some way to explaining the cognitive linguistic processes involved. This suffices for acquiring the L1, but since most families in Japan do not use more than

one language at home, pre-school age children are unlikely to learn a foreign language through these processes unless their family provides sufficient exposure via, for example, television, videos, online sources or story-telling.

Therefore, some instruction in elements of English language knowledge are needed at school and this continues into university, albeit it hopefully at a higher level. Well-implemented CLT, TBLL, CLIL, PBLL and other AL pedagogies have been shown to result in significant gains in language knowledge above and beyond that found with more traditional methods such as grammar translation and Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) commonly found in language classrooms in Japan.

The principle reason given for these enhanced gains is that the learners are cognitively involved in trying to generate, test and refine their understanding of the foreign language's forms and functions. In other words, the communicative classroom seeks to mimic the environment in which children naturally acquire their L1. The learning effect is accelerated by virtue of the fact that the target language (TL) is being used to *do* something, whether it be sharing information, solving a problem, making a decision, answering a question or finding new information, all of which are the bases for various forms of AL. It is the practical element that provides the impetus or drive to use the TL and by using it, to gradually acquire it.

Content and Language Integrated Learning

As with any other skills such as piano playing or writing Chinese characters, practice is key to development. This in itself makes the case for making TL instruction practical, but not all practice is created equal. Where a practice task is perceived by students to be of personal, academic or professional interest or relevance, they are likely to engage with it more actively. So, it seems logical to give students tasks that relate directly to their major subject area, or even to integrate those tasks with those from other related courses. This is the principle underlying CLIL, in which the tasks are designed

to simultaneously develop students' understanding of, and proficiency in the TL and field-specific content knowledge and/or skills. For example, students of Business Management could be tasked with developing a marketing plan for a product of their choice, to be presented in English upon completion. This draws together a range of TL knowledge, language macro- and micro-skills, content knowledge of marketing, marketing plan design and presentation skills. Such projects, often completed in small groups and by necessity over an extended period of time, have been shown to develop language macro- and micro-skills (Peterson, 2008; Kemaloglu, 2010) and associated self-efficacy (Moritoshi, 2017).

Mohan (1986) sets out a framework by which such CLIL projects can be designed and implemented. He advocates for this approach to language instruction because, as he explains:

> Language is normally a medium of learning about the world. A child communicating with a mother is learning about the world, and learns language in the process of learning about the world. Both in research and in classroom practice it makes little sense to disconnect language learning from learning about the world. (p. 3)

In other words, since language is how we learn about our surroundings as a child, it makes sense to utilise that innate ability to acquire new content-related knowledge and to develop new content-related skills through language, in this case the TL.

The Desirable but Intangible Benefits of Practical Education

In addition to working towards language and content knowledge and skills development, the AL options listed above can work towards other desirable but less tangible goals: social and cognitive skills development and effect on affect.

Social and Cognitive skills

By working together in small project groups over several lessons, weeks or even months,

students have the opportunity to develop social skills such as cooperation, collaboration and compromise with others. This is particularly the case in the early stages of a project which require students to plan, design or assign group member roles or tasks. These same requirements also make cognitive demands on the students to solve problems, make decisions in real-time and to think critically and logically.

Effect on Affect

Another desirable intangible is the positive effect that practical instruction can have on motivation, confidence, self-efficacy, interest, engagement and enjoyment. Moritoshi (2017) showed that when project work was conducted with Japanese junior college students in their English courses, it yielded not only perceived gains in the main learning objectives, (knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation, and development of English speaking, listening, reading and writing skills), but also perceived improvements in learner autonomy, self-confidence, and interest. A commonly occurring theme extracted from the qualitative data was that these affective outcomes resulted from students perceiving PBLL projects to be highly "practical" and an effective and efficient use of class time.

Conclusion

This paper has made a case for language teachers to put a higher priority on making foreign language instruction more practical rather than adhering to the more traditional foci on TL knowledge. 'Practical' is taken to mean not merely communicative but applied, goal-oriented TL use, achieved through the use of tasks which students perceive as engaging, useful and relevant to their studies, future career path and/or personal interests.

With a very wide range of communicative and AL pedagogies to choose from, it should be possible to find one that can work towards the students' learning needs while also accounting for prevailing limitations, for the purpose of making larger gains in communicative competence in the short time available to students and teachers in their university foreign language courses.

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