

Syllabus Design and Teaching Methodology in a Japanese University Sociolinguistics Course

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Abstract

This paper looks at issues of syllabus design and teaching methodology in an EFL sociolinguistics course. It sets out the aims for one such course in a Japanese university, and describes a hybrid teaching methodology created to meet those aims. This hybrid approach combines traditional lecture-style teacher transmission with student-centered activities. The syllabus for the course is described using specific thematic examples of course content, and the effectiveness of the course as a whole is analyzed with the help of student feedback.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Syllabus design, Teaching methodology, Content-based instruction

1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a field in which many fine textbooks have been published. However, most of these textbooks have been written for “native speakers” at the university level or higher (see Romaine (2000), Stockwell (2002) for examples). There are some books that give a simpler introduction to the field, yet these too, are written with the native speaker in mind (see Holmes (2001), Spolsky (1998)). Faced with a sociolinguistics lecture course at a university in Japan, in which none of the participating students is a “native speaker” of English, it is imperative to choose suitable materials for the students. The choice is either to set an English language textbook that was designed for native speakers such as those mentioned above; a Japanese language textbook, such as Tanaka & Tanaka (1996) or Nagao, Hibiya & Hattori (2002), in spite of lecturing in the English medium; or to create a course with materials taken from a variety of sources, thereby alleviating the need for one set textbook.

As a syllabus is often dictated (and therefore restricted) by the contents of a textbook, it was felt that the best solution was the final option of the three above, namely to create a “textbook-less” course, allowing the teacher a great deal of flexibility in course design, both in

terms of syllabus content and teaching methodology. This flexibility meant the teacher was able to create a syllabus solely with the students in mind, paying careful attention to the perceived interests of students.

This paper will set out the aims for one such textbook-less sociolinguistics course at a Japanese university, and the teaching methodology used to complement those aims. The syllabus chosen will then be analyzed to show how traditional lecture-style “teacher transmission” and a more active, student-centered approach were combined to create a framework for this sociolinguistics course (see Adamson, 2006, for a related approach). The analysis will show the importance of exercises in which students personalize sociolinguistic knowledge by applying it to their own lives. Finally, the paper reflects on the strong points and the weaknesses of the syllabus with reference to student feedback and personal observation in the hope that the sociolinguistics course can be improved.

2. The Sociolinguistics Course

(a) Background

The sociolinguistics course that is the subject of this paper is an elective class, open to predominantly third and fourth year students at a private women’s university in Hiroshima, Japan. The course consists of weekly 90-minute classes over a period of fifteen weeks, and fifty students enrolled in the course. The teacher informed the students that the course would be conducted in English; that they would be expected to take notes in a “sociolinguistics journal” during the lecture-style part of each class; and that they should be active participants during the group-work sessions. Students knew that they would be evaluated on their sociolinguistic journal work, participation in class, and on a final paper for which they would need to use their notes from class.

(b) The aims of the course

The aims of the course were: (1) the transmission of knowledge by introducing students to some of the key themes and ideas in sociolinguistics; (2) to have students apply this knowledge to sociolinguistic situations in their own lives (personalization); and (3) to improve students’ English ability by providing an English-language content-based course.

(c) A methodology to meet the aims

The first of these aims could be achieved by a “traditional lecture” in which the lecturer acts as the transmitter of information/knowledge. A sociolinguistics lecture conducted in English would also certainly act as a content-based approach to language teaching, thereby achieving the third aim, as it fits the definition of a content-based approach given by Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) as “... the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material” (p. vii). This transmission of new knowledge from teacher to student is, of course, an important part of a university education and therefore important for maintaining student motivation. However, this format of class tends to be passive in nature, even if the students are required to take notes of the lecture materials, and worse still can lead to a lack of motivation if it is the only teaching methodology employed during a full 90-minute class.

In order to achieve all three aims of the course, it is necessary to make the students more active learners. This was achieved by setting students exercises and discussion questions (examples of which are shown below) to carry out in groups in a cooperative atmosphere. The addition of such exercises not only fulfills the second aim of the course, but also leads to an enhanced content-based ideal (aim 3) as Brinton et al point out “... while the initial emphasis is on providing students with native-speaker input in the target language, students do want to express themselves, and [having] an opportunity to do so is an important factor in their own perception of progress in the second language” (p. 53).

(d) Typical class structure and rationale

The structure of a typical class would consist of the following:

- (1) Pre-class: a short article for background reading or short Internet research exercise acting as an introduction to the content area.

Rationale: Students could familiarize themselves with important vocabulary in the content area at their own pace, and get important background knowledge of the relevant theme in sociolinguistics.

- (2) Introduction of theme by teacher: a 10~15 minute introductory presentation by the teacher on a sociolinguistic theme with the use of Powerpoint presentation slides. Students are asked to take notes in their “sociolinguistic journal” during this period of class.

Rationale: The sociolinguistic content is presented both aurally (in the form of teacher lecture) and visually (with Powerpoint slides). This was essential due to the mixed levels of student ability within the class. In order to keep students “on task” in a class with large numbers of students (in which it is difficult to monitor effectively), the teacher felt it necessary to make students active by expecting note-taking during this lecture-style part of the class.

(3) Introduction exercise: students carry out an introductory exercise with the aid of their notes (often in groups) in which they would apply some of the key sociolinguistic points to their own lives.

Rationale: By personalizing and applying the sociolinguistic themes to their own situations, it was hoped that content that could be perceived as abstract, would actually become very relevant to the students’ lives.

(4) Teacher presentation: a continuation of the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student on a sociolinguistic theme. This takes the form of a 15-minute Powerpoint presentation, or the use of audio-visual materials such as DVD movie clips to illustrate certain points.

Rationale: The teacher tried to use as many different forms of modern media to make the class more interesting to students. Movie clips, although not fully authentic, can mirror real life situations. As King (2002) has stated, “the realism of movies provides a wealth of contextualized linguistic, paralinguistic and authentic cross-cultural information.” Movie clips can therefore be very valuable in illustrating sociolinguistic points, and certainly, they can act as a motivating factor in the classroom.

(5) Student group discussion/exercise: students once again apply and personalize the information to their own situations.

Rationale: As well as applying theory to the real world, this section of the class allowed students to express themselves. This self-expression is an important part of progress in a second language, and of progress in understanding any content area.

(6) Teacher summary: the teacher summarizes the main points of the class.

Rationale: This was an opportunity for the teacher to focus the students’ minds on the main points of the class and to illustrate these points with students’ ideas generated in section 3 and 5 of the class.

3. The Syllabus

(a) Syllabus outline

The teacher decided to spend two to three classes on each of the chosen themes. The syllabus for the fifteen-class course was as follows:

- Week 1: Introduction to language in context (naming conventions)
- Week 2: Introduction to language variation (outline of upcoming study)
- Week 3: Language & age (age as a cultural category)
- Week 4: Language & age (child-directed language)
- Week 5: Language & age (youth speech)
- Week 6: Language & gender (introduction to theory)
- Week 7: Language & gender (sexist language)
- Week 8: Dialects
- Week 9: Dialects
- Week 10: Politeness (politeness theory)
- Week 11: Politeness (euphemism)
- Week 12: Politeness (politically correct language)
- Week 13: Non-standard language (slang & impolite language)
- Week 14: Non-standard language (slang & impolite language)
- Week 15: Word play/Review

Main source material consulted in producing the relevant Powerpoint slides was Stillwell Peccei (2003), Holmes (2001) and Clankie & Kobayashi (2007).

(b) An illustrative example of one theme

In weeks eight and nine the course concentrated on the theme of dialects. As with each of the themes, the aims, methodology and structure for the classes remained the same (see sections 2b, c and d). To illustrate, the framework for the study of dialects was as follows:

- (1) Pre-class: The students were set a pre-class exercise to introduce them to the topic. Students had to visit the British Dialect Translator website <http://www>.

whoohoo.co.uk. The teacher stressed to students that this website is a fun website, an exaggerated dialect generator, that it should not be taken too seriously, but that they would get a general idea about dialects from using it. Students had to type in simple standard English sentences of their own choice and click the dialect translation of their choice (from Irish, Scouse, Scottish, Cockney, Yorkshire, Brummie, and Geordie). They then brought these dialect translations to class. At the beginning of class, students worked in groups showing their sentences in dialect to other group members who attempted to translate the sentences back into standard English. The students thoroughly enjoyed the exercise and it gave them an introduction to the changes in phonology, vocabulary and grammar that are the hallmark of dialects.

- (2) Lecture-style teacher transmission: After the pre-class exercise the teacher lectured for a short time explaining the definition of dialect. Students were introduced to the differences between dialects and languages; differences between dialects and standard language; domains of dialect use; and the concept of dialect chains.
- (3) Group exercise: After this short lecture, the students formed groups and used the ideas from the lecture to think about their own situations and lives. Groups discussed the following questions: What are some of the dialects that exist in Japan? What are examples of Hiroshima dialect (and what is the standard Japanese for these examples)? When do you speak your dialect and when do you speak standard Japanese?
- (4) Lecture-style teacher transmission: After working as a class to examine answers generated from the group discussions, the teacher continued the lecture. In this part of the lecture, the teacher focused on phonological, lexical and grammatical differences between dialect and standard language using examples from various regions of Britain. This was followed by an introduction to “attitudes to dialect”, again using Britain as an illustrative example. The teacher gave personal examples of his own attitude to different dialects within Britain, and how the attitudes he holds (and his prejudices) can affect the way he thinks toward the speaker of that dialect.
- (5) Groupwork: Students then worked in groups to discuss their likes and dislikes among the dialects of Japan. Students had to mark dialects (with scores out of 5) for a variety of adjectives that included: stylish, rural, friendly, rough, sophisticated, and romantic. These scores helped students to explain why they liked or disliked the dialect. After this groupwork, the class carried out a vote to see the dialect that they liked the most in

Japan. Students called out the names of eight of the most well-known dialects in Japan. The teacher wrote the dialects on the board in the form of a knockout competition grid, with each dialect competing against another as if in the quarter-final “match” of a competition. A simple show of hands was used to see which of the two dialects was preferred by the class, the winning dialect from each “match” moving on to the semi-final stage, and then on to the final until we found a winner. Not surprisingly, as most of the students came from the Hiroshima area, the winner of the competition was Hiroshima dialect. Kyoto dialect (perceived as sophisticated) came second, and Tohoku dialect (perceived as rural) was one of the first dialects to be eliminated. This exercise clarified many of the ideas about attitudes towards dialects that the teacher had introduced during the lecture part of the lesson.

- (6) Final listening practice: Students were asked to focus for one final time on the range of dialects in Britain. The teacher played them authentic listening clips from various parts of Britain taken from the website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/>.
- (7) Summary: The final part of the classes on dialect was a summary from the teacher about the main points of the theme of dialects.

4. Discussion

As shown in the above example, the classes on the theme of dialects combined both teacher transmission and student-centered exercises in a hybrid format. The aims of the course were met in that the teacher introduced new knowledge to students; students took part actively in class applying new knowledge to their own lives; and the class provided ample opportunity for studying all four English skills in a content-based format.

The teacher felt that the personalization of the themes was particularly important for a successful course, agreeing with Adamson (2006) who has pointed out, “... the subject-matter in the syllabus is best enhanced by student experiences and perspectives.” In order to allow a free flow of “student experiences and perspectives” one of the main challenges for creating a course that is part lecture-style/part student-centered is the creation of groupwork exercises that are accessible for all levels. Unless English language levels of all students are very high, it is not sufficient to simply set group discussion questions. In the classes on the theme of dialects, the teacher created a variety of student-centered groupwork exercises (as shown

above) that asked students to apply the new knowledge/information to their own personal situations in Japan. For the other sociolinguistic themes tackled in this course, groupwork exercises (other than discussion questions) included: students creating personalized naming convention tables, analyzing conversational styles, DVD listening exercises of youth speech, among others.

Reflecting on the course in general, the teacher feels that the hybrid-style teaching methodology combined with carefully chosen sociolinguistic themes (that were accessible to all students) made the course a success. Feedback from students was very positive about the teaching methodology and syllabus used in this class. One student would have preferred less teacher transmission time and more time for small group discussion, but most students were satisfied with the balance. The use of video and DVD clips was, as expected, a good motivational tool, perhaps summed up by one student who stated, "... using movie scenes to explain examples is fun."

As stated earlier, choice of motivating themes for the course is very important. One student said that she "... could learn a variety of interesting topics" and feedback on the themes was, fortunately, positive. However, feedback showed that the most interesting themes (in order) were: slang and non-standard language 53%; dialects 28%; age 9%; gender 5%; politeness 5%. The skewed nature of these results suggests that the teacher should look into ways to make the less popular themes of more interest to the students.

The main problems that students encountered during the course related to note-taking during the lecture-style part of the classes. Although most students were satisfied with having to take notes, some students suggested the teacher simplify the information on the slides, while some others wanted the note-taking requirement to be eliminated from the course. One student wrote, "It was difficult for me to do the compatibility of writing notebook with listening to your lecture."

5. Conclusion

In the English as a Foreign Language field, designing a suitable syllabus and teaching methodology for a sociolinguistics class is a challenge. The teacher of this course felt strongly that the traditional 90-minute lecture of "teacher transmission" of knowledge was outdated and therefore chose to create a hybrid-style teaching methodology for this course, mixing short

periods of teacher transmission with student-centered activity. The choice of thematic units that can easily be applied to the students' own lives was paramount in the design of this syllabus and the success of the course. With the help of student feedback and the teacher's own observations, improvements to both the syllabus and teaching methodology can be made. The issue of student difficulties with note-taking from Powerpoint slides needs to be addressed, and the teacher feels it is important to improve some of the student-centered activities. However, the syllabus design and teaching methodology for this sociolinguistics course were undoubtedly a success and this framework is certainly recommended for other content-based courses in Japanese universities.

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