

Short Articles 小論

Reflections on Learning and the Japanese Classroom

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Abstract

The social nature of language is clear. However, for teachers concerned with the day-to-day running of a classroom, this can sometimes be an aspect that slips into the background; not in the sense of a failure to think about the pragmatic aspects of the language we are teaching, but rather in respect to how our students are using an unfamiliar language to navigate through the society of the classroom. This short research article looks at the reflective journal of an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) attempting to understand better what is being asked of students as they attempt to manage themselves in a small but important social setting (the English classroom) using the tools of a language with which they are not yet completely familiar. In this research article I identify the main themes of the journal and then go on to examine these themes as they apply to a specific context.

要旨

言語の社会性は明確であるが、授業運営に携わっている教師にとって言語の社会性は、時に忘れがちになりやすい側面でもある。それは我々が言語を教える際、語用論の側面を無視するということではなく、我々の生徒がいかに彼らにとって親しみのない言語を教室という社会的環境で使用しているかということである。この論文では外国語補助教員（ALT）による振り返り日記を通して、生徒が小さいながらも重要な社会的環境、つまり英語のクラスで、彼らが未だ完全に慣れ親しんでいない言語を使用しながらいかに教室内でコミュニケーションを図っているかを見る。この論文では日記に記された主要なテーマを明らかにし、そのテーマの背景となっている文脈について分析する。

Keywords: journal writing, teacher reflection, sociolinguistics, learner identity

ジャーナルライティング, 教師の省察, 社会言語学, 学習者のアイデンティティ

Sociolinguistics is the study of why people speak differently in different social contexts as well as the social functions of language and how social meaning is conveyed (Holmes, 2008). In order to understand my role as a teacher better, I wrote reflective journal entries over the course of one academic year teaching at a junior high school in Japan. My aim was to examine the dynamics of classroom-as-society and its interaction with language. The validity of such an approach seemed to me to lie in the nature of language learning which requires the learner to expose themselves in a way that is much more personal and potentially threatening than other fields of study. Language learning *is* social by its very nature, as is teaching; therefore, a sociolinguistic approach appeared justified. My purpose in this

short article is to examine those reflections, identify the major themes that occur throughout, and consider how they might apply to the classroom.

The diary

Four personal diary entries were written at regular intervals throughout the course of the year. No strict structure was imposed prior to writing, the intention being simply to note, as they arose, the sociolinguistic aspects that presented themselves for notice. These reflective journal entries (RJE) sought to examine what was being asked of the students, specifically as members of a social context and not simply as isolated individual language learners. Two major themes emerged from the diary:

- identity
- the role of the teacher.

Each of these themes will be looked at in more detail below.

Identity

Identity concerns how a person conceives of him or herself in the world and how they seek to convey that message to others. Chryssochoou (2003) states that identity “is a particular form of social representation that mediates the relationship between the individual and the social world...Its functions are to inscribe the person in the social environment, to communicate peoples’ positions and to establish relationships with others” (p. 225).

One aspect of identity that garnered a lot of attention in the RJE was the use of the learners’ first language in the classroom. I reflected that if language helps to convey identity, then by barring the use of the L1 in the classroom teachers are effectively negating the identities of the vast majority of their students. The entries expressed a belief that the suppression of the learners’ identity is too high a price to pay for any of the perceived advantages of an English-only classroom.

In addition to concern over learner identity, the RJE made regular mention of the identity of the teacher. I expressed concerns about the extent to which the teacher is justified in imposing their identity upon the classroom material and the learner. Summarized, the crux of my reflections on teacher identity revolved around the question of balancing the essential need of the student to retain their identity while they struggled to learn a second language, and the need for the teacher to remain mindful of the potential for their own identities to become the dominating factor in the classroom by virtue of their command of the subject matter and their position of power.

The role of the teacher

Throughout the journal entries there is quite naturally a preoccupation with the role of the English teacher: What is the traditional view of the role of the teacher? Is this view compatible with effective language learning? How do I conceive of the role I must play in my students’ learning? Harmer (1995) writes of a movement in language teaching towards shifting authority from the teacher to the student and that this “has ...been seen as a way of making students the investigators or discoverers of facts about language rather than just recipients of information” (p. 337). This accurately summarizes my view of the role of the teacher.

The RJE's contain several mentions of the role of the teacher as a bi-directional conduit through which language may pass as learners "discover" it, rather than as a source of knowledge dispensed to recipients. The journal entries express particular concern with teachers becoming arbiters of language, judging what is acceptable or even "good", and what is inferior or unnecessary.

Common theme: Power

While the above constitute the two dominating topics as they present themselves throughout the journal, one major unifying theme undoubtedly connects them both: power. There is an almost ubiquitous concern with issues of power throughout the RJE's.

In terms of identity, much of the issue revolves around the power inherent in the position of teacher. All teachers bring with them ideas about their own identity and the teacher-student relationship. In the journal I was often concerned with the power of the teacher to impose their beliefs upon students. More significant however is the crucial role that identity plays within all of us and the ability of the teacher to significantly diminish or even disregard those of his or her students through decisions made in the classroom.

The role of the teacher is a topic so laden with issues of power that it might conceivably be called the unifying theme of these diary entries. The RJE's express concern with who decides which material to cover, who decides which forms of English are ok and which unacceptable, the necessity of students being able to trust the teacher with providing their education, and the conception of the teacher as a companion on the learners' journey towards English acquisition.

The classroom

Having identified the major concerns shown in the journal, the next step was to examine those themes in a specific context—as mentioned earlier, a junior high school located in a very small town in rural Japan. The role of an assistant language teacher (ALT) is to assist a lead Japanese teacher and the role is incidental, in many ways, to the running of the class. Each of the 12 classes taught by the author contains between 32 and 38 students and standards of behavior vary considerably between classes.

What becomes obvious upon even brief reflection is that a gulf exists between the theory and the practice of the classroom—the most obvious fracture occurring around the role of the teacher, and so I will cover this area first.

The role of the teacher

While it is easy and certainly useful to formulate a philosophy of teaching in isolation, the RJE's showed that in doing so I had presumed a kind of "ideal learner". This learner was mature, motivated, responsible, and committed to the journey of discovery upon which I had conceived of the teacher as being his or her companion. Unfortunately, this learner is often somewhat chimerical.

In the context of this junior high school a major role of the teacher is that of classroom manager. As students move through the first year to the third, not only do they develop as people, but they undergo a kind of evolution in their approach to English. Despite this, each year group, for differing reasons, is actively managed by the teacher. This proved quite instructive as I developed my conceptions of the role

of teacher.

Sometimes it simply is not possible to hold the learners' hand on an idealized journey towards English competence. Learners attend class for myriad reasons and not all of them include the learner's own volition. In this context, many of the most desirable practices in the role of teacher are often superseded by the need to maintain an effectively functioning classroom. A teacher may not always be able to take such a "companion" approach with a student who disdains English and is contemptuous of school in general.

Similarly, my "ideal learner" had possessed a degree of competence that allowed the teacher to function as a conduit rather than an origin of knowledge. Again, this conception needs reevaluating in the light of this specific context.

If we can conceive of the points between the "conduit" and "origin" as existing on a continuum, I believe that all three of the lead teachers at my school swing too far towards the "origin" end. For example, the first-year students are corrected incessantly by their teacher if their handwritten letters stray too far from the prescribed norm of the textbook, even if the learner's handwriting of Roman script more closely approximates a natural, cursive style of writing. Here, the teacher, together with the textbook, is the final word.

Having said this, there is obviously the need, at very elementary levels of study, for the teacher to dispense knowledge. Low-level learners simply do not possess the necessary linguistic tools to advance in a way that allows the teacher to operate in the idealized way mentioned in my RJE's.

Identity

Very similar to the problems associated with classroom management are those linked to student identity. The most obvious issue concerns class size. In a class of 38 fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students, the space for making broad allowances for individual identity is minimal at best. It is not so much the individual learners are not interested as other learners and their requirements make individualization impossible.

A further set of issues compounds the problem—the curriculum as assessed by nationwide and prefectural exams leaves teachers with the bare minimum of space in which to improvise. The time demands on teachers are extraordinary, and reliance on the textbook allows them to carry out all the other functions required of the role. Moreover, a culture of rote learning and teacher-as-origin-of-knowledge means that an approach that largely ignores individuality is the norm and, for the most part, expected. Taken together, there is little possibility of allowing for individual learner identity and there appears little inclination to do so.

The exception to all of this is the use of the students' native language (L1) in the English classroom. In all of the classes a rough estimate of Japanese spoken during class, by both students and teachers, would be approximately 80-90%. Unfortunately, this is not done for such lofty and idealized reasons as safeguarding learner identity, but rather because English is approached in much the same fashion as any other school subject—a series of rules and problems able to be learnt and assessed through pen and paper testing.

Power

Undoubtedly in this context, the teacher remains the source of virtually all power. Teachers act as the bringer-of-knowledge, a role that helps explain the traditionally high esteem in which teachers have always been held in Japan, but which also means that students have absolutely no input into the nature of their learning. Students remain passive “recipients of knowledge,” varying in their degree of receptivity by such things as interest and motivation. That this motivation remains sparsely spread is evidenced by the prevalent distraction and recidivist sleeping on show in most of the classes. There is little allowance possible or expected for learner identity due to numerous factors, a frustration for me when I can see learners keen to learn but am unable to offer them time to engage in the material on a more personal and meaningful level.

Conclusion

Keeping a reflective journal over the course of a year provided interesting insights into the dichotomy between expectations and practice. However, such a confrontation can be of immense value to a teacher, whatever stage of their career they happen to be in. The practical necessities of real life may make our conceptions and ideals regarding such things as the role of the teacher and the necessity of considering learner identity at times unworkable. However, such ideals can act as a spur in all aspects of life and the presence of obstacles on the road to their attainment is a poor argument against the attempt. Life is seldom simple; there seems little reason to expect the language classroom to be different.

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