

EFL in Japanese Higher Education through Learning Theories

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Abstract

This study examines how students' learning can be influenced by their learning environment. In particular, it explores the role of the instructors and their approaches to their students' learning. After briefly reviewing the behaviourist and constructivist orientations of learning theories, this paper will discuss why adapting certain learning theories may be more effective than others in encouraging students at Japanese universities to study English. Data for this study were collected from 90 students at a university in Kansai. The results showed that there were some difficulties in introducing a constructivist orientation at the university where the study was conducted. In conclusion, the limitations and implications of the study are discussed.

I. Introduction

Learning takes place in different forms and for different purposes. Students at Japanese universities are either placed in classes according to their placement test scores or they may have the option of choosing what class to enroll in. Therefore, being in the same class does not necessarily imply similarity of background or prior knowledge that has been gained. This could, therefore, affect the students' ongoing learning and development.

This paper will discuss, in relation to learning theories, how learning can be influenced by environment, the role of the instructor, and the approaches to learning that an instructor takes. Two learning theory orientations, namely, behaviourist and constructivist, will be described. The following discussion takes place within the context of English language teaching in Japanese higher education. The strong influence of a behaviourist orientation can be clearly seen,

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while I would argue that incorporating that of constructivism is crucial if Japanese higher education is to produce learners that are capable of managing and controlling their own learning. Having been educated within both the Japanese and non-Japanese higher education systems, and finding the constructivist orientation style to be both efficient and effective, I have incorporated this learning style into my classrooms and consequently faced some difficulties. Therefore, this paper will conclude with particular issues faced in applying a constructivist orientation in higher education, as well as future implications.

II. English Language Study in Higher Education in Japan

In observing the learning styles of Japanese students, it could safely be said that most of them are familiar with the behaviourist orientation of learning theories. Gorsuch (2001) describes the strongly behaviourist approach that prevails in Japanese junior and senior high schools. Behaviourists consider outcomes such as observable behaviour and behavioural changes to be the product of learning (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). The behaviourist orientation has its roots in the idea that the environment shapes behaviour and/or learning, rather than the learner having control over what is to be learned. The role of the teacher is hence to create a learning environment that will promote learner behaviours that are desirable for the students' development.

In some communicative English classes, such as oral discussion classes, students are even placed in lecture-style classrooms, in which the desks are unmovable with two to three students sitting at each one. These classrooms are designed so that the students are facing the blackboard at the front where the lecturer stands. The number of students per class could vary from 25 to as many as 45. This learning environment suggests that in Japan, the teacher-student relationship often plays out as that of master-apprentice. Instructors are seen, or made to be seen, as experts who are to be followed by the novices. Eraut's (1994) discussion of the Dreyfus (1986) model illustrates how skills' acquisition enables learners to move from one stage of their development to the next. The way classrooms are set up makes it difficult for students to engage in discussion with the other students, as their layout does not easily allow them to do so. In addition, Littlewood (1999) writes that being vocal is less valued than being silent in collectivist-oriented academic cultures, such as those of East Asia. As students at Japanese universities have been educated in such learning environments, large class sizes do not encourage them to question what knowledge is presented to them by the instructor.

Furthermore, the influence of the behaviourist orientation, which focuses on the outcome rather than the process, can be seen in how the students are assessed. Considering the large number of students per class, time management and logistical issues mean that most instructors choose to assess their learning by conducting paper-based, and often multiple-choice, exams. Such assessment is common in Japanese universities, even for communicative English classes. Given that most students in higher education institutions are in either collegiate or vocational orientation, as explained in Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan (1997), students will only engage in rote learning, as this is all that is necessary for them to pass the test/course. As most students consider this to be the goal, their learning is driven by extrinsic motivation—and such motivation does not last long. Schunk (1991) writes that motivation is a process in which goal-directed behaviour is generated and maintained (p.229). Once their goal has been achieved, in this case, passing the test/course, it is questionable how many students will retain their motivation to study English.

However, it is not only how the students are evaluated, but also the act of evaluating them against a list of criteria created by the instructor, providing grades and feedback as described by Svinicki (1999, p.6-7), that suggests education is based on behaviourism. Learning in this style and environment encourages students to take a “surface approach,” as explained by Marton and Säljö (1976, as cited in Atherton, 2011).

As long as the students continue to take this surface approach, it increases the number of them that are “learned helpless” (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). The ability or desire to question what is being presented to them, combined with the reluctance to engage in critical thinking or reflection, is likely to lead students to “react as though they have received an indictment of their ability” (Elliott & Dweck, 1988) when they encounter failure.

III. Application of the Constructivist Approach

A constructivist orientation to learning has two stances. Piaget (1953) considers learning to be dependent on past experiences, upon which new knowledge can be better developed. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978) sees learning as dependent on social engagement. Hence, meaning is made through interpersonal conversations. Regardless of view, both forms of constructivist orientation posit that learners construct their own learning. Candy (1991) sees the constructivist orientation of learning as compatible with “the notion of self-direction” (p.278). He also writes that learning is an “active inquiry,” an opportunity for the learners to put their “individuality in a learning task” by

connecting what they already know/have and what they are about to learn. Thus, learners need to be actively involved if they are to take such action.

Being active enables the learners to learn through dialogue with others. Gergen (1995, as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p.292) writes, "One learns through engaging, incorporating, and critically exploring the views of others, and new possibilities of interpretations are opened through the interaction." Collaborative learning through small-group activities could lead to students having more interaction with each other, whereby they exchange knowledge. Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, and Scott (1994, as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p.292) describe how students could construct their knowledge through talking in activities. Springer, Stanne, and Donovan (1999) report the positive effects of small-group learning in which students demonstrated greater academic achievements and positive attitudes towards learning. Bostock (1998) and Tynjälä (1999) also provide evidence of the positive effects of constructivist learning environments.

Levinson (2006) writes that each individual has an important role in knowledge construction in a group. Japanese students may find it difficult to study in collaboration with others, as they are not familiar with the idea. They are more familiar with studying for/to the tests, as passing a test or course is the goal of learning for many of them (see "collegiate orientation" in Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan, 1997, p.73). One solution to encourage students to work in collaboration may be for the instructors to come up with ways of assessing the process as well as the outcome of group work. Instructors could, for example, assess the learners' self-monitoring and reflective process, which would encourage learners to become "mastery-oriented" (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

By learners taking the initiative in learning, they start to take a "deep approach," which requires them to engage in critical thinking and reflection. As a consequence, they are likely to develop the ability to deal with "threshold concepts" and "troublesome knowledge" (Perkins, 2006). These could not be dealt with without the ability to tackle learning using a deep approach. Bandura (1994) writes:

When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks. (Bandura, 1994, p.71.)

In addition, a deep approach will direct the students to "mastery orientation" (Diener & Dweck, 1978) and allow them to move away from being "performance oriented."

It is, therefore, crucial that the instructors encourage their students to move away from taking a surface approach, such as rote learning, which does not lead to effective learning. Ausbel (1967, as cited in Merriam et al, 2007, p.286) distinguishes between meaningful learning and rote learning. He writes that for meaningful learning to take place, the content of new knowledge needs to be related to the learners' cognitive structure or schema. If learners try to learn something that is not linked with their previous learning, it is considered rote learning, and it is likely that they will not retain much, if any, of what they learn.

Language learning requires constant learning. Therefore, it is crucial that learners form a habit of learning. Larson and Smalley (1972) confirm the important roles that habit formation and practice play in the process of language learning. Instructors can act as facilitators in encouraging the students to form good study habits. They can also encourage the learners to set goals so that they are motivated to study constantly. Wood and Neal (2007) emphasise the strong correlation between goals and habits: people try to form a habit in anticipation of a positive outcome, or goal.

IV. Data Collection

The research was carried out at a university in the Kansai region of Japan. A total number of 90 first-year students participated. On the first day of the semester, they were given a worksheet to fill out. As many students were not highly proficient, the worksheet was prepared in both English and Japanese, so that the students could write their answers in Japanese. This was to make the them feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts freely. For some questions, students could choose pre-formulated answers, while the other questions were open-ended. Questions aimed to clarify the purpose of studying English, which of the four skills they needed to improve in order to achieve that purpose, and how they would improve these skills. Although these questions may not have been very easy to answer, especially for first-year students who had just started university, they were intended to raise self-awareness of how to approach studying English. With the hope that students had successfully answered the questions and were clearer in their minds about studying English, the final question on the worksheet asked them to write a specific study plan for what they hoped to accomplish by the end of the semester.

The main data used in this study are taken from the reflection papers that the students completed during the semester. Students were required to fill out three reflection papers regarding their own progress during the semester. For the purpose of this study, questions were open-ended in order to enable the students to

express themselves freely. The questions focused on asking the students how they felt about their progress.

V. Issues with Introducing Constructivist Orientation in Higher Education in Japan

Various forms of group work or collaborative activities were undertaken with 90 students. Most of the time, introducing the idea of collaborative learning proved difficult, as the students were neither accustomed to working with others in the classroom nor voicing their opinion (see Littlewood, 1999). In their reflection papers, some students expressed the usefulness and effectiveness of group work, namely, that they are able to share their knowledge with their peers. Others expressed feelings of discomfort, as they did not want to share their ideas with others or did not want their peers to think that they were less intelligent than them. Furthermore, because the students are not accustomed to collaborative learning, some of them do not realize that each individual has an important role in knowledge construction, as explained by Levinson (2006). Some students, especially in the “collegiate orientation” (see Beaty et al., 1997, p.73) showed a reluctance to participate or put in the minimum amount of effort. This was, in part, because they were mostly given grades as a group, and the extent to which individuals participated did not greatly affect their individual grades. Setting an assessment method designed to focus more on the individual process may have been more effective and have encouraged those in the “collegiate orientation” to participate more actively.

On another occasion, a term-long assignment was given to the students in which they had to set their own goal/assignment that they planned to complete by the end of the term. After in-class scaffolding, the students set their own goal, which focused on developing their English skills. The students were asked to write a short reflection once a month and to reflect on their progress and any amendments they wanted to make to the goals that they had set. This was to encourage a “deep approach” to learning by prompting them try to make a connection with what they were learning.

This assignment proved to have several limitations. First, there proved to be a large number of students who were “learned helpless” (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). These students expressed difficulty in setting their own assignment, stating that although they knew that they needed to develop their English skills, they could not figure out what they needed to work on, even though they had studied English for the previous 6 years. This may show that the students had not had the opportunity to reflect on their skills or to learn in a meaningful way.

Another limitation to this study may have been caused by any lack of clarity in the set up of the assignment. It is possible that some students did not fully understand the instructions or the goals of the assignment, for which reason these were not achieved. One of the purposes of the assignment was to enable the students to engage in meaningful learning, rather than to have them merely do assignments as set by the instructor. Another purpose was to enable the students to form good study habits by working on a goal that they themselves had set. Neither of these two goals were met. For example, a number of students had set themselves the goal of increasing their vocabulary, since they felt they needed to do so. The method they chose was to memorize the contents of a vocabulary book. They had chosen to perform rote learning, probably because it was something with which they were familiar. Furthermore, some other students decided to participate in English speaking activities that were held on campus on a daily basis in order to improve their speaking skills. This was a more successful learning activity, in that the students chose something that was meaningful to them. Nevertheless, it turned out to be unsuccessful in terms of habit forming. Although they made positive comments on their reflection sheet, probably because the concept of habit forming was necessary in “mastery orientation,” the habit did not stick with them: they stopped participating in the activities as soon as the assignment due date had passed. The students did not seem to have understood the purpose of the assignment and merely considered it to be a simple assignment seen from a behaviourist perspective.

The reasons for these unsuccessful results do not solely lie with the students. As previously mentioned, students differ in their previous learning experiences and learning styles. It is impossible to apply one single approach to their learning. Another purpose of this assignment was hence to enable the students to choose their own learning style and learn what they thought they needed to. However, as explained by Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone (2004), identifying appropriate approaches for each individual student is difficult. This difficulty comes not only from the “complexity of individual students,” but also from the “mass system” (p.100). In the case of the current research, students may not have been able to reach their goals because of the difficulty in being able to support each of them in identifying an individual approach in such large classes. Therefore, some students ended up setting goals that were not necessarily “meaningful” to them.

VI. Conclusion

I have discussed the effects that the learning environment and role of facilitators have on learners within the context of English language education in Japan through behaviourist and constructivist perspectives of learning theories,

in particular. Learners have preferences over how they wish to learn and may further be aware of how best they learn. However, as most learners have been educated from a behaviourist perspective that focuses on the outcome rather than the process, they would need to change their approach to learning if they wish to continue learning. They need to develop a mastery orientation in which they will learn to critically reflect and become aware of what it is they are learning. The recommended role of the instructor would be to present and introduce possible ways and learning styles so that the students are able to construct their own learning styles.

VII. References

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