

Role reversal: A teacher's lessons from language study

Timothy Buthod

Background

This paper reports the experiences and observations of the author, a teacher of English in Japan, as a student on a short-term intensive Indonesian language course in Indonesia. Aside from simple interest, I undertook the project for two reasons, to gain an understanding of myself, a middle-aged adult trying to learn something new, and to examine language learning as a learner rather than as a teacher.

In recent years, the concept of lifelong learning has garnered considerable attention both inside and outside academia (Field, 2000). This paper aims to focus on one case of adult learning, specifically learning by a practicing teacher. While scholars have written extensively about the concept of the teacher-as-learner in the field of curriculum development for public schools in the west (Briscoe, 1996), there has been scant attention to this matter in the EFL community in Japan (Buthod, 2012). Yet this avenue of reflective practice offers an opportunity for insights in both teacher development and program design.

Why Indonesian?

There were several reasons for choosing Indonesian for this project. The most obvious reason was cost. Travel from Japan to Indonesia is relatively cheap, and everyday expenses are a fraction of what they are in Japan. In addition, the competition among private language schools keeps the price of courses quite low. The Indonesian language suited my purposes perfectly as well. It was largely new to me, unlike European languages, most of which were already familiar to me.

Regarding the Indonesian language, it has something of a reputation as an easy language to learn. As a language fan, I was curious to see whether this was true. As it happens, I found certain aspects of the language easy, such as the straightforward correspondence between sound and spelling. Verb tenses are comparatively simple and regular as well. However, I would hardly say that it is an easy language. The complex system of affixes that is used to convert words to other parts of speech or express verb aspect was a complete mystery to me. The language also features several ways to express politeness and intimacy, all of which can be difficult for an English speaker.

In my particular case, there was another incentive to study Indonesian. My university was about to undertake an exchange program with a partner university in Indonesia. I thought some knowledge

of the language and culture might help me in my support role for international students.

About the program

The school I attended was a private language institute in Jogjakarta. There were about a dozen teachers, and they taught Indonesian to foreigners as well as English to local students. The school also offered apartments onsite for its students, coordinated homestays and arranged tourist and cultural events. I only had a week in Indonesia, so I arranged for a four-day, twelve-hour one-on-one course.

The lessons themselves were largely unstructured. The teacher would bring up a topic and ask a few questions about it. If I struggled, she would put new vocabulary on the board and ask further questions about the topic. When I made mistakes, she wrote the correct forms on the board and made me repeat the sentences correctly. There were frequent stretches of silence, which I eventually learned to break with questions about things I had seen and heard on the streets the day before. There was no homework and no textbook, but I studied after class with a variety of materials I had bought on my own.

About me

It is worth noting that my situation is not really parallel to what a student would experience on a study-abroad program. As a 48-year-old language teacher, I obviously did not see the language classroom the same way most 19-year-old college students would. I had both escorted students on study-abroad programs and taught in intensive ESL programs myself. As a learner, I had done short-term programs over the years in France, Korea, Latin America, Portugal and Greece. It is fair to say I was more prepared, motivated and aware than the average university student.

As for my approach to learning the language, I was using what you might call the shotgun method. In the months leading up to going to Indonesia, I had bought and used a range of self-taught Indonesian materials, including Pimsleur, Teach Yourself, and Assimil. By studying with a variety of sources, I found I could see vocabulary and structures repeated in different contexts. This recycling, I believe, facilitated transfer of learning from one situation to another. This approach also allowed room for different elements of learning: input, practice and metalinguistic understanding.

Observations

The free-form lessons raised a number of concerns, but on the whole they worked well for me.

For one thing, the vocabulary that happens to come up in an open-ended chat may not lend itself to useful transfer. It also requires a conscious effort to keep the interaction focused on topics and structures that will help you improve, as opposed to falling into a rut of old familiar expressions. However, this very danger was, for me, a useful motivator in keeping mindful of the ultimate goal of the conversation. The free-conversation format also complemented my other studies nicely. I was collecting information from various sources, but the lessons offered me a chance to practice it and a laboratory to experiment with forms I was not yet confident in using.

This last point strikes me as particularly important. Stevick wrote about the worktable of short-term memory (1998), and in these lessons I was forced to manipulate the language items on my worktable. That in turn helps solidify them in the memory. Testing my interlanguage hypotheses with the teacher reminded me of Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1980). From this experience I found it helpful to summarize Long's ideas in the three A's of awareness, attention and adjustment. My AAA model involves awareness of what you are doing, attention to what you hear and what you say, and adjustment of your understanding and approach. Throughout the experience, I found myself consciously readjusting my understanding of certain words and phrases based on both how I heard them used and the results of my own attempts to use them.

This project also gave me a chance to reflect on my own tendencies as a learner. I found myself to be rather impatient, eager to say more than I was linguistically ready to tackle. I was also a bit lost due to the infinite variety of directions to pursue my curiosity. It was difficult to focus on one point when there were so many things I did not yet know. Finally, I realized I was a bit of a showoff, eager to earn the teacher's praise by using some phrase I had picked up on the street the day before. Oddly enough, I cannot help but think these traits are not so different from those of my students.

Applications

These observations lend themselves to several points worth considering as you learn a new language, teach a language, or manage a study abroad program. In the following paragraphs, I will lay out these practical implications for a person in each of these roles.

The learner

For a learner, a few points came to mind, particularly for a learner immersed in a target-language environment. The most important point is that your progress is up to you. You need to have a plan of attack. Second, the link between the classroom and the world outside is crucial. The best way to improve is to go out and make a point of using what you learned in the classroom today. Likewise, the classroom is the perfect place to test out something you heard on the street yesterday. Finally, people often talk about a shower of language. Though it is no silver bullet, there is definitely

something to this idea. Common phrases come up in all sorts of situations. Input alone is not enough, but it sure helps.

The teacher

For a language teacher, being on the other side of the table can teach you a lot, starting with the fact that there are two sides to the table. Just remembering that the student has a different perspective is a big step in itself. Over the course of a lesson, sometimes a teacher and a student can have very different ideas of what is going on. One way this became clear to me was in realizing my own learning preferences. If I have preferences, I suppose it's natural that other people would, too. Whatever techniques and principles I know as a teacher, there is still another person on the other end, a person who by definition thinks in a different way from me. So I must approach teaching in a way that increases my chances of reaching that person.

With the rather haphazard structure of the lessons in this program, I was often frustrated with the lack of direction provided by the teacher. Though I believe the student must have a long-term plan of attack, the teacher must set the scene and provide direction at the micro level. Whether it is topics, settings or structures, the teacher must set some parameters for the student to work with. A failure to do that can be disorienting to the student, shutting off any chance of learning.

Another issue that proved surprisingly relevant in my Indonesian course was taboo topics. Years ago in my teacher training, I was told to avoid religion, politics, and other sensitive topics because they could spoil the mood of the class and make students uncomfortable. My experience in Indonesia proved the opposite. Presumably my trainers were focusing on group classes in Japan where awkwardness leads directly to silence. My class in Indonesia, on the other hand, was a private lesson. I knew little about Indonesia, and much of what I wanted to know about the country was related to religion or politics. The classroom, in fact, was the perfect place to ask about these things. It was a safe environment I could use to get an Indonesian perspective without ruffling feathers in a social context. As a teacher, I suppose I need to gauge the competing priorities here, raising tough topics in the classroom when there is a danger of problems arising if those topics came up outside the classroom.

Thinking about my ongoing development as a teacher, this course brought back memories of various experiences in my own past. It reminded me of books I had read, courses I had taken, etc. I have already mentioned my teacher training from twenty years ago. The project stirred memories of books I had studied as an undergraduate or graduate student. Surely this kind of booster shot would be useful for teachers in any field as a part of their continuing professional development.

In the end, for a teacher the biggest point is empathy. This course gave me a certain empathy

for the ambiguity and vulnerability students often feel in the classroom. When I tell students to stop thinking in their native language and just work with the tools they have in the target language, I should remember this feeling of frustration. Clearly an adult with complex ideas does not feel comfortable confined to simple language structures.

The study-abroad administrator

Finally, let us look at what this kind of experience can teach us as administrators of study abroad programs. At the time of this course, I was responsible for support for international students at my campus. I was also involved in planning, recruiting and chaperoning for our outbound study programs. There are several points to keep in mind, both in receiving and sending students. I will outline them in the following paragraphs, with a particular focus on the role of pre-departure orientation programs.

In receiving international students to your school, there are issues to be aware of both inside the classroom and out. During my time in Jogjakarta, I was dependent on my language school not only for my language study, but also for housing, food and tourist information. Similarly, students coming to my school rely on us for the practical necessities of life. This can place a heavy burden on administrative officers who have to deal not only with visas and enrollment, but also with landlords, banks and so on. At the same time, the classroom teacher is often the point person for international students. Just as I asked my teacher questions about Indonesian society, we can expect our students to ask teachers about all manner of topics simply because the teacher is the person you see on a daily basis. In the language classroom, the effect may be positive because the student is intrinsically motivated by this kind of discussion. On the other hand, sorting out one student's personal business may not be the most efficient use of everyone's learning time.

If you are sending students overseas, several lessons from this project seem salient. First there is the fact that I arranged this program cheaply on my own with a school in Indonesia. Developing countries are cheap, first of all, and this kind of thing can be done in any language, not only English. In addition, my experience finding and booking a course on the internet makes it clear that students can arrange these things on their own without any help from the university structure.

Another lesson for us as we plan programs sending our students overseas is that support outside the classroom is crucial. Dealing with transport, banks or medical facilities in an alien culture is daunting, and the host institution has a major role to play. If we are to send students to an unfamiliar environment, we must make sure that systems are in place to help them work through any problems in these areas.

More than any other lesson I learned from this study-abroad experience, I was struck by the need for thorough pre-departure orientation. Pre-departure programs today, particularly in

Japanese universities sending students on short-term programs, tend to focus almost entirely on logistics and practical concerns. Very little attention goes to the deeper issues of how an individual student can make the experience fruitful and rewarding. Instead, you have detailed explanations about insurance, videos from the foreign ministry on how the students can expect to be drugged in a Parisian cafe, lectures from a travel agency about why they should buy a particular suitcase lock or sign up for a particular credit card, and exhaustive procedures about the paperwork required for credit transfer outlined by university staff.

What is missing, I believe, is awareness. If an orientation program can make students aware of the challenges they face and the tools at their disposal, it will go a long way toward making the experience a useful and fulfilling one. Without a direct prod, students may not be aware of the processes involved in language learning, the resources available to them, their own personal strengths and weaknesses, the affective challenges of living abroad, or the strategies available to them to deal with all of that. With awareness at its base, a pre-departure program would do well to include a concrete linguistic needs analysis, strategies training, goal setting, and a broad introduction to available resources and contacts.

Further research and conclusions

Reflecting on this project and considering the next steps, several potential projects come to mind. First, of course, is expanding this from one teacher's personal observations to a larger sample of teachers as learners. This would still be qualitative research since the focus would be on the effect on those teachers' own teaching practice rather than their language gains. Gathering more teachers' observations could provide richer insights into the phenomenon. Another angle to take on this would be comparing the observations of practicing teachers, who might be expected to be well-versed on the process of language learning, with those of younger language students, whose perspective might be more naive or, to put it positively, without prejudice. Another intriguing topic is the difference between the commercial model and the university model, leading to a discussion of how each sector could take lessons from the other. Finally, following on from that on a practical level, one could look at various approaches to study abroad to help universities expand options for their students.

With short-term study abroad programs growing in popularity, lifelong learning emerging as an essential component of personal and career development, and language learning expanding more and more outside the traditional educational system, intensive language courses for adults are drawing more and more interest. If you add to that the creative energy of the commercial tourist sector, you see a wide range of opportunities for different kinds of language learning experiences. This could represent a gold mine, possibly for our students but even more so for the continuing professional development of our teachers.

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