

Appropriate Tool Use in Speaking Tasks for Pairs

スピーキング・ペアワークにおける 有効なツール活用

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the need to adapt English language speaking tasks to already successful local teaching methods, based on an understanding of the psychology of culture and the use of appropriate pedagogical tools. A discussion is offered of global ELT's resistance to change, and suggestions are offered, supported by a simple experiment to show how improvements can be implemented via appropriate tool use. It may well be a mistake to put too much faith in global prescriptions. While we do not yet have all the answers, and much work remains to be done, it may be sensible to look for inspiration closer to home.

本稿の目的は、英語のスピーキング・タスクをすでに成功しているその国の教授法に適合させる必要について述べるものである。文化的心理を理解し、その国にふさわしい教授法を用いることを基本とする。グローバルな教授法を用いて変化に対抗している ELT への議論を展開し、適切なツールを使うことでいかに進歩を達成できるかを示す簡単な実験を提言する。グローバルな規範を無批判に採用し続けることは間違っているかもしれない。すべての問題に対する答えはないし、今後なすべきことも多いのだが、一度ローカルな視点から見直してみるのも有効なのではないか。

Introduction

While the failure to adapt methodology to context has long been acknowledged as a problem in English Language Teaching (ELT), there is significant resistance to truly understanding the cultural issues involved. Bax (2003) was early to lament ethnocentric dedication to methodology among young teachers. According to Bax, people who have the “Communicative Language Teaching” (CLT) mentality believe that the latest methods emanating from outside the localities are the only and complete solution, and that no local methods could possibly be any good; the latest research carried out in western countries is accepted blindly even where clearly irrelevant to local conditions.

Indeed, teachers and researchers have long had fundamental doubts about monolingual ELT in certain cultural contexts. Most damningly, Dinsmore (1985) describes speaking classes as often silent and devoid of meaning. Nayar (1989) suggests that an ethnocentric belief in universals may blind the native speaker English language professional to local sociocultural realities. Liu (1996) points to strong ethnocentrism among teacher educators in western countries. Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls for an end to cultural stereotypes employed by language teachers and researchers. Chen, Warden, and Chang (2006) argue that the motivational model employed in monolingual ELT is divorced from local realities. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) claim that monolingual ELT often disintegrates into a farce as professionals sabotage their own efforts by refusing to use necessary tools.

Astonishingly, while a large part of the problem would appear to be related to cultural differences, there is a strong (and perhaps self-serving) tendency in ELT to dismiss the psychology of culture (used here as a blanket term covering both cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology) as necessarily concealing a negative essentialism parallel to Said's (1978) Orientalist dichotomies.

I argue here that clearly relevant research in other fields should, of course, be embraced in order to understand the problem and successfully locate research and practice within a local context, particularly as sociocultural theory has become important in ELT. Furthermore, in line with Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) and Cook (2010), appropriate use of student language, the most salient of local contextual factors, should be pursued as a first step in improving classroom performance. A simple, practice-based study is presented to support this view followed by suggestions for appropriate tool use in the classroom.

Research into cultural differences

There is good reason to believe that an understanding of the psychology of culture can be helpful in ELT. Hammond and Axelrod (2006) claim that ethnocentrism is an extremely common phenomenon. For example, map-drawing experiments indicate that people in general tend to perceive their own country as bigger than it is in reality (Whittaker & Whittaker, 1972).

Certain self-serving and ego-preserving tendencies may be universal across all cultures. For example, there is a tendency among men, rather than women, to overestimate their IQ (Furnham & Baguma, 1999). However, universals are not always so easy to find. The fundamental attribution error (Heider, 1958) and the self-serving bias (Taylor & Brown, 1988) help people maintain a strong sense of self, attributing successes to personal factors and blaming failures on external factors, perhaps because we avoid searching for information that is inconsistent with our beliefs (Nisbett & Ross,

1980).

However, Indians (Miller, 1994) and Japanese (Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984) are less susceptible to the fundamental attribution error than people in western societies. At the same time, it appears that the self-serving bias (Kashima & Triandis, 1986) is much less common among Japanese students than among their American counterparts. Self-enhancement, a form of motivation that works to maintain self-esteem, appears to be uniquely absent in the Japanese (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) caution that people from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies may form an outlier group that patterns differently from other groups. This strongly suggests the need for more research on people from different cultural backgrounds. Of course, similar arguments have been proposed within ELT (Kachru, 1994; Sridhar, 1994).

The need to understand culture in local contexts

Harmer (2003) argues that we are now in a postmethod phase (Pennycook, 1989; Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 2006) in which it is assumed that teaching methods must be adapted to the localities in order to improve practice in local contexts as well as address ethnocentric tendencies among teachers (Sower, 1999).

It is axiomatic that English language teachers should be committed to multiculturalism (Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Sears, 1996), the view that all cultural and national groups have their own unique paths of development, activities, values, and norms, as well as the right to be treated as equal. This seems to presuppose that there will be cultural differences that we should be striving to understand, while attempting to transcend our native ethnocentrism.

Waters (2007, p. 357) finds a link between the avoidance of discussions of culture and an ideology of political correctness (PC) that reflexively supports the cause of those who are perceived to be less powerful. In this formulation, a reflex toward PC (Browne, 2006) is rooted in the failure of monolingual ELT to provide proper levels of control and proper structure in teaching methodology. In general, I take the view here that improved control can be achieved via appropriate use of tools to mediate pedagogical activity.

Suspicion of cultural explanations

Vercoe (2006) reviews research into cognitive divergence between Westerners and East Asians (Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005) and claims that such work is

potentially enlightening for language teachers. However, as Vercoe points out, ELT is often reflexively hostile to the psychology of culture (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; Sowden, 2007; Guest, 2002; Dash, 2003), warning that there is a danger of students being “essentialized” via ill-understood theory.

Holliday and Aboshiha (2009) make the point that terms like individualism and collectivism are used in a pejorative sense and that the use of such words should be ruled out of discourse altogether because they fail the test of neutrality. However, this is clearly erroneous as the test of neutrality should be that categories are open to both negative and positive interpretation.

There is also the considerable problem that, if we say that words like individualism and collectivism have become neo-racist expressions and lack a positive interpretation, we actually agree with the people who use these terms exclusively in a negative, ethnocentric way, and encourage them in the entirely mistaken belief that modern scientific investigations also agree with them. As even a superficial study of the psychology of culture reveals, this is far from being the case.

As is well known, individualism refers to behaviour “based on concern for oneself and one’s immediate family or primary group” while collectivism refers to behaviour “based on concerns for others and care for traditions and values” (Shirayev & Levy, 2007, p. 13). While WEIRD people may identify themselves with individualism and perhaps display ethnocentric tendencies in the way they use such terms, there is not the slightest reason to believe that the word *collectivism* has an exclusively pejorative sense.

Holliday and Aboshiha (2009) cite Bond, Zegarac, and Spencer-Oatey (2000) and McSweeney (2002) in making the further, valid, point that the work of Hofstede (1980) may be usefully criticised as too simplistic. Obviously, there is no need to cling to formulations that have served their purpose. Markus and Kitayama (1991) characterize differences in people’s construal of the self in terms of an *independent* construal versus an *interdependent* construal. However, of course, this new formulation, like any other that recognizes cultural difference, can also be employed in a negative way. It depends entirely on the attitude of the user.

Thorne (2000), offering a sociocultural perspective of ELT, argues that the development of theory in second language acquisition (SLA) requires us to responsibly embrace both relativity (the view that the complexity of human behaviour can only be understood within its cultural context) and essentialism (the organization of individual data in categories of broader description). As it is not possible to avoid essentialism, we should seek positive ways to counter negative stereotypes that may arise as a result of people’s natural ethnocentrism. Young native speaker teachers might well look at the psychology of culture in order to understand the many comparative advantages that non-WEIRD peoples may enjoy with regard to language learning, education in general, and in terms of general perception.

Positive interpretations of cultural differences

Shiraev and Levy (2004, p. 13) argue that formal studies carried out over the past twenty years indicate that, by certain measures, European Americans are not less collectivistic than Japanese and Koreans. It is difficult to see how this kind of research can be dismissed as merely consolidating prejudice! Sinha and Tripathi (1994) have shown that the strong emergence of both individualist and collectivist behaviour in the same society is highly context-dependent. In this vein, Matsuda (1985) demonstrates that very low scores in measures of conformity among Japanese are explicable in terms of the absence of in-group pressure.

However, it should be clear that cultural differences do not disappear as a result of more sophisticated analysis; there are differences, however we decide to characterise them. “Americans are proud of their individualism; Asians are proud of their group-orientation” according to Stevenson and Stigler (1994, p. 88). Furthermore, robust identification with the group in China and Japan helps to raise motivation among students and lead to superior performance, particularly in mathematics. As children strive to live up to the expectations of the group, there is generally heightened engagement in the classroom. Related to this, Clark (2003) laments the failure of Japanese universities to properly activate powerful and easily observable group dynamics, relying instead on self-actualization (Maslow, 1970) drives that are, perhaps, not significant. This view is followed up in the simple, practice-based experiment reported below.

Sullivan (2000) argues for the need to consider teaching methods in context and understand the value of local teaching methods. Successful teaching in Vietnam is interpreted in light of the country’s Confucian heritage which emphasizes interrelatedness, with more “emphasis on mutual obligation of members of a group” (page 121) rather than individualism.

It is, of course, not always easy to acknowledge the virtues of others, as studies on cultural differences have indicated. According to Rogoff (2003), Japanese children often appear undisciplined to visitors from North America, but manage to take more responsibility than American children by the time they are in first grade (p. 215). Rogoff also suggests a link between strikingly good performance in mathematics and a focus on social development and group relations, with more responsibility delegated to students (p. 264) in Japan. Nisbett (2003, p. 189) makes the claim that “Asian math education is better and Asian students work harder.”

Indeed, the paradox here, given that ELT practitioners often assume that culture-loaded terms are necessarily derogatory, is that the superiority of Asian education seems widely accepted among westerners. Is the tendency to make derogatory, ethnocentric remarks rooted in the need to protect the ego in a situation in which monolingual teachers are often failing? Verity (2000) provided documentation of

how a native speaker English teacher in Japan goes from utter failure and frustration to finally being able to see the qualities of local students. Appreciating the value of another culture, in this case, was contingent on successful practice based on a proper understanding of the cultural setting.

Cultural-historical psychology and sociocultural SLA

Nisbett (2003) offers a radical account of psychological differences between Westerners and East Asians in terms of actual cognitive divergence. Rooted in patterns of thinking going back into prehistory, the many advantages of perception enjoyed by East Asians are expected because they tend to see more of a given context than Westerners, who tend to emphasize rules and categories in organizing objects and “attend primarily to the focal object or person” (p. 127) independently of context.

In this cultural-historical view of psychological development, strongly influenced by Vygotsky (1930/1971, 1978, 1986), culture and mind are inseparable, so no appeal is made to universal laws determining how the mind works; considerable cultural differences are expected. Cross-cultural psychology (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011), a separate field, accepts the need to understand cultural difference yet does not reject the view that there is a psychic unity (Shweder, 1991) characterising the minds of human beings.

Relative context-blindness among westerners, understood as the result of centuries of cultural traditions and social practices transforming the western mind, would seem to predict the situation in language teaching (Bax, 2003; Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Hu, 2006) with Western teachers and researchers struggling to move away from global prescriptions and connect with local context.

Scollon (1999) reports that Westerners tend to notice Taiwanese students talking among themselves more quickly than Chinese teachers do. This seems to indicate that Westerners may sometimes enjoy a perceptual advantage, in this case by noticing a salient object more quickly. However, Scollon also suggests that Western teachers may fall into the trap of thinking that their students are worse than they really are. In this case, the teacher’s perception of the students’ lack of interest may itself be exaggerated.

Sociocultural theory

In fact, resistance to culture-related research in language teaching is demonstrably unsustainable. Sowden (2007) sympathizes with teachers who find themselves utterly at a loss as to the best way to teach in the post-method phase. However, the need

to understand culture is rejected (citing Utley 2004), assuming that it will lead to distortions. However, Sowden also suggests that personal qualities and experience must be augmented by best current practice and research (p. 301). This is of crucial importance because understanding recent trends in ELT *requires* us, contrary to Sowden's formulation, to consider the psychology of culture.

Warschauer (1997) explains that the sociocultural perspective on language learning was necessitated as a way of explaining how and why students collaborate through language. The influence of sociocultural theory on language learning studies has grown to the point that Zuengler and Miller (2006) even talk about "two parallel SLA (Second Language Acquisition) worlds," the traditional cognitive and sociocultural approaches to research.

Sociocultural SLA theorists tend to avoid statistical experimentation in favour of descriptive analysis of actual dialogic exchanges in the microgenetic domain as participants engage in "tool-mediated goal-directed action" (Zinchenko, 1985, cited in Lantolf 2000). The most important of the tools used to mediate activity is language. This approach to research has grown in popularity in task-based learning as collaborative social interaction is recognized as increasingly important to language acquisition.

Our ability to use language as a tool, for example, may be understood as a general function of relatively sophisticated cognitive abilities developed in the phylogenetic and sociocultural domains (Ellis, 2006; Tomasello, 2003). In this approach, there is no need for any specialized, innate language endowment (Chomsky, 1972). Rather, language emerged from human beings' uniquely evolved ability to identify with other human beings (Tomasello, 1999).

The growth of the importance of sociocultural theory in SLA is a huge problem for those who would prefer to ignore the question of cultural differences. It is not simply that an understanding of cultural-historical psychology is vital to an adequate understanding of sociocultural SLA (although this is also certainly true); the two areas of study are actually branches of the same field! Therefore, discouraging teachers from looking at the psychology of culture becomes increasingly bizarre and unsustainable. To the extent that we accept a social dimension to language learning that sociocultural theory helps us to understand, it is difficult to see how ELT professionals can conveniently ignore the psychology of culture.

Sociocultural SLA to the rescue?

So, as we simply *must* take culture seriously in ELT, may we assume that the sociocultural SLA dynamic will naturally deliver an appropriate context-based approach to language teaching? I would urge researchers and teachers in the localities

to assume that this will not happen. Just as traditional monolingual ELT researchers de-emphasise important considerations where they are unable to make a contribution to discourse, sociocultural SLA also shows signs of severe limitations.

This becomes obvious in relation to the use of student language in language learning. Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009) and Cook (2010) argue forcefully for the appropriate pedagogical use of student language, whether in translation tasks or as part of appropriate instruction. The rejection of student language use is characterized as futile and self-crippling; Macmillan and Turnbull (2009) make the startling claim that student language is necessarily and appropriately used even in immersion settings. Howatt (2004, p. 312) sees translation as particularly useful for more advanced students. Hawkins (2015) argues that ELT has become limited by its rejection of tool use. A point generally made by these commentators is that the use of student language has been condemned or ignored for a very long time (about one hundred years) without any convincing reasons.

Will the new sociocultural dynamic champion the use of student language, the most salient element of pedagogical tool use in local context? While sociocultural SLA acknowledges translation as a vitally important part of the development of high level second language ability and identity (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), there are no suggestions regarding the pedagogical use of translation. One could add that only researchers in the localities are likely to be able to develop methodology that uses student language as a pedagogical tool in line with already successful local practice.

Clearly, we cannot wait for those outside the localities to solve our problems. For many areas of research connected with pedagogy, teachers and researchers in the localities are in the best position to make progress. Howatt (2004) suggests that use of student language is likely to be the next major historical development in the field. However, it is unlikely to happen unless the localities take the lead. In this spirit, a simple practice-based experiment was carried out to investigate whether appropriate tool-use can straightforwardly help generate oral production of English in the classroom. I take this to be in the spirit of an approach in which there is no gap between theory/research and practice (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). In this case the potential efficacy of the methodology being investigated can be evaluated very directly with no need to propose statistical variables.

The participants

A total of 66 English majors at a Japanese university participated in the experiment. They belonged to three separate classes, one upper level second year class and two mixed level first year classes. It was verified that they all had broadly similar educational backgrounds in English. Two of the participants had studied overseas for at

least one year. However, as their level was not vastly superior to the other participants, there seemed no particular reason to isolate these in any way.

Procedure

The students were split into two groups, A and B, to form pairs for task performance. Both groups were presented with a list of thirty Japanese sentences chosen at random from a database of sentences. These database sentences were all gleaned from a variety of Japanese textbooks; sentences that seemed likely to be perceived by the students as too easy or too difficult were rejected. This approach acknowledges the important part that the subjective judgment of a teacher must play in the choice of materials to be used in translation tasks.

Included at random within the two lists of sentences, ten sentences were shared in common between both group A and group B. The students were required to complete a Spot the Difference type task similar to those familiar from the Task-Based literature (Ellis, 2004). In other words, the students had to say the sentences to each other in English in order to identify the shared sentences.

Great efforts were made, via careful monitoring, to ensure that only English was spoken throughout, with no use of dictionaries, while the students compared the two lists and found the sentences shared in common. Certain sentences were nearly the same for both A and B but contained small differences. Students were required to write down the shared sentences on a sheet of paper that was collected by the researcher at the end of the experiment (which lasted about twenty minutes in total). This was done in order to get a sense of how difficult the task was likely to be for the students and to confirm that control over use of grammar and vocabulary was achieved. The researcher then checked the papers.

Data Analysis

Nearly all the students completed all the sentences. One group was unable to find an appropriate word to complete one sentence. A mark of one point was given for each sentence. If there was a grammatical or vocabulary error in a sentence, the point was not awarded. No points were awarded or subtracted for writing down a sentence that was nearly but not quite identical for both pairs. The upper level second year group received an average score of 9.56 points. The two first year groups received scores of 8.66 and 8.91 respectively.

Discussion

In spite of the difficulties traditionally expected in getting Japanese students to speak, using student language to mediate the task encountered no problems of any kind, even with no preparation time and no pre-teaching of vocabulary or grammar. The students, in fact, carried out the task with great enthusiasm and concentrated effort. There are clear goals, easily set and controlled by the teacher, in line with successful local practice outlined above; achievement of these goals might be expected to yield academic credit, particularly as papers were collected and checked. The task is easy to assess and students gain credit for their group via their efforts; that students would value academic performance is broadly in line with the studies cited above. This seems to suggest that tool-use, offering greater teacher control, might well be of vital importance in designing appropriate tasks in certain local contexts, in line with the studies from the psychology of culture.

The fact that task performance was close to perfect might well indicate that the sentences were actually too easy and not sufficient to effectively stretch the students' inter-language. However, the goal of the task was to see if such tasks might generate oral output in English. Even a simple practice-based experiment was able to demonstrate this quite clearly. Of course, the level of tasks employed in real teaching situations remains the responsibility of the teaching professional.

Conclusion

While McVeigh (2000, 2001) and Poole (2005) view Japanese ELT as a disaster, Oka (2004) points out that traditional Japanese teaching approaches have yielded outstanding success for those who assiduously follow the courses. I follow Oka in taking the position that very little can be achieved unless speaking tasks fit in with local practice and in line with its best qualities, which are clearly indicated by studies mentioned above.

Researchers in Asia are working in authentic, stable non-WEIRD cultural contexts, where more work is fully justified by recent findings in the psychology of culture. For example, the "social loafing" (Earley, 1989) phenomenon is identified among WEIRD subjects. This is the tendency among group members to make less effort on a task than they would if they were working alone. The opposite phenomenon, "social striving" is when a group task enhances the individual performance of its members; this has been observed among Chinese (Gabrenya, W., Wang, Y., & Lataner, B., 1985). The "social striving" effect would seem to strongly indicate high expectations for research on collaborative task-based language learning in the localities. This is in line with Ellis (2004, p. 200) who argues for the need for more research in sociocultural

SLA that shows that task-based interaction leads to acquisition.

We should also note, however, that collectivist-success motivation (Parsons & Goff, 1978) seems to indicate that grades are more important to east Asians than self-actualization through self-expression (Nicholls, 1999). This is highly suggestive for the future use of hand-held devices, a further pedagogical tool, to help set, control, and evaluate student performance in speaking tasks.

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