



Applying Learner Perspectives in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for foreign language teaching intended to better suit the background knowledge, perspectives, and preferences of language learners. Given current theory and research that emphasize the importance of the contributions that learners can make in the language classroom, this paper posits that the status quo of textbook development is insufficient to make language learning more learner-centered. Furthermore, it is only a symptom of broader top-down narratives in language education that place the educator and higher stakeholders as the sole arbiters of how target foreign languages are presented to learners. If the main objective of language education is to create an environment conducive to fluency in foreign languages, all other content considerations must be deemed secondary to an approach that favors curriculum and materials development informed by the perspectives of language learners. After detailing the relevant literature, this paper will provide a set of pedagogical guidelines for language educators, which are built around materials development that take the perspectives and background knowledge of learners into consideration. Finally, practical and theoretical implications for such a framework will be discussed.

Key Words: language education, materials development

Introduction

Dubin and Olshtain (1986), in a treatise on language course design, posited that thematic content selection plays a major role in curriculum and materials development, believing that content cannot be separated from language in materials development. They wrote, "Along with language content, or structures, grammatical forms, etc., familiar to all, language courses have included thematic and situational content as well" (p. 45). The decision-making processes regarding content selection can, in turn, have significant effects on learners with respect to motivation, comprehension, and identity. Despite this, the decision-making process in determining what content is used to complement the language knowledge being taught in the language classroom remains a largely top-down endeavor, in which educators know not only what grammar and vocabulary should be taught, but also what content should be presented. This approach seems outdated and arguably conflicts with contemporary goals in language education aimed at emphasizing learner-centeredness and student empowerment.

In contrast, a deeper consideration of the goals, preferences, and dispositions of language learners can play a profound influence on materials and syllabus development. Contemporary education would, therefore, do well to shift from a top-down view of thematic content selection to an approach that includes the knowledge that learners bring to the language classroom. This paper lays out the theoretical rationale for such an approach, proposes a process for curriculum and materials development that emphasizes a greater focus on learner perspectives, and invites discussion on the pedagogical and philosophical implications language educators must consider in adopting such a process.

Background

Bachman and Palmer (1996) provide an adequate conceptual foundation for the theory described in this paper with respect to the treatment of knowledge in the language classroom. In their treatise on language assessment, they conceptualized language use as requiring *topic knowledge*, which involves *what* a language user should say in order to successfully complete any communication, and *language knowledge*, which involves *how* a learner should say it. Language knowledge includes basic elements of language such as grammar and vocabulary, and higher elements such as organization and mechanics. Another element of language use is *affect*, which is made up of a number of cognitive, emotional, and physiological factors that may influence, negatively in most cases, how a language user produces language.

To highlight this conceptualization, many textbooks that teach English as a foreign language (EFL) include a scope and sequence that details what is learned in each unit or lesson, namely the language that is learned and the thematic context within which that language is taught. The textbook *Communication Spotlight: Starter* (Graham-Marr, et al., 2013), for example, is divided into units according to thematic or topic areas, and focusing on the relevant vocabulary and grammar for each theme or topic. One unit teaches prepositions of places within the context of places within a city (i.e. grammar that produces output such as "The bank is between the post office and the restaurant").

Defining discrete elements of language use is necessary because neither topic knowledge nor language knowledge is sufficient by themselves. Schema theory in language education holds that a language user typically interacts with target language by employing their background knowledge (Brown, 2001). This background knowledge is often influenced by their local context,

which is likely to differ from the culture or cultures of the target language (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). It is in the disparity of topic knowledge between the language learner, the language educator, and the materials employed in the classroom where a great deal of comprehension and production deficits in the target language is found.

Conceptualizations of the language learner

Traditional models of education necessitate, or at least favor, a top-down approach to language teaching and learning in which educators not only teach language knowledge, but choose the topic knowledge they feel is most appropriate in facilitating mastery of language knowledge. This approach is based on assumptions that learners are otherwise unaware of perspectives of the world different from their own if not for formal education. Indeed, this assumption that prescribes "raising awareness" among learners is prevalent in narratives regarding English as an international language (EIL) (Matsuda, 2003), World Englishes (WE) (Miyagi, Sato, & Crump, 2009), and global education (Cates, 1990). A top-down approach can also be considered "necessary" for practical purposes. Foreign language textbooks provide educators with a set of materials for the language classroom that they would otherwise need to spend time and effort creating.

It is typically the responsibility, then, of language educators to adjust the activities found in such textbooks to the particular circumstances of their classrooms. Even so, the status quo model of textbook development, followed by the selection and adaptations of textbooks by educators is still very much a top-down endeavor. Absent other measures, educators still run the risk of undervaluing the knowledge and goals that language learners bring to the classroom. Formal education is a minor influence in learners' lives compared to outside influences (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), and preliminary research on Japanese EFL learners (Sybing, 2013) appears to show that learners enter the language classroom having goals for language acquisition that are more personal than global. These goals may conflict with the content goals prescribed by educators as they are informed by various sources of target language outside of the classroom (Sybing, 2014). Further research also indicates that language learners do not necessarily conform to their teachers' goals even when their awareness is raised. For example, a survey study conducted by Omi and Fukada (2010) indicated that learners, despite having a greater appreciation for non-standard English varieties when they are made aware of them, tend to maintain their preferences for more standard varieties of English.

Learners are not merely unresponsive to content goals that conflict with their preconceived worldviews or fall outside of their chosen interests. The current literature appears to show that students respond positively when presented with content knowledge that appeals to their preferences. Cheung (2001), for example, posited that the inclusion of popular culture in EFL education in Hong Kong was potentially effective in motivating students in their English study. In establishing a contrast between content teachers believe is relevant to learners and content that learners find appealing, he noted that "[t]o many youths, what Beavis & Butthead (the popular TV cartoon characters) have to say is more important than lessons taught by teachers using extracts from literature" (p. 59).

Moreover, research seems to indicate a strong correlation, if not causation, between learner motivation and learner achievement (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Certainly, such research seems to support established notions in language education that raising learner motivation is key to fostering language acquisition. Content selection is, of course, not the only

factor in motivation and learner interest, which can be affected by a variety of other intrinsic and extrinsic influences. However, if the ultimate goal of language education is to foster acquisition in a target language with minimal learner anxiety and maximum motivation, it has to follow that learners can make significant gains in target language fluency with content selection that best matches their content knowledge.

It should be noted that, in specialized domains such as language education for academic or professional purposes, an approach where educators and higher stakeholders such as administrators and policymakers are the sole arbiters in choosing topic knowledge may be appropriate. Education in such contexts emphasizes awareness of and training for specific tasks, and do not emphasize language learning for its own sake. In the abstract, there are limited circumstances in which language learning that emphasizes a specific content goal has an appropriate role in formal education. In the area of general foreign language education, however, where learners have their own disparate goals and dispositions, an approach to topic selection that isn't mindful of the pre-existing knowledge of learners creates unnecessary obstacles of learner affect and anxiety. This paper, therefore, recommends an approach to content selection informed by the preferences and perspectives of learners in general foreign language education. Consequently, it is necessary to discuss a framework in which teachers become aware of such learner perspectives and incorporate that knowledge into curriculum and materials development.

Proposed pedagogy

The methodology reference produced by Cambridge University Press (n.d.) defines two types of language learning tasks. Tasks that emphasize *accuracy* focus on a specific set of grammar or vocabulary that students are asked to learn, while tasks that emphasize *fluency* are open exercises that encourage learners to experiment with the target language learned inside and outside the classroom. Both types of learning tasks work in tandem when fluency tasks provide opportunities for learners to build fluency in the language that is taught in accuracy tasks.

The teaching of language knowledge in the context of the topic knowledge presented by learners is the central aim of the proposed approach. Goals regarding what language knowledge should be learned in a language course should be set by educators and higher stakeholders responsible for fostering language acquisition. Accuracy-building activities foster language acquisition toward these goals, but require context best provided by content with which students are familiar. Fluency-building activities, in turn, provide teachers with that content through the spoken or written output of their students.

As with the development of textbooks, the creation of a scope and sequence of any language course should be divided into units, each of which aims toward a certain goal of language acquisition (e.g. "Students will be able to use the past participle form of English verbs" or "students will be able to write descriptive paragraphs") taught in the context of a specific theme (e.g. vacations, special occasions). What this pedagogy proposes is that thematic content should, in the abstract, only be determined after reflection of learner output from fluency-based activities.

Accuracy-based activities.

Cambridge University Press (n.d.) defines accuracy tasks as those "in which there is only one correct answer." Cloze exercises, for example, are sets of example sentences with words or phrases removed, requiring students to choose the best word or phrase from a set of choices, if

choices are provided at all. Cloze exercises tend to assess either a learner's vocabulary or grammar ability.

Major elements of the presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach to language education provide sufficient example of classroom activities developed for accuracy (Sato, 2010). The PPP method calls for the teacher to provide explicit teaching of the target language, followed by practice in the target language before any open-ended communicative tasks. The aim of the activities that precede open-ended communication is to allow students to internalize the language knowledge and ensure accuracy in output. Examples of such activities in Sato's paper include "pattern practice, drills, and answering questions using a specified form" (p. 195).

An accuracy-based activity should:

1. direct learners toward a specific aspect of the target language,
2. elicit a specific output with respect to the target language, and
3. provide opportunities for practice of the target language.

In such tasks, intelligibility alone is insufficient for success. For example, students may provide utterances such as "I like go shopping" or "I like to shopping" and still be understood. However, such output would demonstrate a deficit in language knowledge relating to the conjugation of English verbs. Accuracy tasks, therefore, aim to reinforce the necessary language knowledge to produce accurate output.

Fluency-based activities.

In real-life situations, of course, language knowledge alone is insufficient if it is not used in a natural manner. Accuracy-based tasks should, therefore, be reinforced by fluency-based tasks, which are more open-ended and encourage free expression among language learners. Tasks that build fluency should be developed around a series of principles. A fluency-based activity should:

1. allow students to experiment with language, whether learned in or outside of class,
2. minimize, if not altogether remove, any potential for learner anxiety, and
3. reward and motivate students for effort and task compliance, instead of final output.

Examples of fluency-based activities include the following:

Open conversation

In this activity, students are paired together and speak only in the target language for a set period of time.

Interview

In groups, students deliver short impromptu speeches based on a question initiated by the class, and then answer questions from their group based on their speeches.

Speed writing

Students write freely in the target language for a set period of time, and assessed for the number of words they write in that time, regardless of content or accuracy.

Note that fluency-based activities intended to be used in this approach differ slightly from fluency-based activities intended for task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is largely, if not exclusively, transactional and seeks a particular result from learners. Open-ended activities are less guided and provide teachers with a more general scope of the extent of learners' background knowledge.

Educators have long debated the appropriateness of one type of task over the other (Sato, 2010; Shintani, 2011). It is not the aim here to explore the shortcomings of either approach, but rather to suggest that both approaches taken together serve complementary roles in the language classroom. This paper only emphasizes that the aim of fluency tasks in the proposed pedagogy is to also provide teachers with opportunities to learn what students already know and, in turn, create a backdrop that is familiar to students so that the goals set for accuracy-based activities are more easily met.

Development of a scope and sequence

Taken together, the two types of activities defined above are used to (1) provide insight about the interests of students, and (2) allow teachers to present the target language through the topic areas relevant to those interests. Open-ended, fluency-based activities provide students the opportunity to express their own ideas and perspectives without concern for language accuracy. Educators can, in turn, take those ideas into consideration when developing materials, keeping in mind the language goals already determined prior to any language course.

In an oral communication class, a teacher may, for example, monitor her students during an open conversation activity without making corrections for accuracy. Among those open conversations conducted in class, she may learn about what music or movies interest her students. Consequently, the materials for her accuracy-based activities (with the goal of providing students the language necessary to, for instance, make invitations to a concert or movie showing) would then be adjusted to include vocabulary and context relevant to the music or movies in which students express interest. Having facilitated the acquisition of new language knowledge in students, the teacher returns to practice fluency-based activities, providing students opportunities to practice language, newly acquired and otherwise, as well as making other interests known to the teacher so further materials development for other language goals to be realized in later units.

Pedagogical considerations

The time required for materials development may be the greatest consideration for adopting this approach. Language education, if not all of education, is largely dependent on the selection of textbooks appropriate for each course and set of learners. Such textbooks come with a pre-defined array of topic and language knowledge that may be compatible for the classes for which they are chosen, but, given that textbook writers are not familiar with the specific circumstances of each classroom, educators have to question if they are the best fit for their learners. The alternatives are to choose and copy from a variety of textbooks (which raise copyright concerns), and to develop materials independently. The latter alternative, which this paper proposes, is more time-intensive, and requires time over the life of a language course.

In the abstract, the proposed conceptualization described in this paper also affects the decision-making process that educators apply to materials and syllabus development. Educators who adopt the defined approach still make the final decision regarding what language knowledge and topic knowledge is taught, but are limited in the choices of topic knowledge they can use to

facilitate acquisition of language knowledge, based on what knowledge language learners bring to the classroom.

Educators also need not take a binary approach to the question regarding from where topic knowledge is derived for classroom use. The current state of language education, or at least EFL education, is such that textbooks will continue to be a mainstay in language classrooms for any number of reasons, many of them good. Therefore, the pedagogy proposed in this paper would constitute a major shift away from a status quo that educators find practical. In such situations, this paper encourages that educators consider the possibility that, in general language education, the content that educators want to teach may conflict with the perspectives and preferences of the learners they teach, and consequently interfere with the greater goals concerning language acquisition.

The goal behind the proposed approach is to ensure a classroom environment conducive to building fluency, rather than reinforce or reaffirm any worldview held by the student or the teacher. Brown (1994) asserts that a certain amount of anxiety can facilitate language learning. Because that anxiety can come from interaction with either unfamiliar language knowledge or topic knowledge, educators would do well to, in learning about the interests and preferences of their students, find a balance that allows learners to explore new knowledge without becoming overburdened or uncomfortable to the extent that it would interfere with language learning. It is ultimately the responsibility of language teachers to determine what materials will foster the greatest gains in language proficiency with the least amount of resistance.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the topic knowledge presented through materials be made compatible with the background knowledge of learners to ensure acquisition of the necessary language knowledge with minimal affect and maximum motivation. Rather than "raise awareness" of learners under an assumption that such learners are ignorant of the world around them, the narrative outlined in this paper recommends that teachers take what learners know and use it for their benefit.

In taking the position that language education should take into greater account the knowledge that language learners bring to the classroom, this paper proposes major changes in the way language educators foster language acquisition. Rather than rely heavily on top-down approaches to how content is chosen, educators should instead take advantage of what learners know in order to present new language knowledge and foster language acquisition in a manner that suits the preferences of their learners. Further discussion of the divide between the cultural and social perspectives of teacher and student is welcome; this paper invites and challenges educators to explore this tension in greater detail and research.

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