

The Learner-Centered/Communicative Paradigm In Pronunciation Teaching

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Abstract

This study looked at a one-semester pronunciation class for first year English Majors at Sapporo University, a four-year tertiary institution in Sapporo, Japan. The class was introduced to, and taught, using the Learner-Centered / Communicative Approach, focusing on the supra-segmental aspects of pronunciation: stress, intonation, rhythm and pitch. Students learned in an all-English environment, while completing tasks challenging them to work using their own resources. The participants (n=118), members of six classes taught over two different academic years, submitted opinions and comments at the end of the course via a written survey in their native language. Results indicated that a majority of participants found the course worthwhile, even enjoyable, and that the methodology used was appropriate, but that the instructor was strict.

Introduction

Pronunciation is consistent within the canon of language teaching pedagogy in having been the subject of numerous approaches, rising and falling in popularity depending on the particular approach. A brief history by Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996, pp. 2-11), follows a timeline

from the 1800's to the present day, covering Direct Method, Reform Movement, Audiolingualism, Silent Way, Community Language Learning and the current Communicative Approach; as well as the role of pronunciation instruction in each. Within the context of the teaching of English pronunciation in Japan, many students seem more interested in pronunciation than foreign culture or literature (Makarova & Ryan, 2000), yet they feel that the study of pronunciation is extremely difficult, and mastering it impossible. Makarova (2001) also identified communicative methodologies, katakana transcription, lack of trained professionals and a gap between speech technologies / education as the main problems hindering the teaching of pronunciation in Japan.

The Communicative Approach is a paradigm that has dominated language pedagogy since the 1980's. The primary goal of meaningful communication utilizing group work, pair work, role-plays, real-life materials and the integrated use of reading, writing, listening and speaking are the primary features of the approach (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Since 1989, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or Mombu-sho (now Mombukagakusho) has, by policy, advocated a communicative style for any foreign language instruction in Japan (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 1994). This has yet to take hold in a pervasive way, but, "unlike other fashions, linguistic fashions arrive in Japan with a delay of 10-20 years" (Makarova, 2001, p. 162). Disciples of the Communicative Approach initially rejected the role of teaching pronunciation at the segmental level of sound, vowel and consonant, because it is not in keeping with discourse-oriented communication. The traditional method of drilling isolated segmentals also contradicted an emphasis on communication over correction. However, the supra-segmental aspects of

pronunciation; stress, rhythm, intonation and pitch, fit the approach well, and have since been adopted into the Communicative Approach (Brazil, Coulthard & Johns, 1980; Brown & Yule, 1983). Gilbert (1983) goes so far as to state that pronunciation teaching should eschew listening drills and center on the production of supra-segmentals through speaking by the learner. The less torturous goal of non-native comprehensible speaking is sought, with improvement of pronunciation occurring over time, as a by-product of overall communication.

Learner Centering, or autonomy, is a development from within the Communicative Approach and, among other aspects, includes the idea that, “learners, for their part, need to develop a range of skills related not only to language, but also to learning and learning-how-to-learn” (Nunan, 1989, p. 94). It is a process in which instructors assume the role of facilitator, offering guidance, while students develop learning strategies, “to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Process itself refers to the interface of students, teachers and materials, going beyond the idea that only content is of importance in the classroom. Vogt (1995, p. 294) suggests that process and context, or how and why students learn, are of greater importance than content, or what students learn.

The rationale for this study was to present participants with a Learner-Centered / Communicative Approach class as an alternative to the mechanical drilling usually associated with the study of pronunciation, and see how they adapted. The following research questions were the foci of the study:

Primary: Could the students enjoy this style of course and find it

worthwhile; why, or why not?

Secondary: How could the instruction and instructor improve for the sake of future courses of a similar type?

Methods

Design

This study was qualitative and non-experimental in design. A first year, second semester class was administered a practical pronunciation syllabus, consisting of twelve or thirteen 90 minute classes, depending on the particular year in which it was taught, augmenting a first semester theoretical pronunciation syllabus. This was followed by a written questionnaire, administered to collect opinions and comments from the participants during the penultimate class of the term. It required ten to fifteen minutes to complete and all responses were anonymous. This was a separate survey, unconnected to the official university student survey administered at the same time. The response rate was 86%, 118 responses from the total, official registration of 137 students. However, this response rate represented 99% of the 119 participants who completed the course, accounted for by the attrition of 18 students and one participant who was absent for the survey.

Participants

A convenience sample of six classes of Japanese university students, three classes each from the academic years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006, at Sapporo University, a four-year tertiary institution in Sapporo, Japan, experienced the course and responded to the written questionnaire. The

participants (n=118) consisted of 61 females and 57 males, with 114 first year and 4 repeating students from second and third year. The average age was 18.6 years old, with an age range of 18 to 22. This was a required course for these students, all of whom were English Majors.

Instruments

The course (see Appendix I, II, III, IV) was conducted from September 2004 to January 2005, and again from September 2005 to January 2006. During the introductory class, the instructor explained that, while being a pronunciation class, the focus was on the participants to be active participants, applying the English that they already possessed. From a communicative standpoint, the participants were given support and asked to try to function in English while in the classroom. This included tasks such as being polite, speaking in sentences and asking for help if they wanted or needed it. This constituted meaningful communication, using English naturally within the classroom context. They were given the goal of functioning above what the instructor referred to as the Threshold of Understandability, meaning to have effective communication with a native speaker, the instructor, as well as with peers. The native English speaking instructor's pronunciation served as a model, but not a goal. "This focus on language as communication brings renewed urgency to the teaching of pronunciation, since both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a threshold level of pronunciation for nonnative speakers of English; if they fall below this threshold level, they will have oral communication problems no matter how excellent and extensive their control of English grammar and vocabulary might be" (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996, p. 7). In a learner-centered vein, each student taught one chapter of a textbook on vernacular pronunciation to the other students, did a pair work intonation

test using translation, meaning and punctuation to determine the answer, and also conducted a group work television commercial project requiring the writing of a script, drawing of storyboards and video taping of the commercial. These activities were conducted with limited instructor input, except in a guiding and facilitating role.

At the end of the course, a four item, written questionnaire (see Appendix V, VI), developed by the researcher, was used to collect data. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese, with the participants having the option of responding in Japanese or English. Each item solicited opinions, usually in the form of open comments. The survey was valid in that it sought subjective opinions and comments about the course from course participants.

Results

Responses to all questions in the questionnaire are expressed as a number per total number of surveys, and also as a percentage, rounded off to the nearest whole number. Responses for questions #2-4 were grouped into the main three to five themes, or patterns, which emerged when the data was tabled. Not all questions were answered by participants, and there was some overlap or repeating of some answers. Five participants, or 4%, responded in English.

Table 1: Did you enjoy this course and find it worthwhile?

	Response by # of surveys	Response by %
Yes	86 / 118	73%
No	32 / 118	27%

Table 2: Why? Why not? Please be specific.

		Response by # of Surveys	Response by %
Yes	(i) Fun / Interesting / Useful Activities.	55 / 118	47%
	(ii) Active and Student Centered	23 / 118	20%
	(iii) English Only and Sentences	22 / 118	19%
	(iv) Productive Pressure Atmosphere	6 / 118	5%
No	(i) Different Teaching Style	6 / 118	5%
	(ii) Did Not Like Activities	7 / 118	6%
	(iii) Not Interested / Did Not Understand / Too Strict	22 / 118	18%
	(iv) Mixed Level Class	1 / 118	1%

Table 3: Suggest how this course can be improved.

		Response by # of Surveys	Response by %
	(i) Students Need to be More Active	40 / 118	34%
	(ii) Atmosphere Needs to be More Relaxed	27 / 118	23%
	(iii) Different Teaching Techniques	40 / 118	34%
	(iv) Different Teacher / Teacher Decides	7 / 118	6%

Table 4: Evaluate the good and bad aspects of the instructor.

		Response by # of Surveys	Response by %
Good	(i) Used Only English	14 / 118	12%
	(ii) Well Prepared	16 / 118	14%
	(iii) Centered Class on Students	22 / 118	19%
	(iv) Encouraged Students	2 / 118	2%
	(v) Easy to Understand	1 / 118	1%
Bad	(i) Too Strict	31 / 118	26%
	(ii) Difficult to Understand	8 / 118	7%
	(iii) Not Enough Support	13 / 118	11%

Discussion

The results (see Table 1, 2) show that a solid, but not overwhelming majority, 73% of the participants, enjoyed the course, or found it worthwhile. The positive answers were supported by; a general liking of the course or the content, with 20% specifically responding to the Learner-Centered / Communicative Approach aspect, while a surprising 5% thought that the productive pressure atmosphere it produced was good. The use of English-only was given positive feedback by 19%. Of the participants answering negatively to the course, 18% were generally not interested in the subject or the content, but only 5% found the Learner-Centered / Communicative Approach to be a specific reason for their answer.

Improving the course (see Table 3) centered around three main ideas. Firstly, creating a more relaxed classroom atmosphere with a different, "less scary" teacher or by streaming the student levels before classes began, as in the oral communication Skills classes at the university. Secondly, using different teaching techniques involving more fun activities, more technology, more support in the form of corrections by the teacher was favored by 34%. Finally, more than a third of the surveys indicated that the participants themselves realize the need to be more active in class.

The good and bad aspects of the instructor (see Table 4) brought to light that he is considered to be strict according to 26% of the surveys, but well prepared, 14%, and centered on the students, not himself, 19%.

Conclusions

Bringing communicative-style pronunciation teaching into an arena ruled by convention can be a difficult, and overwhelming success or student approval may become increasingly necessary for the survival of both instructors and universities in the current climate of falling student enrollments. Taken in that context, the level of support for this particular Learner-Centered / Communicative Approach Pronunciation course, for which “only” 73% of the participants approved, may signal a need to revert to a more conventional style of teaching which is more in line with student expectations and comfort levels.

Many students struggled with the English-only classroom environment, with 19% finding it novel enough to merit mention, perhaps an indication that instruction, among even native English speaking instructors, varies widely. It should not be unrealistic to expect students majoring in English to be able to function at a basic English-only level in the classroom. Streaming students for ability would alleviate this to some extent, as the range of ability in all six classes surveyed was strongly diverse. Part of the communicative process of “real” interaction involves being polite, yet many students seem to have been aculturalized in English without benefit of this social grace, which is important to every culture.

This instructor generally receives feedback indicating a tendency to strictness. For this particular course, the rules were that the work be done and that the students attend the class in accordance with the university policy of not missing more than one-third of all classes. The penalty for

late work, or arriving late for class was decided in negotiation with the students and was jointly agreed upon by all concerned as part of the learner-centering process. This makes a point that many students were not aware of the responsibility attached to the process and the decisions they helped make for themselves and the class. As one participant noted, the course may have been, "too learner-centered", but that many were self-aware of the need to be more active in the class, represents an encouraging sign that an overall objective of raising student self-awareness was achieved.

Shifting pronunciation to a Learner-Centered / Communicative Approach may have been an unexpected challenge for the participants, but one to which they could, and did, adapt. That adjustments to content could be made is probably true of any course, and is generally an ongoing process for most concerned instructors. Continuity and compatibility with other courses in the English Department curriculum may be of equal, or more, importance, but much more problematic in terms of curriculum organization and instructional variation.

References

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Appendix I

PRONUNCIATION CLINICS 2004-2005

OBJECTIVES: This course will complement the phonetics course taught in the first semester by the active use of the sounds the students have previously studied. Students will practice their pronunciation, intonation, pitch, stress and rhythm to improve their English skills by means of traditional and communicative activities, such as speaking, listening, tape recording and reading, among others.

OUTLINE: Please note that this outline is subject to change at the instructor's discretion.

- Week 1: Introduction, Four skill instruction, Responsible classroom citizens.
- Week 2: Greeting, The spectrum of pronunciation, Segmentals and Supra-Segmentals.
- Week 3: "TH" sound, Pronunciation and Punctuation, Common words, Loud and clear.
- Week 4: 55 Word stories.
- Week 5: "R/L" sound, Dialogue Project.
- Week 6: Dialogue Project.
- Week 7: Dialogue Project.
- Week 8: "B/V" sound, Dialogue Project Final.
- Week 9: Advertising Project.
- Week 10: Advertising Project.
- Week 11: "F" sound, Advertising Project.

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Week 12: Advertising Project.

Week 13: Advertising Project.

Week 14: Student survey.

GRADING: Grades will be based on any work done in class or as homework assignments.

TEXT: Benjamin Willey, **Speaking Well: Pronunciation for Japanese Students**, Seido Language Institute, 2003.

Nina Weinstein, **Whaddaya Say?: Guided Practice in Relaxed Speech**, Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1982.

Appendix II

SAPPORO UNIVERSITY 1ST YEAR PRONUNCIATION CLINIC REVIEW SEPTEMBER 2004–JANUARY 2005

1. Introduction and Class Information
2. Comprehensive Four Skill Instruction
3. Student Centered Classes
4. Classroom English Handout
5. Classroom Language Pragmatics
6. Basics: Pronunciation, Intonation, Loud and Clear Voice
7. Levels of Pronunciation: Threshold of Understandability
8. The Importance of Listening
9. One-to-One Student / Teacher Consultation
10. “John and Mary” Pair Dialogue Basics Practice
11. “TH” Sound Practice
12. Television Commercial Group Project: Scripts, Storyboards, Video
13. Pair Dialogue Test
14. *Speaking Well* Textbook Vowel and Consonant Sound Pronunciation
15. *Whaddaya Say?* Textbook Vernacular Pronunciation
16. Student Surveys
17. Review

Appendix III

PRONUNCIATION CLINICS 2005-2006 SYLLABUS

- INSTRUCTOR: Harry E. Creagen
- OBJECTIVES: Students will actively use the sounds studied first semester during this complementary course. Working alone, in pairs or groups, and using traditional, communicative and everyday activities, students will practice their pronunciation, intonation and projection to gain confidence and speak above the threshold of understandability.
- CLASSES: Story Project Dialogue Project Advertising Project
Difficult English Sounds
- EVALUATION: Grades will be based on any homework, assignments and tests.
- TEXTS: Benjamin Willey, **Speaking Well: Pronunciation for Japanese Students**, Seido Language Institute, 2003.
Nina Weinstein, **Whaddaya Say?: Guided Practice in Relaxed Speech**, Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1982.
- REFERENCE: NA
- MESSAGE: Please try to relax and do your best.

Appendix IV

SAPPORO UNIVERSITY 1ST YEAR PRONUNCIATION CLINIC REVIEW SEPTEMBER 2005—JANUARY 2006

1. Class Information and Procedures
2. Course Syllabus
3. Being Responsible Classroom Citizens
4. Comprehensive Four Skills Instruction
5. Student Centered Classes
6. Classroom English Handout
7. English Language Culture
8. Basics: Pronunciation, Intonation, Loud / Clear Voice
9. Levels of Pronunciation: Threshold of Understandability
10. "TH" Sound Practice
11. *Speaking Well* Textbook Vowel and Consonant Sound Pronunciation
12. *Whaddaya Say?* Textbook Vernacular Pronunciation
13. Television Commercial Group Project: Scripts, Storyboards, Video
14. One-to-One Student / Teacher Consultation
15. Intonation Dialogue Practice and Test
16. Student Surveys
17. Review

Appendix V

— 英会話クラス評価票 —

この英会話クラスについての印象・意見を書いて下さい。英語でも日本語でもどちらでも構いません。名前は書かなくて結構です。

1. このクラスで楽しんで、少しでも英語を身につけることができましたか。

Yes/No

2. それはどうしてですか。具体的に書いて下さい。

3. このクラスは、どうなったらもっと良くなると思いますか。

4. インストラクター（講師）の指導法について、良いと思われる点、悪いと思われる点があれば、書いて下さい。

Thank you very much.

Appendix VI

COURSE EVALUATION

Please think for a few minutes and give your impressions of this English Conversation course. Write in English or Japanese. Do not sign your name.

1. Did you enjoy this course and find it worthwhile?

Yes / No

2. Why? Why not? Please be specific.

3. Suggest how this course can be improved.

4. Evaluate the good and bad teaching aspects of the instructor.

Thank you very much.