

Language Teaching as Artful Science

Brent A. Jones

Kobe Gakuin University

Abstract

Is second language (L2) teaching more of an art or more of a science? Persuasive arguments can be made either way, and many teachers would answer that L2 teaching requires a skillful balance of both. Decisions related to L2 curriculum, methodology and teaching strategies are often based on the teacher's own attitudes and beliefs regarding language learning. In many instances we find ourselves making pedagogical choices based mainly on intuition. This presentation will introduce one teacher's journey of professional development, especially as related to L2 teaching/learning and affective variables such as motivation, anxiety, attitudes and beliefs. The major aim of the presentation is to stimulate discussion of how best to manage our classes toward increased efficacy and customer (i.e. learner) satisfaction. One underlying assumption is that existing learning and instructional theories have much to offer the classroom teacher in terms of both guiding principles and practical prescriptive advice.

Introduction

This presentation was offered as an informal overview of my own professional development as a language teacher. The aim was to encourage participants to reflect on their own development and stimulate discussion of theories of learning as related to second language (L2) teaching. The main areas covered were motivation, classroom community, multiple intelligences, social development theory, social learning theory, situated learning, communities of practice, elaboration theory, minimalism and conditions of learning. The common thread here is the focus on the learner and affective variables associated with L2 learning and teaching. The following is a digest of my ramblings.

Second/Foreign Language (L2) Learning Motivation

My interest in this area stemmed from questions of why some learners are more apt than others to “pick up” and use a new language. The work of Robert Gardner (1985) caught my attention with its distinction between integrative and instrumental orientation to the target language. While I agree that integrative orientation might strengthen the chances of language learning success in some contexts, there are also good arguments regarding the strength of instrumental orientation, especially in EFL contexts such as Japan. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is also important for L2 teachers and highlights the importance of finding or designing material that is intrinsically motivating.

One area of L2 learning motivation that is underrepresented is ‘demotivation’. The few available findings were reviewed by Dörnyei (2001), and reveal that 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). These findings provide language teachers with a working list of things to avoid.

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.

Relevant Theories

I am still deeply interested in classroom community, especially as related to affective variables such as motivation, attitudes, beliefs and anxiety, but find myself reading more on the topic of instructional design and the related fields of educational psychology and theories of learning. Readers are directed to the Explorations in Learning & Instruction: The Theory Into Practice Database maintained at <http://tip.psychology.org/> for more on the following theories.

Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner (1983) contributed significantly 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, etc. 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 inherent value 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).

Minimalism

The key points stressed by John M. Carroll (see, for example, 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

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. It is hoped that this discussion prompts readers to reflect on their own professional development and explore these and other theories of learning in more depth.

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