Language Learning: Meaning Construction Through Communication

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Introduction

Language is meaningful in social contexts. Communication is to construct meaning by people who participate in that conversation. English is the global language and has become a prerequisite for success in the wider world. If that is the case, what can and should be done in English classes to help learners acquire English language skills?

This paper first explains what languages and communication are, and then outlines the three major teaching methods of English education. It then examines what learners should do in classrooms to acquire English language skills to participate in real-world communication. Furthermore, it reveals the factors which influence learners' willingness to participate in communication and examines what are needed to foster such willingness.

1. Language, People, and Society

To live our lives is to be involved with the people around us and to live in relation to them. Therefore, what we say and write become meaningful in social contexts. The dominant view of language today is that it is contextualized in society and a means of constructing meaning within individual contexts. Communication is a social act which goes beyond mere information transmission and is a process of constructing meaning. Meaning is created in mutual acts called conversations. Thus, communication is a dynamic process of meaning construction (Yoshinaga, 2005).

The form of the language which is spoken is determined according to various conditions, such as the speaker's intention, the person they are talk-

ing to, and the situation in which the language is spoken. Communication is not only determined by contexts such as the relationship with the other people, but also reflects the will and intention of the speaker. An utterance expresses the speaker's feelings, which is only meaningful in conversation with the other people. In other words, everything we say and do is rooted in our relationships with others in society (Gergen, 1995). Therefore, communication is not merely a means to convey people's intention or achieve a purpose, but rather a process in which participants in the conversation construct meaning together through their relationships.

2. Purpose of Learning English

Such a view of communication is also true in language education and learning. The idea proposed by social constructionism indicates that learning is a social activity. All learning occurs within social contexts and is understood through social mediation, namely, language. Learning and education are inseparable from the social context. Moreover, due to the advancement and popularization of information technology, learning for the mere acquisition of knowledge has become less meaningful.

In such a society, the purpose of learning English is as follows. First, acquiring English is useful in order to communicate in a global society. Currently, increasing numbers of people emigrate to multiple regions or countries during their lifetime to work away from home or study abroad, or stay temporarily in those regions for travel. Furthermore, the increased convenience of the Internet allows people to instantly connect and communicate with the online world, unlike previous conventional environments where people only had the opportunity to use English in English classrooms. Monolingual norms based only on the world of one language had to change to conform to a diverse society. Secondly, learning English can broaden people's horizon. As people interact with others through language, they deepen their connections within society. Learning English enables them to find a different culture from their own and look at things from a broader point of view.

3. Methods of Language Learning

In conventional general school education, learning has been seen as a process where learners receive and memorize knowledge from teachers and textbooks and acquire knowledge as they are taught. Learning was considered to be conducted on an individual basis by acquiring and accumulating knowledge. In contrast, sociocultural theory views learning as a social process. Thus, it is important for learners to construct ideas and knowledge as they interact with others. Sociocultural theory sees learning not as an individual act, but as a social interaction such as a conversation or activity with other people.

The conventional theory believes that if learners are taught language rules, they should then have an excellent command of English. However, anyone who has learned a language has the experience of being unable to speak the language even if they have knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Few teachers now believe that learners will be able to speak as long as they acquire linguistic knowledge. This is crucial because it influences how classrooms and learning activities are designed. Teachers need to proactively create their own teaching materials and classroom activities suited to their students, look at their language teaching style, and tackle the problems inherent in their teaching methods and techniques while interacting with the learners.

3.1 Three Major Approaches to Language Acquisition

What should be done in classrooms to improve the language proficiency of learners? To answer this question, it is necessary to know what factors are related to language learning and how they work under certain conditions in language acquisition. We will take up three major approaches based on language acquisition theories and outline the representative theories of each approach: behaviorism, nativism, and interactionism.

3.1.1 Behaviorism

Behaviorism emphasizes the process of forming habits by conditioning in the form of stimulation, response, and reinforcement in acquisition. Learners can acquire correct language habits through repetition and the correction of mistakes by following given models. When applying this concept to the classroom environment, learners are expected to speak as instructed by their teacher, and then appropriate responses are provided by the teacher, thus strengthening the stimulation-response-reinforcement connection.

One teaching method with the behaviorist approach is the Audio-lingual method. It uses pattern practice through the imitation of dialogues and repetition of grammar exercises, based on the idea that acquisition equals habit formation. This method holds that acquiring new language habits requires intensive educational instruction. A typical lesson consists of presenting a model dialogue. Learners recite it and repeat key expressions exhaustively. Repetition of dialogues may be useful in the practice of pronunciation and prosody; however, it does not mean that it has the same effect on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. Simply repeating model dialogues may not be useful in actual communication, if the situations in which they are used and how they are used to convey meaning are not considered. No matter how many repetitions and drill exercises are conducted mechanically, it is difficult to achieve the expected results.

3.1.2 Nativism

Nativism emphasizes the potential for learners to learn from their environment, and states that the most important way to maximize a learner's innate ability to learn a language is to create as natural a language environment as possible. Supporting this position is the Monitor Model proposed by Krashen (1982), which argues that it is important to expose learners to as much input as possible.

The Monitor Model is a general theory of second language acquisition; its most fundamental element is the Input Hypothesis. The Input Hypothesis assumes that learners can only acquire a language through exposure to comprehensible input by listening and reading. The input given to learners in-

cludes language items at a level slightly higher (+1) than the learner's current level (i), and that the learner can use pre-existing knowledge and context to understand such input. The Monitor Model emphasizes the role of input but places less emphasis on learner output. Output is seen as the effect of the abundance of high-quality input given and cannot be the cause of acquisition. The value of output is only to continue the conversation to receive input. Therefore, output such as repetition of model dialogues is considered of little value.

A teaching method proposed in line with the concept of the Monitor Model is the Natural Approach, which emphasizes understanding of the meaning in input through listening and reading, rather than output such as speaking and writing. Classes are designed to expose learners to as much "i+1" input as possible. The content of the input should be chosen to match learners' interests in order to sustain their concentration. Classe time is spent listening to and reading input, rather than on repetition. The Natural Approach provides learners with plenty of input to develop listening and reading comprehension. However, since speaking is discouraged, it has been noted that there is a lack of speaking and grammatical improvement; thus, there has been a movement to try to encourage speaking. Input is a necessary but not sufficient condition for acquiring a high level of language ability.

3.1.3 Interactionism

Interactionism lies between behaviorism, which emphasizes external educational factors, and nativism, which emphasizes the potential within learners. Interactionism is not very different from nativism in its emphasis on content-rich input. Rather, it is based on the idea that learners should not simply receive input but should understand input through interaction with other people and proactively produce output.

The interactionism is supported by the Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1996) and the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985). These are proposed to supplement the Input Hypothesis, stating that input is the most important factor in acquisition, but additional factors should be added to it. The Interaction Hypothesis argues that to progress in language acquisition, learners should

actively participate in conversations, ask questions about what they do not understand to deepen their understanding of input. The Output Hypothesis states the need for not only comprehensible input but also comprehensible output which is accurate and can be easily understood by others.

One of the roles of output which the Output Hypothesis identifies is the automaticity function. When speaking, a person searches for the vocabulary necessary for communication and makes sentences according to grammatical rules, and then produces speech based on phonological rules. By repeating these processes, skills are improved automatically, and fluency can be developed.

Another output role is the noticing function. When understanding input, it is not always necessary to pay attention to detailed grammar; it is usually sufficient to pay attention to content words alone. However, when producing output, more attention must be paid to the use of language structures. In other words, semantic processing focuses on content and vocabulary and is central to understanding the input, while syntactic processing focuses on grammatical structures and is required to produce output. When forced to pay attention to syntactic processing while thinking about what they say for output, learners may not be able to use their grammatical knowledge they have already learned due to difficulties doing the dual tasks. However, this experience increases their attention and sensitivity to language forms and encourages them to notice subsequent exposures to input.

The idea of interactionism is applied to education in the form of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). TBLT is a teaching method which uses tasks to facilitate language learning, asserting that learners acquire language most effectively in the process of working on tasks proactively. TBLT emphasizes learning English through practice rather than memorization.

Since task is a generic term for goal-directed meaningful activity, its content should have some relation to real life. Some tasks are set in specific situations, such as ordering and paying at a restaurant, or giving a direction, while others are more generic tasks, such as participating in a debate or discussion, giving a presentation, or working on a project. Tasks are activities which effectively use all four skills by aiming to convey meaning and accomplish

tasks. TBLT fosters practical language proficiency, as language is used in a variety of tasks based on the learners' needs and interests. In English classes, it is important to develop learners' communication skills in a well-balanced manner by incorporating tasks that focus on semantic contents, rather than tasks which focus only on language forms. Language instruction which is deeply contextualized allows learners to become aware of the close relationship between form and meaning, rather than simply learning grammar.

What are the relationships among these three major approaches? The Audio-Lingual Method, based on behaviorism, emphasizes teachers' perspectives over learners. The Natural Approach emphasizes input and recognizes little value in language instruction. In between the two is TBLT. This teaching method respects learners' abilities and natural acquisition process, while actively incorporating the educational instruction as needed. From a global perspective, the current trend in English education is toward interactionism, which recognizes the roles of both intensive educational instructions and learners' innate ability to learn and seeks to explore the interaction between these two approaches.

3.2 Relationship Between Learning and Acquisition

The above is an overview of the three major approaches to acquisition, but how does learning lead to acquisition? Some models show the relationship between learning and acquisition.

There are two types of learning for acquiring linguistic knowledge: explicit and implicit learning[1]. The concepts of explicit and implicit learning propose two positions: the non-interface position and the interface position. The non-interface position states that there is no facilitative relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge, and the interface position sees the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge.

In the non-interface position, explicit knowledge can only be used when there is sufficient time and attention to form, and is difficult to use in fast-paced, semantically focused real-world communication. For instance, we learn how to use plurals, but it is common to forget the plural form usage for the plural number in actual communication. When having a conversation, if we

try to pay attention not only to meaning but also to forms, we may fail to deliver what we are trying to say or end up with unnatural utterances full of self-corrections.

In contrast, the interface position believes that having explicit knowledge facilitates the acquisition of implicit knowledge and leads to higher language ability. This position has two types: strong interface and weak interface.

The strong interface position states that knowledge acquired through explicit learning can be transformed into implicit knowledge through repeated practice. This practice must be done in accordance with the skill acquisition theory. In skill acquisition, the first step is to acquire declarative knowledge, which is then transformed into procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to knowledge which conceptually understands methods and rules. In English language learning, it refers to the knowledge used to explain English grammar and vocabulary. When this is transformed into procedural knowledge, descriptive knowledge gradually becomes unnecessary and becomes practical knowledge which is immediately useful in real situations. In English learning, it is the knowledge that is essential in practical language use across all four skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Acquiring procedural knowledge is not a matter of simply engaging in repetition to memorize. For instance, no matter how many times learners repeat the mechanical practice of transforming affirmative sentences into interrogative sentences, they will only be able to engage in the mechanical manipulation of grammar. To transform declarative knowledge into usable linguistic knowledge, it is important to learn by associating form with meaning, rather than focusing only on forms. What is really needed is meaningful or communicative practice.

The weak interface position states that explicit knowledge indirectly aids implicit learning and that communicating with explicit knowledge enables more effective learning. When learners have explicit knowledge, they pay more attention to language forms: when listening or reading, learners increase their attention to how the language is used, and when speaking and writing, learners try to use more accurate and complex language forms.

Japanese learners of English struggle to acquire practical English skills despite years of study. The reasons may include the following. One is that

many learners follow only explicit learning, and they overwhelmingly lack communication-focused learning. For these learners to build the interface between explicit and implicit learning, they must not limit themselves to only explicit learning such as translating English sentences into Japanese, and memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, but have more opportunities to practice the language using all four skills. Another reason is often due to the methods which learners practice. An example of such a method is when learners mechanically do grammar exercises while focusing only on sentence patterns without thinking about their meanings. Learning without meaning cannot be applied to communication where conveying meaning is indispensable. Explicit knowledge does not naturally become implicit knowledge without effort. Learners must make efforts and teachers need to support them to bridge the gap between these two.

4. What to Do in the Classroom for Language Acquisition

The types of tasks teachers provide learners and how they teach them in the classroom are important because these may affect what English skills and to what extent learners can develop. Daily English conversation requires quick response in language use, but usually does not require much complexity in content. Set phrases are often used, and learners are expected to use them skillfully. Meanwhile, tasks such as explaining or expressing opinions on social issues, giving presentations, and participating in debates require more complexity and accuracy of language to match the contents, in addition to being requiring quick responses. While trying to complete a given task, learners can improve their abilities. Therefore, teachers have to know well what tasks require what abilities to use before assigning a task, and learners should clearly grasp the purpose of learning. This will help to develop the required skills in the process of performing tasks. While taking task difficulties for the learners into consideration, teachers need to determine what types of scaffolding are necessary in the learning processes for effective education.

Language acquisition starts with input and is led to output. What should

be done in classrooms to connect input to output? The basis of language acquisition is listening as input. Useful input in language acquisition should have a clear scene or situation, something that learners can relate to their own lives, and topic which learners are interested in. Classroom instruction sometimes focuses so much on learning grammar and vocabulary that teachers may neglect to provide learners with meaningful input. Even when the focus is on English conversation practice, the focus may be on repetition of dialogue, and input may be neglected. What is effective for language acquisition is exposure to as much input as possible that is rich in semantic content.

The role of output is also important. It is essential to incorporate as much knowledge and information as possible from the input into the output; however, that does not mean that learners should be able to say everything they listen to or be able to write everything they read. Language ability has two aspects; receptive and productive abilities, and the latter does not exceed the former. Learners do not have to use all they have learnt from the input, and it is good to use part of what they have listened to or read in their own way. They do not have to worry about making mistakes. After producing output in this way, when exposed to the input again, learners pay more attention to the sentence structures, grammar, and vocabulary than before, resulting in noticing the gap between the observed input and their output, and learning how the language is used. Next time they produce output, their speaking may be able to be more accurate. The very important thing is that learners find what they could not say in their output and know how to say from the input.

4.1 How to Facilitate Task Engagement

In Japan, where English is not used on a daily basis, classrooms play an important role in language acquisition. Tasks conducted in the classrooms enable learners to develop their English skills. Then, how can learners' task engagement be facilitated? It is required that learners perceive what they learn from task engagement as useful, relevant, and important to them (Shernoff, 2013). It is also necessary to encourage learners to have willingness to learn English. It depends on their intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. From learners' perspective, their engagement in an activity depends on whether

they feel that they will be able to accomplish the given task on their own; otherwise, they will not actively try to engage in the activity. Such thought is an important component of a facilitative mindset, a collective term for learners' internal factors related to engagement.

To cultivate a facilitative mindset in learners, teachers should support them to develop their self-efficacy and autonomy. Learners also need to have energy and persistence to continue proactively learning over a long period of time. How can these goals be achieved in teaching? For learners to immerse themselves in learning, there are five principles to facilitate their readiness and motivation: self-efficacy, a growth mindset, a sense of ownership, proactivity, and grit (Dornyei & Mercer, 2020). These are interrelated and represent various aspects of the positive and facilitative mindset.

If learners enjoy a task and become more motivated, they are likely to have self-efficacy. In contrast, when learners feel anxious, worried, or embarrassed in class, their self-efficacy will be noticeably reduced. As for proactivity, while it plays an important role in engaging in communication, proactivity is not merely a personality trait. Some people seem naturally more positive and active than others, but that also depends on the environment. If a person feels supported and secure; they then feel no risk in taking voluntary actions and become proactive. In other words, if a classroom is an environment in which a teacher is willing to accept and allow learners to speak and act freely, learners will be more active, have responsibility for their own learning, and be able to control their learning (Parker & Wu, 2014).

4.2 A Classroom Environment That Encourages English Learning

Since learning English is conducted through communicative human relations, the relationships among learners are critical to learner engagement, as is a trusting relationship between a teacher and learners. A key concept for building a group that can grow together and a positive classroom culture is psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019). This refers to a psychological state in which learners can freely express their opinions in the classroom without fear of being embarrassed, ridiculed, rejected, or offended, and without hesitation

of making mistakes. Everyone needs to feel that they do not hesitate to make mistakes and to be able to do their best to learn. Since using English in the classroom is stressful enough for learners, teachers should build a classroom culture which ensures psychological safety, where learners feel that other learners will warmly receive any mistakes they make.

Once psychological safety is assured, the next challenge is how to stimulate active engagement in tasks in that environment. To do this, tasks must be designed to suit the learners' English proficiency level. Learning occurs most effectively when working within The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, it is effective when a learner is working on something that is not too difficult for them and that they can do well with assistance. Ideally, a learner should feel competent and capable of performing the given task well, while also finding it interesting and enjoyable.

In light of these factors, what can and should be done in an English classroom? To develop communication skills, learners perform communication tasks in their classrooms. However, are these communication activities superficial? Repeating the same questions in the classroom, such as "What time did you get up?" or "What did you do last Sunday?" may not excite learners, and they may have to put up with unnecessary communication activities. Since their cognitive levels may be high, they may not be interested in being asked questions at lower levels. Instead, when teachers ask questions that draw out learners' own ideas, the learners feel motivated to do their best to convey their thoughts. Interactions which exchange thoughts are desirable, rather than content-less interactions which only serve to memorize fixed expressions. Learners want to answer questions which are interesting, intellectually stimulating, and worth exploring.

The argument that communication requires basic skills, and that grammar must be learned is valid, but grammar can be learned when necessary. Through trial and error, learners steadily learn how to use English. When learners feel the limitations of their skills in using English, they want to improve. Learners will start talking when being asked questions that stimulate their intellectual curiosity, and that motivate them to talk and express their opinions. English classrooms should facilitate interesting exchanges of

thought.

5. Willingness to Communicate

We communicate because we have something to say. In the case of using English, however, several factors prevent willingness to communicate (WTC). Removing these factors and fostering a positive attitude toward communication is a central goal of education (Dornyei, 2001).

Research on WTC originally began in the field of communication studies in the first language, with the question of why some people actively communicate while others do not. WTC in the first language is defined as willingness to start communication in a situation where a person is free to communicate (McCroskey, 1992). Since WTC in the foreign language is influenced by anxiety and perceived competence, people are willing to talk if they have no anxiety and are confident in their abilities (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In a study by MacIntyre and Charos (1996), people who considered themselves competent communicators participated in conversations regardless of their actual abilities.

Research of factors affecting WTC among Japanese university students learning English found that anxiety, perceived competence, and international posture influenced WTC (Yashima, 2002). Yashima describes international posture as a concept that includes "favorable attitude toward what English symbolizes," "interest in foreign or international affairs," and "willingness to go overseas to stay or work" (Yashima, 2002, 57). The research showed that for Japanese university students English is a symbol of international society, and the more clearly they want to be involved in such a society, the more likely they are willing to communicate in English.

In a model of WTC in a second language (MacIntyre et al., 1998), accuracy, communicative competence, confidence, and WTC are directly related to affective factors in learning a second language in the classroom. When teachers try to motivate learners in English classes, they need to focus on the internal factors of the individual learner.

Previous studies have noted that the links between affective factors,

WTC, and communicative behavior affect each other (Yashima, 2003; Yashima, 2004). As WTC increases, the amount of communication in English increases. When such a communication is a positive experience, anxiety about communication is eased and motivation to learn increases. As a result, English acquisition may progress well through communication.

6. Conclusion

Teachers can reduce learners' anxiety about using English, increase their perceived competence, and engage them in communication activities. To motivate learners to engage in active communication, teachers should choose topics, which learners have interests in and desire to talk about, rather than just set up a place for activities such as role-playing. During classroom activities, learners are motivated to speak, when they desire to express their thoughts and understand others. If classroom activities are conducted in a way that satisfies such desires, learners will be more active and motivated to learn actively, thereby increasing learning effectiveness.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented people from meeting and talking face to face. However, the pandemic led to dramatic advances in online communication, which is no longer an alternative, establishing a new means of communication. The same is true for English education. Classes can be held online using meeting systems, conducting communication activities. Currently, a new virtual world such as Metaverse is being built and the infrastructures are constantly being improved. Within such a world, people can meet new people as well as people they already know. This will allow people to talk to others from various countries within the same space, which is a great opportunity to communicate in English. Nevertheless, a courage or willingness to talk to a stranger may be still needed, if they do not start talking, a stranger remains a stranger in any environment. The external environment which increases opportunities for communication is indeed important. Still, willingness to communicate to construct meaning is more important than improving the learning environment.

Note

（1）　explicit and implicit learning: Explicit learning is learning with awareness of what has been learned, while implicit learning takes place without awareness of what has been learned.

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