

[論説]

## Realising Student-Centred Learning in the EFL Classroom

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### Abstract-Introduction

The purposes of this paper are to present a basic model of what 'student-centred learning' (SCL) constitutes in terms of theory and application, to look at some of the problems that may be encountered when applying SCL techniques in the Japanese, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) high school classroom (with implications for other EFL milieux), to provide some suggestions as to how these problems may be overcome, and to indicate what might characterize an effective EFL class for Japanese teachers in Japan. The paper does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of any of the above areas but aims to provide a starting point from which EFL high school teachers wishing to implement SCL approaches may proceed.

(J. Aomori Univ. Health Welf. 7(1): 105-112, 2006)

Key words : Student-centred learning, Foreign language learning, EFL Japan, Educational Culture

### 1. Theory

To obtain a firm understanding of what constitutes 'student-centred learning', (SCL) it is useful to compare it directly with the conventional or more traditional 'teacher-centred learning'.

Teacher-centred learning is typified by teachers acting as the centre of knowledge. They direct the learning process and generally control students' access to information. Students are viewed as blank pages waiting to be filled in, and learning is viewed as an additive process. Instruction and instructional procedures are geared for the 'average' student and everyone is required to progress at the same rate (Atsusi, 2002). This approach is most typically encapsulated by the following phrase;

*'I will tell you this and therefore you will learn'.*  
(Moore, 1999)

SCL is a methodology backed by research that indicates students are not 'blank pages' waiting to be filled. They come with their own perceptual frameworks (Erikson, 1984), they learn in different ways (Kolb, 1984), and they construct their own meaning by talking, listening, writing, reading, and reflecting on content, ideas, issues and concerns (Meyers and Jones, 1993).

Their learning is an 'active dynamic process in which connections are constantly changing and their structure is continually reformatted' (Cross, 1991). This approach is most typically encapsulated by the following phrase;

*'I want to help you in ways which are effective for you and match your needs'.* (Moore, 1999)

SCL gives students greater autonomy and control over what is learned, how it is learned, when it is learned and what will be assessed.

The table below is useful in comparing instructional variables associated with teacher and student-centred approaches to teaching and learning. It also provides a guide to the creation or evaluation of student-centred learning environments:

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Instructional Variable	Instructional Approach	
	Teacher-Centred	Student-Centred
Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Discipline-specific verbal information.</li> <li>◆ Lower order thinking skills, e.g. recall, identify, define.</li> <li>◆ Memorisation of abstract and isolated facts, figures and formulas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Interdisciplinary information and knowledge.</li> <li>◆ Higher order thinking skills, e.g. problem-solving.</li> <li>◆ Information processing skills, e.g. access, organise, interpret, communicate information.</li> </ul>
Goals and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Teacher prescribes learning goals and objectives based on prior experiences, past practices, and state and/or locally mandated standards.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Students work with teachers to select learning goals and objectives based on authentic problems and students' prior knowledge, interests and experience.</li> </ul>
Instructional Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Instructional strategy prescribed by teacher.</li> <li>◆ Group-paced, designed for 'average' student.</li> <li>◆ Information organised and presented primarily by teacher, e.g. lectures, with some supplemental reading assignments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Teacher works with students to determine learning strategy.</li> <li>◆ Self-paced, designed to meet needs of individual student.</li> <li>◆ Student given direct access to multiple sources of information, e.g. books, online databases, community members.</li> </ul>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Assessment used to sort students.</li> <li>◆ Paper and pencil exams used to assess students acquisition of information.</li> <li>◆ Teacher sets performance criteria for students.</li> <li>◆ Students left to find out what teacher wants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Assessment is integral part of learning.</li> <li>◆ Performance based, used to assess students ability to apply knowledge.</li> <li>◆ Students work with teachers to define performance criteria.</li> <li>◆ Students develop self-assessment and peer assessment skills.</li> </ul>
Teacher's Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Teacher organises and presents information to groups of students.</li> <li>◆ Teachers act as gatekeeper of knowledge, controlling students' access to information.</li> <li>◆ Teacher directs learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Teacher provides multiple means of accessing information.</li> <li>◆ Teacher acts as facilitator, helps students access and process information.</li> <li>◆ Teacher facilitates learning.</li> </ul>
Student's Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Students expect teachers to teach them what's required to pass the test.</li> <li>◆ Passive recipients of information.</li> <li>◆ Reconstructs knowledge and information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Students take responsibility for learning.</li> <li>◆ Active knowledge seekers.</li> <li>◆ Construct knowledge and meaning.</li> </ul>
Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Students sit in rows.</li> <li>◆ Information presented via lectures, books and films</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Students work at stations with access to multiple resources.</li> <li>◆ Students work individually at times but also need to collaborate in small groups.</li> </ul>

Adapted from Astusi, (2002).

## 2. Educational Culture and Conflict

In implementing SCL approaches in the classroom, as outlined above, there will invariably be some conflicts with the classroom practices, and attitudes towards the education process already in place. These practices and attitudes are based on common conceptions of what is

'good learning' and 'good teaching', in what may be termed as the classroom 'educational culture'. Some of these clashes are generic to most education environments and others are particular to the educational culture at hand. The following points will look at the educational culture inherent to the situation in a Japanese EFL high school classroom, but with implications for a variety of education environments.

a) Traditional notions of the teacher's 'job'

It is the teacher's job to 'teach'. This generally implies that the teacher is the focal point of the classroom experience and as such does most of the talking and provides the learning opportunities. The teacher is expected by students, parents and mainstream society to impart knowledge in a digestible form for students. Therefore when working outside of this framework of expectation the teacher may be seen by the students and the public as not doing his or her job.

The pressure that stems from these kinds of expectations may further be exacerbated by teacher accountability practices such as teacher performance reviews and student questionnaires. If the observer or learner has notions of 'good' instructional methods based in traditional methods of teaching it is highly likely that the teacher risks receiving poor feedback or a poor appraisal. Therefore it is important that the students or reviewer are fully versed in the objectives, methods and benefits of SCL before any such exercise is carried out.

b) Learning responsibility

Some students may find the responsibility for learning and working in groups for assessment-based activities difficult at high school level, as many may want and expect to be told what to do and what to think. Part of the thinking behind this, is that students are often studying in preparation specifically for examinations and therefore they expect the teacher to impart the most important information in the most expedient manner so that they may get on with the chore of memorising the information and thereby maximising their chances of passing the particular test involved. This may be overcome by introducing activities gradually, in terms of difficulty, depth, and responsibility until the students feel comfortable with their roles. Each class may be different in this respect so the teacher needs to be able to adjust according to the circumstances of each class.

c) Change and experience

With change often comes fear of the unknown as teachers negotiate new pedagogical areas, and many teachers may feel a good deal of anxiety and

uncertainty about SCL. Moreover, experienced teachers may think along the lines of, 'I am already successful in what I do so why should I change anything?' Acceptance of change and continually seeking to improve one's profession are generally recognized as being parts of a good teacher's make-up, and as sure as change is always evident both socially and systemically, adaptation and improvement are always necessary.

d) Implementation time

By its very design SCL seeks to overcome complacency in the classroom by students and teachers alike. In an SCL classroom teachers cannot simply pull out units that they created 10 years earlier and use them time after time. The syllabus needs to be planned according to each class. Therefore the implementation of SCL takes a good deal of time not only in the early stages in regards to designing and creating the syllabus and activities, but also on an ongoing basis. There is also a continual need to assess the requirements of classes, groups and individuals, and give the necessary feedback to ensure success for all. If SCL is not overseen effectively there is the strong possibility that individuals and even groups may slip through the educational net with insufficient skills.

Under the current system, and with current teacher workloads, any attempt at anything as ambitious as SCL is probably doomed to failure and will no doubt be perceived negatively by those whose efforts are paramount to its success, that is, the teachers. Teachers therefore need to be given ample time to devote to SCL planning, not only in the initial designing stages but as an ongoing practice on a yearly basis. Along with extra time requirements will come extra expense, and therefore more teachers will also need to be hired or overtime work hours provided.

e) Examination system

The Japanese examination system remains one that rewards those students who can best memorise and recall volumes of information for one main examination event based on multiple choice answers. It therefore little reflects the types of abilities, such as

analysis, problem solving, creativity, lateral thinking, and long-term memory and skill assimilation that are necessary after high school. It is contrary to the recommended SCL method of assessment, which, as stated above, is done via the accumulation of work throughout a given period of time, and the participation of the students themselves in deciding what and how their learning should be evaluated. The best way to ensure that SCL is effectively adopted at the classroom level is if it is part of the examination system, a system that is accumulative. In this sense 'examinations' need to be conceived of as part of an SCL system rather than SCL as part of preparation for an examination. It is highly unlikely that SCL approaches can be effective until the examination system itself is adapted to it.

There is some recognition by the government that the current examination system is failing the students in terms of promoting real abilities in such fields as English (Toyama 2003), and hence the need for more student-centred approaches. However, while the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is currently trying to promote SCL in Japanese classrooms via teacher education programs, it seems it is reluctant to devolve the control of and adaptation of the current examination system to SCL practices, which is so vital to its success in the classroom and beyond.

### 3. Realising Student Centred Classes - Practice

#### A) Effective Features of SCL orientated EFL Classes

Below is a list of features and practices that will help practitioners to realize student centred English classes. Rogers (2002) recommends the following strategies and practices for EFL classes, (italicized to distinguish them from the author's own comments):

- Ask don't tell
- Focus on students' experience and interests
- Emphasise communication over accuracy

The main reason for students learning a language is to be able to communicate (in whatever form) with other people who can communicate in that language. In reality Japanese learners will probably

speak English with more non-native speakers from the Asia region than with native speakers from English-speaking countries, and the ultimate goal is to be able to understand and respond to each other in English.

Students therefore need opportunities to practice communicating in English without the fear of making mistakes. If it is in fact the case that Japanese high school teachers struggle with English communication skills as Toyama (2003) suggests they would also feel somewhat embarrassed by having to communicate with students in mistake-ridden English or with poor pronunciation. However, the sooner the teacher can forget his or her language short-falls for the sake of communicating in the language the sooner the students will do likewise and both teacher and student can progress in real communication skills.

With the exception of pronunciation difficulties like L/R, Th, V/B, etc, which Japanese students clearly struggle with and may be considered fundamental to effective communication in English, students should also be encouraged to not be self-conscious about their accent. A Japanese-English accent is perfectly acceptable as an American, Australian, or an Indian-English accent is. An accent is part of one's identity, and confidence in one's identity can affect one's confidence in language learning. Indeed requiring a student to pronounce words precisely as a native speaker to a native speaker can be perceived by the student as somewhat of an affront or intrusion. (Conducting group pronunciation practice sessions and nominal-pair differentiation practice in pairs are a couple of ways to overcome the student's affected front in pronunciation practice here). Therefore, while it is important that students are given practice in pronouncing key phonetic sounds, and awareness thereby raised as to their importance in effective communication, outside of key problem areas, it should not be considered vital to their learning in the early stages and all attempts to desensitise them to their pronunciation short-fallings should be encouraged. In sum, it is advisable to let them be Japanese while giving them as much exposure as possible to a variety of Englishes (especially with

an emphasis on varieties from the Asia region).

Also, in assessing students at lower levels they should not be penalised for a minor misspelling of a word or confusion of a grammar pattern. This kind of assessment focus has been endemic in Japanese high school and university entrance testing. Research indicates that they will learn accuracy over time and with exposure to the target language, and that the micro-correction of mistakes will not improve the student's performance in the language (Kepner 1991; Lalande, 1984; Semke, 1984). Also assessment based on spelling mistakes is not indicative of a student's progress or real ability in a course based on communicative skills, although students should be encouraged to strive for fundamental levels of accuracy. Emphasis should therefore, in all forms of testing, be placed upon how successfully the student is able to understand, process, and communicate information in real situations.

- Learning by doing
- Give students choices
- Focus on confidence building for real-world skills.
- Encourage interest in English
- Use tasks that are open-ended

I would also add the following to the list:

- Use authentic English materials  
Students may be set homework involving research undertaken using the internet or other English language reference sources. They will also gain valuable insights into different cultures. It is vital that students do not approach 'English Study' in the same way as they would approach a mathematical problem. Language study is as much about learning linguistic tools as it is about learning different ways of thinking and behaving, (remembering that much communication is non-verbal).
- Incorporate multi-skill activities  
As I indicated above studying English is about more than just language absorption. Students are also encouraged to think critically and develop

problem-solving skills through more creative tasks and group work. As stated above, it is important to remember they are learning about different ways of thinking as much as the mechanics of a language. The learning must also cater for the students' different learning styles.

#### ■ Use of English in the EFL class

This point relates particularly to the average Japanese high school teacher who is lacking in essential English communication skills (Toyama 2003), and foreign language teachers working at high schools who may be lacking in Japanese skills. These teachers may be wondering how to implement SCL procedures, which require an intense level of interaction between teacher and student, while attempting to conduct classes in the target language.

There is an increasing pressure upon Japanese high school teachers of English to use as much English as possible in the ESL classroom, and rightly so, as each instruction or explanation delivered in the target language is a learning opportunity. It is probably the single greatest source of stress, in terms of professional development, for the Japanese English language high school teacher in Japan. However, to date, (according to the author's knowledge) there has been no research conducted in Japanese high school EFL classes that suggests that not maintaining 100% immersion methods is any less successful, in terms of communication competency outcomes, than a combined target-language/native-language approach. The current climate in EFL teaching in Japan has positioned 'immersion' based classes as a politic or a public relations exercise rather than research based on sound educational practice to the students' whole educational experience and places undue pressure upon teachers who may feel that they may not be able to cope with its requirements. (This is probably one of the reasons foreign teachers without teaching qualifications are so enthusiastically hired in Japan, namely to fill the shortfall between students' communicative English education and Japanese EFL teacher

English communicative ability). While the benefits of the 'immersion' approach to the students in terms of communication skills and listening ability is quite obvious in itself, it needs to be adopted selectively and strategically with the success of SCL methodologies firmly in mind, and this success is based in effective ongoing communication between teacher and student.

Establishing effective SCL practices is to a large degree a continual negotiation of the learning process between the teacher and the students. For these practices, and therefore the learning potential of the classroom to be maximised, the level of communication between the two parties is of paramount importance. This is especially the case in Japanese high school classrooms. Both Shimahara (2002) and Okano (1999) stress the importance that nurturing the student-teacher relationship has in the Japanese educational culture and this cannot be achieved with the superficial levels of communication that are necessary in an immersion environment. Further research suggests that Japanese high school students tend to feel a considerable amount of stress and anxiety if they are not able to follow what is being said (Niiya 1998, Tenma 1985). Therefore, in the initial stages (for basic instructions, passing on of information, and setting up of activities, and even the use of humour to help to establish a rapport), and for the purposes of monitoring students' progress and offering guidance throughout the year, using English selectively in combination with Japanese, would be the more prudent and less stressful approach for Japanese high school teachers and students alike, and would be of greater benefit to teacher and student confidence and motivation as they would be employing English at a comfortable and enjoyable level for all involved.

As indicated above, by all means students should be encouraged or required to communicate in the target language as much as possible and practical, and this approach is best applied incrementally once the teacher has established a sense of trust and rapport with the students and they are able to come to terms with simple instructions. However

this should never be at the expense for example of conducting an activity that may be of significant educational and motivational value. It is important to remember that the short term benefits of language study are few and fuzzy at best to the learner and therefore one of the most vital goals is to make the study of English an enjoyable experience so as to encourage learners to pursue the study of English, and other cultures, long after they have left the school. Therefore to help maintain the student's motivation towards foreign language learning the activities given by the teacher must be challenging enough on the level of intellect as opposed to language ability, and for example activities which challenge the students' intellect may at times require the use of the first language to set up. Also, when considering the current curriculum and examination requirements of high school EFL courses (inappropriate though they may be) it is not practical in terms of time usage to maintain a 100% target language approach when for example a point in grammar may need to be grasped in the most expedient manner in order to conduct an activity.

Also for foreign teachers (Assistant Language Teachers or ALTs) working in Japan, and responsible for high school EFL classes (in whatever capacity) that adopt the immersion, or 'target language only' approach, at least in the initial stages, there is the danger that they may be seen as taking a stance that is too convenient, in that there is little requirement for them to learn the native language for the purpose of significant communication with their students, or to help contribute to more effective teaching. There is further the underlying implication for the students that the teacher is, albeit unwittingly, rejecting or devaluing Japanese culture by such a limiting approach and practicing a kind of cultural imperialism. Moreover, teachers are also restricting their approachability should a student have a learning problem, or even a simple question of clarification. This may be particularly detrimental to those class members whose ability is low as they may feel they have no recourse to redress or improve their situation. SCL requires



that you are able to adjust to the circumstances on hand, so teachers need to be constantly evaluating the ability and needs of the students as a class and individually using the most effective communicative tools at hand. While ALTs to date may not have felt or have been required to take on such a level of responsibility, any teacher who is given charge of a class, and is responsible for their learning to some degree, should also be responsible should a student have any learning difficulties. If the teacher is receiving such information second or third hand there is a danger the information becomes distorted in some manner or even a political tool within the department.

It is therefore something of a balancing act for high school teachers in that in order to gain the benefits of immersion methods and SCL methods both the Japanese and foreign teacher need to establish some kind of system in the classroom, where the students know in what situations it is appropriate to use English or Japanese or both as the case may be. Once the ground rules have been established this should not be a problem.

#### B) Some practical strategies

- ◇ Introduce student-centred activities gradually
- ◇ Self-paced teaching booklets (expected language competency level by the end of a set time frame given to student at the outset). Based on this students select what areas they are weak in and strong in (with regards to communication competency), and then should plan to build the skills necessary to achieve these goals. Evidence of their progress and efforts should be submitted and checked by the teacher regularly to ensure they have planned effectively and are progressing
- ◇ Independent study modules  
Prepare a variety of resources that students can work through in teams
- ◇ Presentations  
Students work together in groups of 3 to research a particular topic of their choice, for example the customs or values of another country, and present it to the class in English. Their choice of topic

should be relevant to the interests of the class as a whole, and if possible require audience input or participation.

#### ◇ Questionnaires

This kind of activity it can be as simple or as difficult as the teacher thinks the class can manage in groups of 2 or 3. On a simple level, the students could write the questions in English and Japanese and then interview class or school members, and then correlate the results and present a basic analysis of the information to the class with an explanation of the language used to conduct and obtain their results. This encourages research skills and enables students to create information and learning for the other class members. On a more challenging level students could first gather information from different resources before designing and implementing their questionnaires.

### 3. Conclusion - What are the expected benefits to the students?

How much time is spent organising and planning what is to be learned and how it will be learned in EFL high school classes? How much time do students spend doing this? In a sense SCL is the democratization of classroom practices and assessment, and the students taking on greater responsibility for their own learning. Who would gladly deny themselves the chance for a vote and active participation in something that will directly affect their futures? SCL can only empower students and encourage them to become proactive, analytical and cooperative citizens in the future. There are many obstacles to achieving an effective SCL classroom in the shape of the educational culture and the implementation of practices and routines, and initially teachers will have to spend a lot of time gathering information about the students and incorporating this information into lesson planning and procedures or activities. However the benefits will be tangible both in the short and long term as they will see students who achieve more effective learning outcomes.

(受理日:平成18年6月9日)

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