BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: A CASE FOR OUT-OF-CLASS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The most successful language learners often attribute much of their success to initiatives they undertook to extend opportunities for language learning beyond the classroom. Experiential learning theory also argues that making connections between in-class learning and personalized out-of-class applications maximizes learning. The litmus test of success in second language learning is whether the learner can actually use the language to communicate beyond the classroom.

Recent developments in information technology, particularly the Internet, give learners access to an astonishing variety of authentic aural and written texts. The proliferation of social networking sites provides learners with opportunities to communicate in speech and writing with other users of their chosen target language around the globe.

In this paper, I will argue that learning through using language in authentic as well as pedagogically structured contexts outside the classroom can significantly enhance the language learning process. Practical illustrations and examples in the form of case studies will be presented to illustrate the rich variety of opportunities that exist for language learning and use outside the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The two contexts for language learning and use are inside the classroom and outside the classroom. Traditionally, the classroom world was where language was learned, and the world beyond the classroom was where language was used. This distinction between language learning and language use began to break down with the development of communicative language teaching, which brought with it experiential learning (Kohonen 1992) and the notion that one could actually acquire a language by using it productively and communicatively inside the classroom. By the same token, one could also increase the rate of acquisition by studying and using the language beyond the classroom.

Until recently, opportunities for language learning beyond the classroom were fairly limited. These days, however, thanks largely to technology, there are enormous opportunities for individuals, regardless of the language they are learning, to connect and interact with other speakers of those languages. One of the interesting things that is happening is that there is an enormous spread of individuals using a wide range of languages. Not just languages that are used widely for international communication, business communication, media and so on, such as English, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish and Arabic, but minor languages as well. The number of second language conversations – so, ones between second language speakers of these global languages – is increasing exponentially.

In fact, if you could take a snapshot of individuals around the world engaged in that moment in genuine communication beyond the classroom using English, it would reveal far more second language to second language speakers of English than native speakers, whether conversing with other native speakers or with second language speakers. English can no longer be claimed to belong to any one national group, not even the English themselves. Native speakers can no longer claim that they own the English language. These days, English belongs to anybody who chooses to use it. And I would argue the same goes for Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, and for the many other languages that are used around the world.

In the background section that follows, I shall draw a contrast between patterns of language use in the classroom and discourse outside it. I shall also set out some of the limitations of the classroom, as well as pointing to some of the advantages of language learning beyond the classroom. This is followed by five case studies of language learning beyond the classroom. These studies show how teachers in a range of contexts, and using a range of languages around the world, have developed ways of encouraging their learners to develop target language skills beyond the classroom. They have been selected from an edited collection of twenty-eight studies of language learning beyond the classroom (Nunan & Richards 2015).

BACKGROUND

Prior research has shown that classroom discourse tends to be structured and hierarchical. It involves simple rituals and routines as well as display language. Behaviour and contexts of use are safe and predictable (McCarthy & Walsh 2003). Discourse beyond the classroom, on the other hand, is relatively unstructured and its contexts of use generate complex rituals and routines resulting in authentic (rather than display) language. Behaviour is unregulated, and communication is relatively risky and unpredictable. Comparing the discourses used by learners in the classroom and beyond the classroom provides insights into the complex relationship between instructed language acquisition and language use. While the structured, hierarchical discourse of the classroom has certain benefits for learners, particularly in the early stages of learning another language, it is also important for them to be exposed to the risky business of authentic interaction beyond the classroom.

In the 1980s, the idea was proposed of making classrooms indistinguishable from the world outside the classroom in terms of discourse and interaction. The idea was that learners would "pick up" the second language through a little-understood process of osmosis in much the same way as they acquired their first language (Krashen & Terrell 1983). This so-called "natural approach", in which teachers organized integrative opportunities in class that mirrored those that took place outside the classroom, certainly had merit. However, to completely exclude classroom language and patterns of interaction was a mistake. Classrooms exist to provide learners with learning opportunities that they cannot get outside the classroom. We need both in-class and out-of-class learning / using activities to maximize the learning potential for our students.

Beyond the classroom, learners have opportunities for authentic input, comprehensible input as it is called, but also authentic output, opportunities to get closer to the kind of language that we use for authentic communication because that is in fact what they are going to be doing with the language that they are learning. Beyond the classroom, there is a much broader range of interactional contexts than can exist in the classroom, where the only people that a student can interact with are the teacher and other students. And, of course, there are unequal power relationships between teacher and students that affect the discourse. For example, students rarely if ever get to ask questions of the teacher apart from language-related questions. And the great majority of teacher questions are not genuine questions at all, but are "display" questions, the function of which is to get students to display their knowledge. While classrooms and what goes on in them are critically important to successful language learning, so also is learning outside the classroom.

In summary, language classrooms have a particular place and a particular value. While they are necessary, in many contexts, they are not sufficient for language acquisition to develop to the point where learners can communicate effectively beyond the classroom. We need to provide learners with structured, semi-structured and unstructured opportunities to study and practise language beyond the classroom.

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: EXTENSIVE READING (DAY & ROBB 2015)

Anderson (2008) argues that the best way of developing fluent reading skills is through extensive reading. He distinguishes between intensive and extensive reading as follows:

> The differences between intensive and extensive reading are important for teachers to understand. Intensive reading is the teaching of reading skills, vocabulary, and phonological instruction, typically through short reading passages followed by reading comprehension exercises. Extensive reading is reading of longer passages with a focus on enjoyment and / or learning new information while reading. There is typically no accountability required during extensive reading. (Anderson 2008, 8)

In contrast with intensive reading, extensive reading is carried out for enjoyment rather than for the purpose of mastering grammar and vocabulary. Linguistic skills and knowledge will develop incidentally rather than intentionally.

Day and Robb (2015) present the case study of Wendy, a beginner learning Japanese as a foreign language. In addition to undergoing formal instruction, Wendy made the decision to embark on a self-study program based on extensive reading. Over a nine-week period she read forty-three books. These were simple books, including comic books and children's storybooks. During this time, she kept a journal of the extensive reading experiences. At week ten, she made the following note:

> The cool thing about reading so far, or perhaps I should say the rewarding part is when I am able to recognize words that I have read from other books before. Last night I took a Japanese children's book from the bookshelf and was going to show the pictures to my baby. As I scanned through the book, I realized that I could read some of the words. (cited in Day & Robb 2015, 4)

Day and Robb identify five principles that underpin successful extensive reading programs. In the first place, given the fact that the primary aim is reading for pleasure and that learning will be incidental rather than intentional, the reading texts must be well within the reader's comfort zone. The second principle is to provide learners with a variety of reading material. This will help to maintain interest and motivation. Older learners should be given the opportunity to select their own reading material. As the name implies, extensive reading entails reading as much as possible. Finally, the focus should be on reading for enjoyment and general understanding rather than for specific linguistic information. This is not to say that there are not specific language outcomes. Vocabulary development is particularly facilitated by extensive reading. However, as has been mentioned, it happens incidentally. Day and Robb (2005, 7) also argue that extensive reading fosters positive attitudes towards reading in general: "perhaps the best result from numerous studies is that students develop positive attitudes towards reading and increased motivation to study the target language".

CASE STUDY 2: EMAIL TANDEM LEARNING (SASAKI 2015)

In email tandem learning, a second language learner is paired up with a first language speaker of the language he/she is learning. That speaker will be a second language learner of the other person's first language. Sasaki (2015) presents a case study of two high school language learners, Shelly, an American learning Japanese, and Shogo, a native Japanese speaker learning English, who took part in an email tandem learning program to augment their regular in-class language courses. Shelly sent Shogo emails in Japanese, and Shogo wrote to Shelly in English. Shelly responded to Shogo's email in English, correcting mistakes and pointing out cultural information, and Shogo did the same to Shelly's email in Japanese.

Sasaki notes that:

> The unique aspect of this activity is that, unlike regular *native speaker-nonnative speaker (NS-NNS)* communication, where only one participant (i.e. NNS) benefits as a learner, tandem partners bring their own L1 knowledge and reciprocally support their partner's L2 learning. Therefore e-mail tandem is considered to be potentially beneficial to L2 learners on *both* sides. This practice stands on the notion of collaborative learning where each interlocutor plays an active role as an expert of his or her own L1 and provides scaffolding to assist the partner's (i.e. novice's) L2 learning. (Sasaki 2015, 116)

The technique promotes learner-centeredness and independence because the students get to make decisions about what topics to write about and what kind of feedback to provide to their partner. Having to provide linguistic explanations about aspects of their native language improves their linguistic awareness. At one point, after Shogo had corrected Shelly's misuse of the *-wa* and *-ga* particles, Shelly asked for a grammatical explanation of the difference. Shogo was embarrassed to admit that he didn't know: like most native speakers, he had relatively little knowledge of the grammatical rules of his own language. His journal entry reads:

> In the previous reply, she wrote, "How can I distinguish *-wa* and *-ga?* They both mark the subject of the sentence!" I felt she was irritated, but I couldn't answer right away. I felt guilty for not being able to solve her problem.

One day in his regular English class, the teacher reviewed the use of the definite and indefinite article and suddenly he realized what the distinction was between *-wa* and *-ga*. He wrote:

> Finally! I discovered the difference between "-wa" and "-ga", which is almost like the distinction of English articles "a" and "the". I hope Shelly will be glad to know this.

Students also developed intercultural knowledge and awareness. One of the topics that Shelly and Shogo chose was on festivals. By describing and comparing important festivals, they were able to enrich their knowledge of American and Japanese culture.

Sasaki makes a number of observations on the email tandem learning technique. Firstly, e-mail tandem helps learners develop linguistic skills by using language as both medium and topic of communication. Secondly, it is important to encourage learners to learn from each other's cultural background. Shogo, for example, realizes that before she makes a criticism of his English, Shelly praises him. In his reflective journal, he notes, "I received a lot of comments in her feedback, and I felt good every time I read them. I think it's an American custom to offer high praise when they give negative comments so that their comments do not sound like refusal or rejection but instead constructive." Sasaki's third point is that through the e-mail tandem technique, learners engage in authentic communication rather than regurgitating pre-fabricated patterns or reproduce the meaning of others. Finally, the technique fosters learner autonomy, and increases metalinguistic awareness.

CASE STUDY 3: DIALOGUE JOURNALS (CHIESA & BAILEY 2015)

For Chiesa and Bailey (2015), the dialogue journal is an ideal vehicle for connecting the classroom with the world beyond the classroom. A dialogue journal contains reciprocal, ongoing written exchanges between students and teachers used consistently over time (Peyton 1993). Chiesa and Bailey (2015) report on a dialogue journal case study between Jennifer, a university student in China, and Dave, her American teacher. The study was carried out over the course of a semester. Jennifer wrote to Dave on a regular basis, and Dave responded. In the case study, some major issues emerged that highlight some of the strengths of this technique as a way of making connections between the pedagogical context of the classroom and the personal world of the student beyond the classroom.

In the journal, Jennifer documents her dysfunctional home life, including physical and mental abuse, that impinged on her ability to focus on her studies. In one entry, she recounted the following episode:

> The time when I found my dad didn't love my mom was on my tenth birthday. My dad left us, no, abandoned us. My mom woke me up in the early morning, and handed me a note, asking me to read aloud. (My mom is illiterate.) I recognized my father's handwriting. That note was very short, but the content in it was so hurtful to my mom and me that it took me nearly 30 minutes to finish reading it. The scene of searching for my father around the city where I lived became a scar later in my heart. I could not understand the reason why my dad left without saying anything. (Jennifer, Journal entry #3)

This entry highlights the fact that journal entries can raise issues that can prove to be extremely challenging for the teacher and that will almost certainly not come up in regular classroom discussions, but will have a material effect on the ability of the student to deal with the exigencies of regular classroom study – even though the incident may have taken place some years before, as is the case with Jennifer. In this instance, the teacher, Dave, has to decide how to respond to what was clearly a traumatic incident.

A fundamental principle in responding to students' journal entries is that the focus should be on experiential rather than linguistic content, that is, the teacher should respond to the ideas expressed and not to issues of discourse, grammar or vocabulary. (That said, the teaching might identify certain errors that are commonly made by different students in the class, and use these as the basis of a follow-up language review.) Another important principle is that the teacher should adopt a personal rather than an instructional stance in reacting to the students' entries. As Chiesa and Bailey state, "The teacher should relinquish power in order to build interactive reciprocity."

As indicated above, a major benefit of dialogue journals is that they provide a window on the world of the learners beyond the classroom. They provide a means of building into the instructional process the interests, needs and experiences of learners. This is a fundamental feature of a learner-centred approach to instruction (Nunan 2013). Needless to say, the teacher needs to exercise judgment when making decisions about what content from dialogue journals to draw on, and how to draw on the content. Confidentiality has to be respected at all times, and it would be inappropriate to draw directly on the content from Jennifer's journal. However, such content can act as a warning signal to the teacher about the possible negative impact of touching on certain subjects in class.

A drawback of the technique is that it is time consuming, but for the students, but also for the teacher, particularly if he / she is teaching large classes. Dave the teacher who features in this case study spent many hours each week responding to the entries made by his students.

CASE STUDY 4: INTENSIVE LISTENING (GRODE & STACY 2015)

In case study 1, I presented a snapshot of extensive reading, while at the same time making the point that intensive reading can also be useful. Extensive and intensive listening can also be valuable ways of improving listening skills. Intensive listening involved the close study of a relatively short audio or videoclip. In the study presented by Grode and Stacy (2015) Keiko, a Japanese student of English, and her partner, decided they wanted to improve the accuracy of some specific features of discourse, grammar and pronunciation. They found a short scene in the popular television series *Sex and the City* which contained the target features of interest. Guided by their teachers, they then carried out an independent three-step procedure on the scene. Firstly, they listened to the scene multiple times, and made a written transcription, marking pronunciation features they wanted to focus on such as the phonemes /l/ and /r/ and intonation and stress patterns. Then they rehearsed the scene using the transcript. Finally, they tried "shadowing" the original, listening to and speaking along with short segments, trying to get as close to the original as possible.

When the teachers reviewed Keiko's attempts to mimic the original, they found that her

> errors were stubbornly resistant to change. She could use the target forms, for example /l/ and /r/ when monitoring her speech, but would continue to make the same errors when focused on meaning. Building automaticity through drilling proved helpful. "... the facilitation of extensive practice is also an underlying principle of improving spoken accuracy for the basic notion of repetition is a solid one that can lead to automaticity of use". (Grode & Stacy 2015)

The authors identify four principles for getting learners to undertake intensive listening. Firstly, get learners working with authentic material and developing a greater awareness of the elements that make up English speech. Although the *Sex and the City* material was scripted, it was not specially written and recorded for the purposes of language teaching. The students were therefore working with naturalistic chunks of material. Secondly, in practising the transcript and shadowing the original scene, the students were encouraged to strive for automaticity. The third principle is raising awareness. Through the intensive study of short scenes from television dramas, students' linguistic awareness of their own speech, as well as the characteristics of English, were raised. Finally, the task fostered autonomy: the students took key decisions about which drama to work from and which linguistic features to practise, and completed the practice activities outside the classroom. The perceived disadvantage was that the procedure, particularly doing the transcription, was extremely time consuming.

CASE STUDY 5: CONTACT ASSIGNMENTS (CADD 2015)

Contact assignments are designed to provide learners with structured opportunities to use the target language for authentic communication with native speakers or advanced learners of the target language. Study-abroad programs, tandem language techniques (such as the email tandem technique described in case study 2), and language villages are all designed to provide such opportunities. (Language villages provide a relatively short, intensive language immersion experience without the learners having to leave their own country.) Arnold and Fonseca (2015, 225) state that "The starting point of the experience is learners' desire to improve their language skills and increase their knowledge of the culture in situations of authentic communication."

Cadd describes a university program he established for students studying foreign languages. Students were required to take part in summer study-abroad programs. During this time they had to complete twelve contact assignments along with a self-evaluation, and report back to the professors and fellow students on a class website. He presents a case study of Monica, an American student of Spanish, who undertook a study-abroad program in Spain. Monica carried out twelve tasks that required her to interact with native speakers and report back to the teachers and fellow students through the online discussion forum.

Here is an example of a typical contact assignment. As can be seen, the assignment has two parts: a task part, describing what the student is to do, and an evaluation guide, consisting of reflective questions for the student to complete as they report back on their experience.

Task
Attend a festival, fair, public event etc. celebrated in the culture. Speak with at least two members of the culture who are present. Choose two who are quite different: e.g. young vs. old, male vs. female etc. Ask why the event is important.

Reflective questions
Which festival, fair, public event etc. did you investigate? What is its history? Did you learn anything meaningful about the culture? If so, what? Did you notice any differences between your style of communication and theirs? If so, what were they? Did you have problems understanding them? If so, what did you do about it? (Cadd 2015)

Monica's response to the contact assignments overall was positive. She reported that her fluency and confidence increased as a result of undertaking them.

If I can introduce myself to the person and get the person to see that I can speak Spanish well enough to hold a conversation, they are much less likely to keep switching back into English. They are appreciative that someone can speak the language fairly well and so I get more practice. (Monica Journal entry)

Cadd argues that success with foreign language learning is significantly enhanced with out-of-class learning experiences, and that the blending of in-class learning and out-of-class applications represents the optimal environment for success with foreign language learning. However, the caveat is that the success of study-abroad programs rests very much on the extent to which the students interact with members of the target community. He cites research suggesting that many study-abroad programs are ineffective because students do not avail themselves of the opportunity to interact, but effectively "ghettoize" themselves by socializing with other students of their own language background. It is understandable that students want to stay within their "cultural comfort zone" to minimize culture shock and the anxiety of publicly interacting in a foreign language. The solution is to create a program of contact assignments such as the one devised by Cadd. He argues that these assignments need to be "decisive interventions" (Laubscher 1994). A "decisive intervention" is one in which the student gains an insider perspective on the target language and culture, usually from a "key informant" who will in the normal course of events be a native speaker: it is more than simply collecting and reporting information, it is a consciousness-raising experience.

In summary, while contact assignments can be threatening and create anxiety, overall they improve confidence, fluency and cultural sensitivity. They are also motivating, because students find real-world applications for what they have learned in class.

BENEFITS AND PITFALLS

BENEFITS

Each of the techniques described above have their own unique strengths and weaknesses. However, there are some generalizations that we can make across most out-of-class activities. When considering benefits of out-of-class learning, the twenty-eight students reported in Nunan and Richards (2015) most often came up with these three words: authenticity, meaningful, and autonomy.

There are two types of authenticity: input authenticity and output authenticity. Input authenticity refers to the aural and written texts that learners are exposed to. These are texts that came about in the course of regular communication rather than being specially written for the purposes of teaching a language. Specially written texts are important, particularly in the early stages of the learning process, but exposure to authentic texts is also externally helpful; some, and I am one of them, would say it is fundamental. Authenticity of output is also fundamental. Learners need to go beyond the production of prefabricated formulaic utterances to producing their own unique utterances. Again, in the early stages, the production of formulaic utterances is an important step in the acquisition process, but in order to engage in meaningful communication, learners need to go beyond these prefabricated patterns.

This brings us to the next benefit of out-of-class experiences: they provide opportunities for authentic interaction. At the beginning of the chapter, I pointed out some of the characteristics of classroom interaction that makes it different from meaningful interaction outside the classroom, such as that it is ritualistic and predictable. I also noted that this is a good thing in the early stages of language learning, because it provides security to the learner and enables him / her to make sense of and practise core grammatical patterns in a secure, supportive environment. In meaningful, communicative interactions outside of the classroom, such as those that are necessitated by, for example, contact assignments in study-abroad programs, they need to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability. They also get to practise important skills such as initiating a conversation, asking for clarification, signalling lack of understanding, checking comprehension and other communicative strategies.

The third benefit of out-of-class activities is that, by their very nature, they lead to the development of autonomy. Whether the out-of-class activity is initiated by the teacher or is self-initiated by the student, when they actually engage in the task itself they have to function autonomously in making decisions about how to proceed with the task, how, when and with whom to interact, etc. The practice of autonomy is illustrated in each of the five case studies that form the body of this chapter. On case study 1, Wendy makes decisions about which materials to read, and how much time to spend on independent reading. Shogo and Shelly, in case study 2, have to decide on which topics to discuss, how to structure their own target language messages, and what kind of feedback to give to their partner. Similarly, in case study 3, Jennifer has to decide on whether she will reveal to her teacher, Dave, highly personal and emotionally charged incidents from her personal life. (And Dave, for his part has to decide how to deal with these.) Although Keiko's intensive listening task is directed by the teacher, she and her partner have to decide on which phonological, grammatical and discourse features to focus on, which TV drama to select, which scene from the drama to work with, and how much time to devote to the activity. In the final case study, Monica has to decide which of the contact assignments to carry out, how to initiate the interaction necessitated by the assignment, and how to complete it, negotiating meaning and deploying other communication strategies to see the assignment through to a successful conclusion. She also has to work independently to reflect on and evaluate the assignment.

PITFALLS

A pitfall mentioned by virtually all of the participants involved in out-of-class activities is that they are time consuming. This is the case for students and, for some assignments such as dialogue journals, for teachers as well. In some ways this is a benefit in disguise. There is evidence that the amount of additional time devoted to language learning beyond the classroom is correlated with success at foreign language learning. For example, Wong and Nunan (2011) find it is a significant factor differentiating between more successful and less successful learners. The more successful learners spent up to fifteen hours a week using English outside the classroom, while less successful learners spent less than one hour a week on out-of-class tasks.

Another pitfall frequently mentioned in the case of tasks requiring face-to-face interaction, such as contact assignments, was that they could be threatening and anxiety-creating. Initially, at least, students reported that being forced to interact with native speakers was a frightening prospect. In the long run, however, all improved fluency, confidence, and sensitivity towards the target culture.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have made a case for blended learning programs, suggesting that this can be achieved through the addition of an out-of-class dimension to traditional classroom programs. I illustrated the range and diversity of out-of-class learning through five activities: extensive reading, email tandem learning, dialogue journals, intensive listening, and contact assignments. I also discussed some general benefits and pitfalls of out-of-class learning, illustrating these with reference to five case studies.

Based on their analysis of twenty-eight language learning activities, Nunan and Richards (2015, xv) make seven observations on language learning beyond the classroom. I shall conclude the chapter by listing and glossing these seven observations.

1. Out-of-class activities provide opportunity to address some of the limitations of classroom-based learning. These include limited access to authentic input and output.

2. The wide-ranging benefits such opportunities provide encompass the development of language and communication skills, improvements in confidence and motivation, personal growth, and intercultural awareness. In other words, out-of-class learning addresses the shortcomings of classroom instruction in the cognitive, communicative and affective domains.

3. Out-of-class learning provides authentic language experiences and opportunities for real communication. Again, in the body of the chapter, I have contrasted the relative artificiality and predictability of classroom interaction with the opportunities for meaningful communication afforded by out-of-class activities.

4. There is a need to integrate classroom-based learning with out-of-classroom learning since both support each other. I have taken pains to stress the fact that in-class and out-of-class learning are not "either-or" options. Both have their own particular contributions to make to the learning process.

5. It is important to establish clear goals for out-of-class learning activities, to prepare students for the activities, and to provide follow-up in the classroom. As learners are on their own, and having to function autonomously in the out-of-class component of the program, the goals of the activity have to be clearly articulated, there has to be careful in-class preparation, and a debriefing and evaluation after the activity is essential.

6. The activities entail new roles for both teachers and learners as well as the need to develop learning and communication strategies to support out-of-class learning. As learners will be functioning autonomously, without the guidance and support of the teacher, they will have to adopt a different role from that of the recipient of knowledge. Teachers also have to see themselves as guides and supporters rather than dispensers of information.

7. Particularly through technology, many out-of-class activities allow learners to make use of the tools and digital resources that are a part of their everyday lives. Technology has made out-of-class learning feasible in many contexts and situations where, hitherto, it was only an aspiration or even a dream. These days, technological tools and digital resources are a part of everyone's daily reality. It is up to the teacher to show learners how to use these tools and resources not only for entertainment and communication but also for independent learning.

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