

Presentation Reflection

Transition and beyond: Continuing the shift to learner-centeredness

Joe Siegel

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

The CUE 2008 Conference title was "Language Education in Transition", and my initial reaction was to ask "a transition from what to what?" After attending, it is clear that a robust, multifaceted transition is well underway. It is a transition from treating a student body as a monolith to better understanding individual learner psychology; a change from pre-specified inflexible course design to more fluid material that addresses specific local needs; a shift from teacher-focused content to learner-centeredness; a move from neglecting individuality to seeking and recognizing student investment. In fact, the transition referred to in the conference title may be growing into a paradigm shift and research into learners' psychology ensures that it is a sustainable, not cosmetic, shift.

Many of the presentations at the conference examined and reported on different aspects of this ongoing transition. Some focused on learner psychological mechanisms. Data from such studies can serve as a basis for pedagogic change. Transitions in pedagogy, methodology and course design, in order to be sustainable, must incorporate increasingly better-informed understanding of how learners approach language learning.

It is encouraging to hear teachers report on their findings of the internal workings of students because such information provides a

solid platform from which to launch our transition and help keep it on course. So long as we continue to base the transition on the learners, it has the potential to develop into a paradigm shift, one that will not be merely superficial. According to Woodward (1996):

Changing techniques on the surface does not involve paradigm shift. Paradigm shift is about changing our view of learning or language, teaching or training or all four. It's about changing categories, procedures and views of the world (p. 7).

Learner perceptions

Better understanding of language learner psychology will help fuel this transition. Learner perceptions and strategies were two areas specifically addressed at the conference. Setsuko Mori reported on the results of a student survey given to 522 first year non-English major university students. She found that 69.4% felt their English ability either declined, slightly declined or remained unchanged after one year of English instruction at the tertiary level. If this finding can be generalized to a majority of universities in Japan, it certainly suggests a paradigm shift is necessary.

Using attribution theory, Mori also investigated learner perceptions of failure and success in English classes. Generally speaking, it seems learners blame themselves and internal factors when they fail; conversely, they cite teachers and external factors when they succeed. I find both results troubling. Firstly, students should hold teachers at least partially responsible if students fail. Teachers are able to influence such internal factors as confidence and motivation through their personality and pedagogic choices. Secondly, teachers may be receiving excess credit, and a more satisfying situation would involve learners at least partially crediting themselves for success. These findings suggest that major changes are necessary in many university classrooms, changes that would enable learners to perceive improvement and to recognize

that a combination of their own and teacher contributions may lead to failure or success.

Strategy use

Fifteen years ago, Rees-Miller (1993) stated: "[T]here is no empirical evidence to show that awareness of strategies is a casual factor in L2 learning success" (p. 681). Since then, support for strategy use and activation has been increasing (see for example Chamot & Rubin, 1994; Brown, 2000). Robert Taferner spoke on the need for better understanding of learner strategies specifically in the Japanese tertiary context. Taferner designed a pertinent strategy questionnaire, the items on which were student-generated, having been taken from interviews and student responses to open-ended questions about strategy use. Information provided by students at the local level was used to create the extensive questionnaire, making it distinct from more global procedures that may not be as relevant to the Japanese EFL context.

Taferner has worked diligently to identify precise strategies learners utilize and "it is useful to identify which approaches [learners] favor and how teaching can accommodate their learning preferences" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 62). He advocates that teachers should take their students and their strategies into account when planning lessons; for example, Taferner allows lower level students in writing classes to brainstorm in Japanese because it is one of the strategies with which they are comfortable. I believe existing strategies should be incorporated and nurtured; teachers may provide alternative options but should not slight those strategies initially selected by learners. Building on strategy reports like Taferner's, the continuing transition to learner-centeredness needs to proceed with pedagogical shifts including more strategy training and use in the classroom. Once teachers better understand learner psychology, they can begin to shape lessons and materials in order to maximize students' preferred learning styles and strategies.

It is this understanding that will continue to drive this transition in language education.

Pedagogical transitions

Kurtis McDonald has matched some materials to his learners' preferred learning styles. With students in the School of Science and Technology at Kwansai Gakuin University, McDonald teaches English through logic puzzles. These are activities that probably come close to matching the approaches to learning used by more scientific-minded students and have the added bonus of being fun. Through puzzles, which are used at different points throughout the semester, McDonald teaches English content.

The example used in his presentation demonstrated how common classroom language (e.g., "I forgot my textbook") is taught through puzzles. McDonald pointed to the cognitive involvement and the benefits of learning through exposure as reasons to use puzzles. He has acted progressively based on his understanding of his students to make classroom activities more localized and appropriate. His presentation has challenged me to better understand and cater to my own students' preferences and to be alert for opportunities to do so.

Student investment and learner-centered instruction

Nunan defines learner-centered instruction as that "in which learners are required to learn actively, through doing, rather than focusing on the teacher" (1999, p. 310). A shift to learner-centered instruction is clearly evident in the task-based course *Widgets* (2008). Co-author Marcos Benevides outlined the pioneering course, which includes a textbook that provides a backdrop to an extended task-based simulation. Groups of students play the roles of new employees at the company Widgets Incorporated. Benevides emphasized the course is based on task difficulty, not on language difficulty like most

other commercial texts. This task difficulty allows for use in mixed-ability classes.

Moreover, ideas created by students are the fundamental core used throughout the course. For example, each group of students brainstorms four product ideas; these ideas are passed to another group, who must debate and select the best idea. Learners are given greater responsibilities and opportunities to invest their energy, propositions, and enthusiasm.

According to Benevides, motivation and attendance in these courses are higher than average. While measurements of motivation may be based on subjective criteria, attendance rates provide objective data relating to the popularity of *Widgets*. Students invest their ideas and may be curious about what happens to their brainstorms and how they evolve.

A course like *Widgets* brings EFL/ESL to a new frontier. It leaves rigid teacher- and textbook-driven content behind and captures the uniqueness, excitement and fun of student-generated initiatives. Never have I come across a course that has such a combination of practicality (e.g., business situations), cooperation (e.g., group work), and negotiation of meaning (e.g., referential information). Ideas generated by students are the focal point of the course, which is based on learner-centered instruction and marks a major shift in the field.

Authentic materials

Since many English textbooks are meant to have wide appeal and for use in a number of countries, they struggle to match any teaching situation perfectly. Such materials cannot address specific local needs and can be less interesting for students than authentic materials. Alex Gilmore's featured speech on design and use of authentic materials was an explicit call for transition away from mass-produced textbooks.

Gilmore provided a stimulating example of authentic materials in

the form of a video clip. One focus of his sample was the teaching of ellipsis, a feature common to native speech but often neglected in EFL/ESL textbooks. His sample demonstrated how more natural features of language can be drawn out of and highlighted in authentic materials. Natural features are often lacking in many textbooks, which are sometimes sterilized for simplicity and wide appeal. I, and probably many other teachers, often encounter learners whose English is “textbookish” and a shift to use of more authentic materials should help increase the naturalness of English to which learners are exposed and utilize.

Furthermore, many textbooks offer a limited range of choices in terms of content and activities, but authentic materials are nearly limitless at a time when news stories, videos, and podcasts, for instance, are readily available online. Teachers might elicit from students which media and topics interest them most. Questionnaires could easily be distributed early in the semester and materials that coincide with student interests selected. I believe authentic materials are motivating for many Japanese students and may be more stimulating than English materials they encounter prior to university. Allowing them to partly dictate content further increases the motivational potential of such materials. Using authentic materials also allows teachers to better connect with students on a personal level and allows them to deliver meaningful messages they care about.

It seems a transition to authentic materials is a much-needed and welcome one but is not without challenges. Lessons based on authentic materials, such as Gilmore’s example, which included a video clip and an original work sheet, require more planning time than many teachers currently have. Teachers might not be persuaded in the end to create authentic materials due to the time commitment. Indeed, textbooks provide materials which need little to no preparation time, one of their main benefits. Hopefully, institutions and teachers will recognize the immense value of authentic materials and the substantial amount of time

needed to prepare them as opposed to standard textbooks. Institutions, in order to promote authentic materials, may need to allow teachers more planning time as well as to encourage more teacher autonomy. These conditions will make possible a transition from sterilized pre-fabricated mass-produced materials to localized, engaging, authentic materials.

Conclusion

As the steady transition in language education in Japan continues and gains momentum, it has the potential to evolve into a paradigm shift. In fact, as evidenced by the presentations cited above, three of the four categories mentioned by Woodward (1996, p.7) as crucial to paradigm change in language teaching are currently being addressed by EFL professionals in Japan. Indeed, by investigating learner psychology through action research and by implementing pedagogic change based on such research, teachers are demonstrating changing views of language, learning and teaching. The status of changing views concerning the fourth category, teacher training, may need more time to develop. Nevertheless, the presentations mentioned in these reflections serve as brief snapshots of the transition in progress. I plan to act in this period of transition and to be an agent of change (Wells, 1994), and I hope the aspects of transition referred to in these reflections may encourage readers to do likewise.

Presentations cited

Benevides, Marcos (Kansai Gaidai University): Adapting Widgets.

Gilmore, Alex (The Graduate School of Human & Environmental Studies, Kyoto University): Strategies for exploiting authentic materials in the language classroom.

McDonald, Kurtis (Kwansei Gakuin University): Engaging language learners with logic puzzles.

Mori, Setsuko (Kinki Universtiy): Who is to blame? University students' perception of lack of improvement in their English.

Taferner, Robert (Tama University): Academic English program development: Japanese high school students learning strategies in transition.

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