The Outline and Discussion of a Proposed Innovation: An inside job	

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Abstract

This paper discusses the application of a small scale curriculum innovation which seeks to engage greater student investment in the second language (L2) learning process. The pedagogical opportunities available to a teacher to improve the L2 attainment of a group of learners are examined within a specific Japanese tertiary educational context. As the two parties concerned are the most directly affected by any curricula change, the interior innovation proposes to alleviate the resistance that often accompanies imposed (top-down) innovations by attempting to meet the particular needs of the learning group via a jointly-constructed and negotiated curriculum (Nunan, 1988, Hall & Hewings, 2001). The possibilities of a 'change for good' within the parametres of a mandatory English language course are considered in light of recent research.

Key terms: curriculum innovation; needs analysis; negotiated syllabus; autonomous learning; authentic response

Introduction

Curriculum innovation in language teaching is considered a complex and dynamic process that is never without challenges (Karavas-Doukas, 1998) hence, a working definition has been appraised by many theorists. For the purposes of the following discussion, innovation will be construed as "proposals for qualitative change in pedagogical materials, approaches, and values that are perceived as new by individuals who comprise a formal (language) education system" (Markee, 2001, p.120). This paper outlines a teacher's proposed small scale curriculum innovation in a Japanese university EFL class; 1) to enhance the motivation and autonomous learning of the students; 2) to extend their second language (L2) acquisition and authentic learning outcomes.

In any innovation, despite the scale, and whether it be 'top-down' or 'bottom-up', the teacher's role is considered to be at the heart of it, acting as a lifeline to it's implementation (Kennedy, 2005). As it is the teacher who ultimately promotes the innovation to it's end users, the students, a 'match' between the innovation and the teacher's values and beliefs, pedagogical and otherwise, is crucial for it to be regarded as a feasible component of the learning process (Li, 2001). In this case, the innovation's adopter, implementer, supplier and "change agent" are all roles the teacher subsumes (Markee, 2001, p.151). Fullan (1992) describes this key factor as an innovation's 'workability'; that the changes to be made "fit in well with the teacher's situation, that are focused and include how-to-do-it possibilities" (p. 72). Another critical factor is the 'perceived need' for the qualitative change in ideas, materials, or practices (Fullan, 1992). As the teacher is the interpreter of curricula changes at the chalk face, enacting an innovation which they themselves perceive a need for and regard as 'workable' the innovation is therefore more likely to be successful (Karavas-Doukas, 1998). In addition to these affective factors the innovation's 'trialability' and suitability for the 'other' end users, the students, will be discussed in view of the constraints and opportunities of the proposed innovation in its specific educational setting (Markee, 2001).

Intentions from the inside

The purpose of the proposed innovation is for an EFL university teacher to implement a learner-centred, negotiated curriculum of content and tasks which aims to reduce the teacher's control over the learning process while increasing learner responsibility and autonomy over the management, content, outcomes and assessment of their learning (Hall & Kenny, 1988). The intended end-users of the innovation are myself, participating as the potential change agent, adopter, implementer and teacher, as well as the students

who will also act as implementers (Markee, 2001).

The students are a class of Japanese first year university EFL learners who participate in a 21 hour course in which the teacher has had three years experience teaching. The perceived need for the innovation is based upon observations during this teaching period that there is an educational need for better learning outcomes as many students complete the course with little improvement to their L2 competence (Brindley & Hood, 1990). Nunan & Lamb (2001) argue that to achieve better L2 learning outcomes students need to be more "actively involved in their own learning processes" (p. 27). To instigate these autonomous learning outcomes and processes the tenet "the need to communicate is at the heart of learning a language" will be considered a central principle in this innovation (Hall, 2001, p. 230). In recognizing the constraints and opportunities of the contextual variables the proposed innovation intends to re-interpret the curriculum outcomes, content and mode of working through adopting and implementing a learner-centred and learner negotiated curriculum.

By applying the 'on the ground' knowledge the teacher has acquired from previous experience, the teacher can effectively concentrate not just on the 'what' of the innovation, but also the 'how' (Karavas-Doukas, 1998). This antecedent knowledge also offers an informed perception of the 'perceived behavioural controls' that may affect the innovation's successful implementation (Ajzen cited in Markee, 2001).

The EIC curriculum in context

'Curriculum' in this discussion will be understood as "the planning, implementation and evaluation of a series of language-learning events conceived as a coherent whole with a specified purpose" (Hall & Hewings, 2001, p. 1). As the curriculum is a medium of the learning process it is necessary to consider what social, cultural and political context it is situated within (Markee, 2001).

In Japan, over the past two decades, the goal of the multifarious reforms to the national English curriculum at high school has been to "cultivate Japanese with English abilities" (MEXT, 2002). Despite these top-down innovations, high school teachers have largely resisted their implementation due to their "incompatibility with the unique learning environment in Japan" and "knowledge-based, high stakes exams" (Sato, 2009, p. 11). Upon reaching the university EFL classroom, students' low communicative skills, reduced motivation, and attitude to English as being a subject rather than a language is still common, as it often remains when they graduate (Hadley, 1999).

The Japanese university, which is the institutional context of the innovation, has embraced the freedom from the centralised English curriculum since the 1991 educational reforms and developed "innovative EFL curricula" such as the adoption of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), advocating Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches, and allowing individual teachers greater autonomy in their teaching practice (Hadley, 1999, p. 92).

In the university's Faculty of International Studies, first year students are required to take eight mandatory 90-minute English classes. Each semester, two of these classes are 'English for International Communication' (EIC), taught by two different part-time teachers, (who do not collaborate), over the 15 week period of a semester. EIC students are placed in classes according to their university entrance exam scores, and their major of study; Tourism and Hospitality (TH) or, International Understanding (IU). By graduation, students are required to have taken an additional ten elective English classes.

Despite the 18 English classes and the vague consensus that English may 'somehow' be useful in the future, the majority of students graduate without having achieved the English communicative abilities to make them a "truly international person in this age of continuous globalization" as the university's website proposes (Bunkyo University, n.d.).

EIC curriculum decisions are made by the four members (full-time tenured professors) of the 'Language Committee'. Their decisions encompass outlining learning objectives, adopting textbooks, and advocating teaching approaches. Presently, the EIC curriculum's main learning objective is to "enhance students' general communicative English skills" (Bunkyo University, n.d.), the required textbook is an in-house publication of pair conversation practice, and all pedagogical practice which falls under the 'umbrella' term of CLT is promoted as 'good' practice (Knight, 2001).

Teachers are expected to use the textbook as both a teaching-learning resource and an informal curriculum however the use of supplementary materials is encouraged. EIC assessment is based primarily on students' attendance (80% of the final grade) in accordance with the university's administration; any additional assessment is entirely up to the individual teacher.

Overall, the EIC curriculum's practical and institutional constraints are few, and the principal 'influential others' of concern to the EIC teacher are the students themselves rather than administrational stakeholders who would be involved if a budget was requested (Kennedy, CD, 2005). Benson (2001) points out that "flexibility in the guidelines for the implementation of a curriculum often creates spaces in which individual teachers can allow learners a degree of control over aspects of their classroom learning"; in other words an opportunity to 'do an inside job' (p. 162). Therefore, the proposed small scale, bottom-up innovation can be implemented without treading on any institutional toes.

The proposed innovation: An inside job

The proposed innovation will re-interpret the practical and institutional constraints of an EIC class to extend students' self-directed learning and increase student investment in the learning process. Through the means of an in-depth needs analysis and an ongoing negotiation of curriculum content, structure and assessment, the class curriculum will be jointly constructed by the students and the teacher. In other words, the trajectory of the course will be collaboratively tailor made for the learning group as a whole and the individual learners within it, and re-negotiated when needed (Nunan, 1988).

From qualitative observation over the three years of teaching EIC it seems that generally, from a student's perspective, the class is regarded as a) compulsory, b) an English class amongst many others, and c) unrelated to non-English classes in their major. A 'Language Committee' member echoed these perceptions when discussing needs assessments, in saying, "the students only need to show up so they can graduate" (personal communication, May 17, 2010).

None of the above perceptions about EIC are conducive to authentic communication taking place in the learning process (Hall, 2001). Brundage & MacKeracher's (cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 23) research illustrates that "adult learners are profoundly influenced by past learning experiences, present concerns and future prospects". Therefore, when considering how to improve the status quo of EIC through the proposed innovation, the benefits of "inviting, including and increasing student voice and participation in their own education" would provide opportunities for authentic communication, increased learning and student agency both inside and outside the classroom (Murphey et. al, 2009, p. 1).

Implementation from the inside: We are all in this together

Nunan (1988) asserts that the impetus of a learner-centred curriculum is that it is a shared effort between teachers and learners. The proposed EIC innovation is influenced by Nunan's (1988) seminal work on negotiated curriculum as well as the literature of Hall & Kenny (1988), Sarwar (2001), and Hadley (2006) who all played the roles of change agents, implementers and teachers in their respective bottom-up innovations, which were based upon the perceived needs of their students, and also promoted the tenets of learner autonomy and learner-centredness (Nunan, 1988, Nunan & Lamb, 2001). The suitability of the application of needs assessment and analysis (Savage & Storer, 2001), project learning (Legutke & Thomas, 1991) self-assessment (Benson, 2001), as well as the negotiation of the learning experience (Nunan, 1988) are also taken into account in regards to the constraints and resources available for the teacher to implement the curriculum innovation.

In some respects EIC students can be regarded as a stable learning group in terms of ethnicity, age, background, past learning experiences and major of study which is advantageous in designing the implementation of the innovation for the learner group. However, the adoption of an in-depth needs assessment and its subsequent analysis is the necessary first step in identifying individual student's attitudes and beliefs, interests, present concerns, future goals, and learning desires more elaborately (Nunan, 1988; Savage & Storer, 2001).

After the initial needs analysis it is necessary for the teacher to scaffold negotiation so student voice can be both expressed and heard. After negotiating specific learning goals for the 15 week course, and "what can be achieved" (Hall, 2001, p. 230) in

collaboration with the students, the teacher could then provide a learner-centered task framework that the students can collectively decide upon and add to (Nunan, 1988). To make certain student voice can be heard, despite anxiety or low communicative abilities, an anonymous bi-lingual suggestion box can be placed in the neutral territory of the university's self-access centre.

Brindley & Hood (1990) point out that "the concept of 'joint ownership' has been shown as vital in ensuring the success of any innovation" (p. 243). Through negotiation, the students should perceive that the learning process 'belongs' to them as much as it does to the teacher (Kennedy, 2005). In a learner-centred curriculum "no decision is binding" (Nunan, 1988, p. 5). As the innovation allows for continued negotiation it has the positive 'inbuilt' condition of 'trialability' so the learning process can be continually adjusted and managed (Kennedy, 2005).

The experiential and task-driven learning processes, offered as options to the students in a model framework, could be based upon the concept of project learning which needs to be understood, as Legutke & Thomas (1991) suggest, as one that "is rooted in an educational philosophy which aims at providing the direction, and some possible routes, to a more democratic and participatory society" (p. 158). The characteristics of project learning that Legutke & Thomas (1991) discuss are ones that result "from a joint process of negotiation between all participants" and "a wide scope of self-determined action" for the learners involved (p. 160).

Project learning can be seen as a good fit for the learner-centred framework which is offered as a starting point for the students, in addition to the innovation's overall aims of increasing authentic communication, within the time constraints available. For example, as Legutke & Thomas (1991) suggest 'text projects' based upon various media would be a suitable match for the proposed innovation. Through student selection of texts (reflecting students' interest), self-directed management of the learning task, and their shared response to the learner group, the students' reality that exists beyond the classroom walls could be brought into play. Hall (2001) points out "an authentic response depends on the existence of an authentic need" (p. 231). Hall (2001) also discusses Kenny's (1989) classifications of student responses to learning tasks and suggests that opportunities for a "socially validated response" occur when a student's response to a text is exposed to group evaluation, (in which the classroom group represents 'society' as discussed by Legutke & Thomas (1991)). Thus, desirable learning outcomes would be implemented via such text projects that provide students with learning experiences in which "combining the need for authentic response with the need for developing confidence to initiate and persist with communication" (p. 232).

Text projects are also suitable for the practical resources available in the institutional context, such as the DVDs, manga, magazines and books available for student use in the self-access-centre. Additionally, CALL classrooms offer a wealth of authentic resources for students through the medium of the Internet where websites such as 'youtube.com', blogs and social networking sites, can provide "genuine opportunities for self-directed learning" (Jones, 2001, p. 363). The supportive role of the teacher as a guide to such learning opportunities provided by project learning also needs to include "managing the input of topic information, organizing the social interaction of the participants, and providing opportunities to review preceding and to plan future action needs" for such self-directed learning to be effective (Legutke &Thomas, 1991, p. 166).

Opportunities and Constraints

The main institutional constraint is the 'required' textbook. This would have to be a non-negotiable component of the learning process, but could be adopted in a more learner-centred way. By using the textbook as a 'warm-up', students could select what conversation practices they wish to talk about. Therefore, the text could also be used as a socialization tool for developing rapport between members of the class 'society' by allowing students to communicate in the L2 while bringing their lives from outside the classroom inside it. In the remaining class time, instead of textbook-driven content and tasks, and supplementary materials decided by the teacher, through negotiation with the students content and tasks that are related intrinsically to their present lives, major of study, and their futures, will be brought to the forefront (Hall & Kenny, 1988).

A further practical constraint that needs to be considered is students' expectations of classroom roles, which may be affected by "a cultural preference for the teacher being the holder of all knowledge" (Hall, 2001, p. 229). In Japan, the classroom is

traditionally viewed as a space that is under the teacher's authoritative command; however, there seem to be different implications if the teacher is a native English speaker. Teachers who are native speakers are more often expected to be 'entertainers' rather than 'transmitters of knowledge", therefore students may be more open to a new way of doing things as they are expecting the unfamiliar. The advantage of implementing the innovation with first year students is that they are already expecting differences at university, rather than a replication of their past learning experiences at high school. As there are no fixed notions of what the norms of an EIC class are, the students may be more flexible in their expectations.

Learner participation and their abilities to negotiate their wants and needs could also be considered constraints in this socio-cultural context, rather than the potential resources, which through scaffolded learner-centred tasks and authentic opportunities for communication, they can become. The concept of the passive, analytical, 'Japanese learner' needs to be re-evaluated as this 'one size fits all' stereotype no longer fits the bill (Nozaki, 1993).

In regards to self-assessment, EIC students will be encouraged to reflect upon their learning experience. Although such action is initially teacher directed self-assessment instruments, such as worksheets, action logs and learning journals, "encourage formative self-monitoring and a cyclical approach to the re-evaluation of goals and plans" for the students (Benson 2001, p. 158).

Conclusion

The proposed innovation intends to exploit the space between EIC contextual constraints and opportunities to make it workable (Hall & Hewings, 2001). The benefits of the negotiated content and tasks will promote greater learning autonomy and reflective practice for the 'chalk face' stakeholders at the locus of the language classroom. Through the scaffolded, joint-construction of curriculum, it is anticipated that the learners will develop not only L2 attainment but a more authentic L2 identity as well.

The initial implementation of the innovation could take on the form of a 'pilot project' (for future reference) by monitoring its success "so that problems and issues could be identified and strategies developed for overcoming problems" (Brindley & Hood, 1990, p. 236). The new roles of the EIC teacher and learners will also include being 'co-explorers' of the (re-negotiated) learning process (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

Hadley (2006) asserts that the "development of a successful language education syllabus and materials should clearly reflect the interests of students and situations which students feel are related to their lives" (p. 36). The proposed innovation is determined to allow the process of learning to be 'experiential' and continually negotiated by the EIC students through the guidance and support of their teacher (Hall & Kenny, 1988). The innovation is also based on a clear "pedagogic need", due to the general lack of L2 attainment and motivation, so it is therefore a definite improvement on the present EIC curriculum as "more of the same would not be effective" (Hall & Kenny, 1988, p. 19).

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