Opinion and Perspective

Why Less Is More in the Japanese University EFL Classroom

T. Traub

Hosei University

When planning a curriculum for an EFL course, teachers strive to choose the material which creates the greatest net benefit for most students in the class. Of course, this can be difficult when we have students of varying ability levels. As well, we have many stakeholders with competing ideas about what to do to create the maximum benefit for students. Additionally, these stakeholders often have their own personal agendas which may influence their decisions about which learning material is best. All too often, when the textbook choice is not in the hands of the teacher, the text that is chosen is far too difficult, or otherwise inappropriate.

This article intends to suggest that while teachers may risk not challenging higher level students, we should choose, or advocate for the choice of, more basic level material. There are a number of sound reasons for this view. Easier material will decrease absenteeism, increase learner confidence, and reduce behavioral problems of the lower level students. Additionally, the use of material which contains previously studied language provides a fertile ground for automatization of the use of said language. This automatization will then, in turn, free necessary cognitive resources to be used for the oral production, and creative use of previously learned language. Finally, easier material is less likely to cause emotional stresses that raise affective filters, and hinder language acquisition.

Some of the stakeholders who may want to see a more difficult text being used may be doing so because they believe a harder text portrays more value when showcasing the curriculum to final decision makers. Oftentimes, consideration is given to what the students ought to be able to do and they find it discomforting

to see that some of the students are performing at a level beneath where they are supposed to be. But the situation is what it is, and we cannot correct the problem by ignoring its existence. A realistic view of the actual abilities of the students at the beginning of the course can help us to attain maximum benefit for the class as a whole.

Others may actually believe in the "drowning man" approach. Those people tend to advocate for the more difficult text believing that a drowning man will certainly swim as hard as possible to save his own life. In the same sense we can be assured of maximum effort from the students when they are in over their head, and thus maximize English learning. However, a man who has been in over his head may equate this negative experience to the water, in general, and thus will avoid the water altogether. Therefore, that man will, certainly, never learn to swim well. This situation can be avoided if we stay in the safety of the shallow waters near the shore.

With regards the lower level students in the class, if we are covering vocabulary and grammar structures which are too difficult for them, they are going to feel less confident, and thus less motivated (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Additionally, the anxiety can lead to absenteeism which would, of course, reduce their exposure to the language and compound the problem (Williams & Andrade, 2008). This will result in a net loss to the overall educational benefit of the course for the group as a whole. Additionally, lower level students are more likely to act up in class when they do not understand the material (Jorgenson, 1977). Thus, care must be taken to develop a curriculum around a text which is not overwhelming to the lower 30% of the class. They will be more likely to show up, and not act up.

One question that may be posed by advocates of choosing higher level material is "If we choose material that is low enough so that it will not cause undue anxiety in the lower 30% of the class, will we not risk making it 'too easy' for the upper 30%?" This can be answered with the question, "How many of the best students in your class are so good that they would not benefit from more exposure to previously learned language?" If the higher level students are engaged in activities requiring them to perform tasks with the language that

they could already perform, then they are simply going to become more fluent, and automated at doing so, and this they will do with fewer hesitations, faster recognition, and more communicatively appropriate production of the language (Schneider & Fisk, 1982; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). Additionally, automating the underlying cognitive mechanisms frees up those resources so that the student can attend to other conversational tasks such as constructing larger pieces of discourse by combining previously learned constructions (Pawley & Syder, 1983). If we choose a text which is "too easy" for the top 30% of the class, the worst thing that could happen might end up being the best thing that could happen. Thus, there is no quantifiable net loss to the students, if a text is chosen targeting the lower 30% of the class.

Another reason to choose lower level material is to lower the affective filter for all students (Krashen, 1981). The student is unlikely to learn as much if she is struggling to comprehend so many things that learning becomes unpleasant. Worse yet, if the student feels inferior or embarrassed because she cannot understand the material, because every other word is an unfamiliar word, then the affective filter is likely to go up, and the student will learn less (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

Obviously, there are some limits to how basic we should reasonably go. And, it is assumed that choosing a course book will require a certain amount of guesswork. But, when choosing material for the Japanese university classroom, it stands to reason that it would be best to err on the side of easiness when our goal is to increase communicative competence with previously learned language. Perhaps a good rule of thumb would be to consider what level would be needed so that the lowest 30% of the class could get a 75% with a reasonable effort.

References

Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, *2*(3), 203-229.

Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1993). A student's contributions to second-language learning. Part II: Affective variables. *Language Teaching*, *26*(1), 1-11.

Jorgenson, G. W. (1977). Relationship of classroom behavior to the accuracy of the match between material difficulty and student ability. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *69*(1), 24-32.

Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. New York, NY: Pergamon.

Pawley, A., & Syder, F. H. (1983). Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. In J. C. Richards & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 191-227). New York, NY: Routledge.

Schneider, W., & Fisk, A. D. (1982). Degree of consistent training: Improvements in search performance and automatic process development. *Perception & Psychophysics*, *31*(2), 160-168.

Shiffrin, R. M., & Schneider, W. (1977). Controlled and automatic human information processing: II. Perceptual learning, automatic attending and a general theory. *Psychological Review*, *84*(2), 127-189.

Williams, K. E., & Andrade, M. R. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: Causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *5*(2), 181-191.

Author bio

T. Traub *teaches at Hosei University in Tokyo, Japan. He has been teaching in the U.S., and Japan since 2001. His current research interests include content-based learning, and pronunciation pedagogy.*

Received: March 22, 2015

Accepted: February 3, 2016