The Influence on Classroom Dynamics of a Process Syllabus Approach to English Language Teaching in Korean Middle Schools

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<Abstract>

This paper attempts to present the framework of dynamics in a language class in order to help understand the negative and positive dynamics through the comparison of two language situations: controlled and communicative language teaching. At the same time, it suggests a syllabus model, which modifies process syllabus considering limitations in Korean education. The key factors of process syllabus are ‘negotiation’ and ‘task’. Within this modified model, these two factors will promote interactions for communications between a teacher and students, and among students, sometimes involving interpersonal interactions. Here, especially, on-going needs analysis is used to negotiate with students about a language class, so that students would feel more responsible for the class and have a sense of purpose. This model will lead dynamics in a language class in the positive way for communicative language learning.

key words: needs analysis, task-based learning, CLT(Communicative Language Teaching), group dynamics, process syllabus

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I. Introduction

English education in Korea as directed by Ministry of Education and Science Technology tends to place greater emphasis on the policies of English language education than issues which occur in a language classroom. Besides, most language classes in Korea are rather controlled by teachers' talk. Talking is usually initiated by the teacher as an I-R-F (Initiation-Response-Feedback) exchange structure, where 'I' represents an initiating move, such as a question posed by the teacher, 'R' is the response from the class usually from an individual student and 'F' is the evaluative comment by the teacher (Cullen, 2002; Cazden, 1988). The focus of talking is not on natural conversation, but rather on grammatical understanding. The interactions that exist between a teacher and students or among students in the language classroom are mostly mechanical. These top-down communicating in and outside of a language class negatively influence language teaching and learning in a class in the following ways:

Firstly, students tend to adopt a passive attitude towards language learning activities in language classes.

Secondly, teachers' rote instructions as well as mechanical drills and exercises for 'getting students talking' become the dominant mode of delivery in a language class even if the importance of CLT for ELT (English Language Teaching) was emphasized.

These problems are primarily due to the lack of awareness of the importance of classroom dynamics for language learning and teaching. As for the language dimension, the lack of awareness of interpersonal interactions as an intrinsic characteristic of language results in 'getting students talking' instead of 'getting students communicating'. This paper thus has the following objectives:

Firstly, it provides a theoretical framework for a general understanding of classroom dynamics as well as explaining the relationship between ELT and classroom dynamics by illustrating the specific characteristics of classroom dynamics in a controlled and communicative language classes.

Secondly, it then suggests a syllabus model which is modified with on-going needs
analysis and Willis’ task-based framework (1996). This will be able to both activate and create desirable dynamics for English language teaching and learning within the Korean school context.

II. Group Dynamics in a Language Classroom

When it is considered that language is perceived as a complex reality reflecting social and cultural conventions for communication, the focus of language learning needs to be on improving communicative abilities in a social context. In this light, a classroom should be regarded as a valuable social space for language learning. Within this social context, students create diverse dynamics through interactions with a teacher and among their classmates.

The following sections describe the diverse aspects of dynamics in three different levels, which is interpreted by the means of interactions, and explain the characteristics of interactions in two different language learning situations.

1. Classroom Dynamics in English Language Teaching and Learning

The key factor, which should be considered to understand classroom dynamics, is ‘interaction’. Interaction in other subjects plays an assistant role in helping students’ understanding of content, but the role of interaction for language learning is more important than the other subjects. Interaction not only creates learning conditions which facilitate students’ understanding of the use of language, but also learning interactions between people, that is, language learning.

In a language classroom, the following three learning processes are assumed on the basis of interactions with variables at each level: during a course, a language class, and individuals’ learning processes:
Level C: a process during a course
- Interaction between a teacher and students for selection of content and methodology

Level B: a process during a language class
- Interaction between students for language learning
  <getting students talking vs. getting students communicating>

Level A: a process of individual students' learning
- Individual psychological learning process

[Figure 1] The three levels of learning process in a language classroom

As the focus of Figure 1 shows above, the focus of individuals' learning processes is on understanding the relationship between cognitive and affective capacities for language learning. The processes during a class are concerned with the characteristics of interactions and their influences on language learning. In this level, two interactions for language learning could occur: 'getting students talking' and 'getting students communicating'. Under the situation of 'getting students talking', the quantity of interaction in a language class is emphasized and mechanical drill exercises could be prevalent. However, language learning for communication cannot be achieved simply by these exercises for 'getting students talking'. It requires more than simply substituting some words in given sentence structures and exchanging them mechanically. The activities for 'getting students communicating', which require the interpersonal and meaning-focused interactions, should be practiced in a language class.

The final process is related to procedural interactions which support and facilitate effective language teaching and learning by narrowing the gaps between a teacher's and students' opinions about English classes. When the discrepancies are narrowed by the negotiation process, students will learn what a teacher expects students to learn through the realized syllabus. This process also creates unique classroom dynamics and reinforces group cohesiveness and individuals' identities within a classroom group. What is important in these learning processes is that each level of processes is interrelated and mutually influences each other. The figure 1 provides a framework to understand the dynamics of
the following classrooms: controlled and communicative classrooms.

2. Dynamics of Controlled and Communicative Classrooms

Figure 2 shows the differences in classroom dynamics between two classrooms at the three levels of learning processes. First of all, the individual learning level of a controlled classroom focuses on cognitive capacity. Due to the vision of language as a code, students are more concerned with improving the cognitive capacity such as understanding the meanings of words, and sentence structures. During a language class, teacher talk is dominant. Even if there are some conversation exercises, the focus is on ‘getting students talking’ by providing drills, exercises or role plays, and these activities yield mechanical interactions. In this context, there exists a simple formula that the more frequently students interact with language, the more improvement students will make during language learning. However, repeating others’ words or sentences with partners does not motivate students to keep carrying out interactions. It also does not guarantee that students can express what they want to say with that language after these mechanical interactions.
[Figure 2] A comparison of dynamics of controlled vs. communicative classroom

In the case of the communicative classroom, language is recognized as an instrument of self-expression at the individual learning level. Therefore, a comfortable and supportive classroom atmosphere plays an important role in encouraging students' personal involvement in such ways as bringing up personal topics or their own feelings during the language class. Furthermore, there is not an obvious division between individual learning and a language class since this classroom has the view that language learning should take place through interactions. Since the purpose of language learning in this classroom is to improve communicative ability, the focus is on 'getting students communicating'. In this context, a teacher encourages interpersonal interactions during a language class by
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using group dynamic techniques or various group organizations (Byrne, 1987). At the final level (C), the negotiation between a teacher and students reinforces the students' sense of a group whether the scope of negotiation is big or small. It would be difficult to say which one is better, a controlled or a communicative language classroom because both are meaningful, depending on the classroom dynamics created by participants and the objectives of language classes. However, within the CLT context, nobody says that a controlled classroom would be the better option.

The key to understanding the differences between the two classroom dynamics is the characteristics and roles of interaction in language learning. Furthermore, as Figure 2 shows, the factors of negotiation and task influences on the characteristics of interactions in a language class. Thus, they make differences in dynamics in a language class, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. The process syllabus in the following chapter is based on these two key factors and provides the fundamental concepts for syllabus design.

III. The Key Features of a Process Syllabus

The process syllabus works on the basis of negotiations and tasks in order to form communicative language learning conditions. In other words, it is a meaning oriented approach as well as a task-based approach. The big difference from the other approaches is that it emphasizes the negotiations between learners and teachers in order that the gap between 'what should be learned' and 'what actually is' can be reduced. The key features of a process syllabus include:

Firstly, a classroom group represents the meeting point of three syllabuses: a teacher’s, the students’ and a syllabus realized by a teacher and students in a daily class. The process syllabus focuses on the last syllabus, which is the synthesis of two former syllabuses, through a decision making process undertaken by a teacher and learners together.

Secondly, the process syllabus provides a means of relating content matter and methodology.
Thirdly, the process syllabus requires the reinterpretation and recreation of the plan according to emerging changes in needs during teaching-learning processes. Fourthly, the process syllabus prioritizes classroom decision-making. Fifthly, the process syllabus views decision-making as an authentic communicative activity in itself. Sixthly, the process syllabus is an extension of the task-based syllabus which aims to develop underlying communicative competence in a new language. Furthermore, it implicitly proposes that metacommunication and shared decision-making are necessary conditions for language learning in any classroom. (Adapted from Breen, 1987)

1. The Influences on Classroom Dynamics of a Process Syllabus

[Figure 3] The influences on classroom dynamics of two factors

The key factors of the process syllabus are ‘negotiation’ and ‘task’. These factors (Figure 3) influence diverse dynamics of a classroom intra- and inter-personally. To
begin with, 'negotiation' would facilitate narrowing of gaps between a teacher's and students' different attitudes and opinions about language learning by revealing students' hidden agendas (Johnson, 1989:176-186). These narrowed gaps of rationalities thus lead to effective ELT in a language class. In addition, while students are participating in the negotiating process, they would have a feeling of being accepted and contributing in a classroom group. This feeling makes students have positive attitudes towards language learning and be more motivated to participate in a language class. These positive affective effects would strengthen group cohesiveness and result in positive dynamics within a language class. While actively participating in class, students would be aware of their weakness and strength, and develop learning strategies.

The other factor, task, sees a language as a chunk of meaningful verbal behaviours: 'students learn by doing, the learning is part of the task itself' (Willis, 1996:118). In order to complete tasks, students naturally put themselves in situations requiring communicative interactions and the use of their linguistic resources. Thus, this will lead to the improvement of communicative competence. In addition, they experience various interpersonal relationships. Sometimes, the interpersonal relationships facilitate the performance of tasks and interactions. However, sometimes, they form negative classroom dynamics and hinder the learning process.

IV. An Application of the Process Syllabus

The strong version of process syllabus (Breen, 1987) is a more sophisticated framework which emphasizes the creation of a syllabus by using given decision-making questions and alternative activity banks, provided by a syllabus designer. This version not only deals with methodology but also includes assessment, materials and contents as the areas which should be negotiated by a teacher and students. This might be appropriate for ESP (English for Specific Purpose) courses because such students are normally adults and bring to class specific purposes for language learning. This might, however, not be applicable in secondary and primary school settings which have constraints such as the
existence of external curriculum plans, the lack of time, large classes and diversity of student abilities, the prior experiences of teachers and learners and the wide cultural background.

Breen and Littlejohn (2000) propose a more flexible and applicable framework which throws light on its possibility even in primary and secondary schools. It calls for a flexible definition of 'negotiation' and the negotiation cycle (Figure 4) along with presenting the levels of the negotiation cycle (Figure 5). They mention that the key to the process syllabus is 'negotiation itself among participants in a classroom'.

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**Negotiated decisions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content (what)</th>
<th>Ways of working (how)</th>
<th>Evaluation (how well?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The focus of classroom work, for example, language areas, topics, skills, learning strategies</td>
<td>What resources will be used?/When and for how long will something be done?</td>
<td>What should be the outcomes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who will work with whom?</td>
<td>How will they be assessed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How much guidance will be available?</td>
<td>What will happen with the assessment?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Action(s)**

Undertaken on the basis of the negotiated decisions at Step 1: for example: tasks chosen and completed, plans made, evaluation procedures worked out

**Evaluation**

- of learning outcomes: achievements and difficulties
- of the process itself in relation to outcomes: appropriateness of purposes, contents, ways of working, evaluation and action taken at Step 2

[Figure 4] The negotiation cycle (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000:284)
[Figure 5] A process syllabus (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000:287) The curriculum pyramid (on the right side of the figure): the levels of focus for the negotiation cycle

In the Korean middle school context, the lower three levels of the curriculum pyramid (figure 5) (i.e. a wider educational curriculum, a specified language/subject curriculum and a course) are all pre-determined by the Korean Ministry of Education, whereas the upper three levels (a series of lessons, a sequence of tasks and a task) are negotiable in a language classroom. Purpose and ways of working are possible decision-making areas except evaluation.

1. An Application Model for a Process Syllabus in Korean Middle Schools

The application model of the process syllabus (Figure 6) is designed with the following assumptions:

Firstly, students in a language classroom should be involved as participants of a classroom group when decisions are being made. Such participation will not only result in effective ELT by narrowing gaps between a teacher and students but also have a positive influence on both students’ learning and classroom dynamics.

Secondly, task-based teaching will create more learning opportunities because it requires interaction for a task to be completed. Moreover, its pair or group tasks facilitate students’ social abilities in that they take place in an interpersonal context.
[Figure 6] An application model of the process syllabus in Korean middle schools

In the first stage, extensive needs investigation is conducted on the first day of a course.
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course. The purpose is to collect general information about students in relations to learning purpose, learning styles, and so on. After an analysis of such needs, a teacher then redesigns content in one lesson of the textbook into activities. In the second stage, an on-going needs analysis is conducted in order to seek out students’ opinions and preferences on the redesigned activities. From the results of the on-going needs analysis, a teacher designs a lesson plan with detailed tasks and activities. Then, a teacher seeks the opinions of students whereby changes are made to the plan. The purpose of this negotiation process is not only to negotiate a teacher’s and students’ opinions about a lesson plan but also to make students clearly aware of what and how to learn before actual learning starts. After finishing the classes, students are required to evaluate the classes taken in two ways: one is the students’ self-reflections on their contribution to learning such as participation and preparation for a class, and the other is the evaluation of classes in terms of difficulties, enjoyment and usefulness of tasks or activities. At the same time, students are required to choose activities for the next lesson in the textbook by means of a questionnaire or through a website (Mi-yong Kim, 2005a; Mi-yong Kim, 2006b) for an on-going needs investigation. The first three stages (figure 6) are more concerned with narrowing gaps between teachers and students through negotiation processes and with helping students to recognize what and how to learn. It is in this fourth stage that actual teaching and learning take place whereby students are made to interact and negotiate ‘meanings’ while performing tasks.

The following sections will discuss more about need analysis, which is a medium for negotiation in this model and present the results of extensive needs analysis. A master plan for the six periods is exemplified for on-going negotiation.

1) Negotiation Processes through needs analysis

In figure 6, needs analysis is a tool for negotiating with students in order to reflect students’ needs and opinions about a language on a lesson plan. Unlike ESP (English for Special Purposes) students, the purpose of needs analysis in secondary school is that students become more aware of what and how they learn during classes in carrying out
needs analysis. Especially, on-going needs investigation, which is suggested in the figure 6, will help middle school students to be aware of what's going on and what they should do during classes. Furthermore, through this course of negotiation processes, students will realize that their opinions are valued and will be made to feel responsible for their own learning. It is an obvious fact that the more interested and involved the learners are in the negotiation process, the more likely they are to contribute to their learning in class (Dornyei, 1997; Dornyei & Ehrman, 1998; Dornyei & Malderez, 1997, 1999; Clement, 1994; Moskowitz; 1984).

2) General Information Collecting: Extensive Needs Analysis

<Table 1> The research variables in the needs investigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>The variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Personal background</td>
<td>1. sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. purpose for language learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. relevance to future career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. self-assessment on language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. What students want to learn</td>
<td>1. four skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. learning preferences for a reading skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Learning styles</td>
<td>1. learning styles in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. problem-solving and the reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. a teaching medium: Korean vs. English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. the frequency of a quiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. motivating factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. classroom atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. How students want to learn</td>
<td>preferences as to given activities and techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extensive needs analysis above was conducted targeting the small numbers of a subject group in order to collect general information for re-designing a lesson from a textbook. The variables above were identified by a questionnaire and the results were collected from 37 students of a Korean middle school through e-mailing and the assistance of a middle school teacher in Korea. The following interpretations on responses from students
are deemed important guidelines for designing tasks:

Firstly, in spite of students' low proficiency in the speaking skill, they want to learn a speaking skill in a language class.

Secondly, differently from most teachers' opinions towards the controversial 'Teaching English in English' issue, most students prefer English as a teaching medium. This is partly due to the emphasis of listening ability in tests.

Thirdly, as for 'how do you want to learn?', students' negative responses to traditional English language teaching techniques (e.g. lecturing and grammar explanation) and their demands on various learning conditions should be reflected in lesson planning.

Fourthly, students' preferences for maintaining good interpersonal relationships and a supportive and relaxed atmosphere in the language class underpin the importance of establishing a harmonious classroom group as a context for an effective negotiation process.

3) On-going Negotiation In and Outside of a Language Class

Whereas extensive needs analysis focuses on students' methodological preferences in the beginning of a course or a semester along with the purpose of getting general information, on-going needs analysis is to attentive to activity or task selection-content relevant choices and is conducted through over the course before and after the actual classes. Considering students' cognitive capacity, students could more easily assume what and how they are going to learn if descriptions of tasks or activities were presented instead of mere linguistic explanations.

With an extensive needs analysis and the information from the on-going needs analysis after the previous lesson, the following master plan is prepared for on-going negotiation before actual implementation. Willis' task-based learning (1996) framework is applied for making the lesson plans (Table 2) of lesson 8 in Middle School English 2 (Sung-gon Kim, 2001). Through these negotiation, students will be aware of the
objectives and activities of each class and will show more expectations for that class since it is conducted after the agreement between a teacher and students and among students.

<Table 2> A master plan of lesson 8 for negotiating with students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Tasks and activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1st   | pp. 140-143 | <Conversation activities>  
Pre-task: pronunciation practice with tongue twisters  
Task cycle: ① pair practice with given dialogue structures  
② let’s interview friends  
Language focus: repeat dialogues |
| 2nd   | pp. 144-146 | <Reading and speaking>  
Pre-task: topic discussion, word puzzle (information gap activity)  
Task-cycle: ① selecting and ordering sentences according to a title  
② opinion-gap activity: matching ad techniques and ads phrases  
Language focus: sentence-making |
| 3rd   | Extra activities | <Listening and speaking>  
Pre-task: listening to a text on additional ads techniques  
Task-cycle: ① discussion> watching British, American and Korean ads and then comparing three ads as a group.  
Language focus: listening to a recorded tape about their discussion |
| 4th   | pp. 138-139 150 | <Let’s do something with English language: team contest>  
Pre-task: matching pictures of ads with appropriate phrases and sentences  
Task-cycle: ① picking up one picture and making creative ads phrases for the provided item in pictures with group members  
② making slides for TV ads  
Language focus: listening to a recorded tape about reporting of ads slides |
| 5th   | Extra activities | <Let’s sing a song>  
Pre-task: Sharing of feelings and familiarity after listening to pop songs  
Task cycle: ① listening and choosing right words in blanks with a partner  
② matching pop songs with products for commercial ads  
Language focus: sentence-making |
| 6th   | pp. 147-149 | <A grammar game>  
Pre-task: simple explanation about grammar with PowerPoint slides for a game  
Task-cycle: playing a game  
(A tic-tac-toe game for 'see/hear/ watch + a noun + verb')  
Language focus: analysis activities |
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What is most important in the application of this model is that: firstly, teachers are willing to negotiate with students to better reflect their needs and secondly, students are willing to adopt a more positive attitude towards English language classes. This attitude of a teacher and students would result in a better product of the negotiation process and create positive classroom dynamics for a improved negotiating process.

V. Conclusion

The modified version of process syllabuses and the framework for understanding dynamics in a language class can be regarded as an argumental topic under the Korean educational situations considering the following constraints. However, the truth is different. Firstly, most teachers insist that 'we do not have enough time to waste on the negotiation process'. However, use of the application model does not mean that teachers should spend a great deal of time in negotiation and decision-making with students. The fundamental purpose of bringing out a process syllabus is to inform teachers of the importance of 'negotiation' in classroom activity. For example, instead of imposing a sense of order on students by top-down communication, if teachers assumed a kind of negotiating mood while they are demonstrating aims of classes, this may be more appealing to students affectively. Secondly, differently from high schools in Korea, the evaluation in middle school is not directly related to the requirements for University Entrance. Even if it is not possible for students to involve themselves in decision-making, it is possible for teachers to adjust evaluation as a way of supporting TBL and the negotiating process through the performance test. Given that task-based learning focuses on 'task-completion' during a language class, this characteristic will meet a performance test and students will have a sense that they are studying something worthwhile as it is related to an existing test. The last problem is related to teachers' discomfort toward the new syllabus model because it requires the different roles of a teacher and a student.
Teachers should do away with their authoritative attitude of 'who knows what is good for the children', but at the same time they can take off the burden of 'a teacher knows best'. Instead, they can enjoy a class being a guide, or a counsellor.

Most of all, the fact that on-going needs investigation is the important factor of students’ self-directed learning can not be ignored. In this point, the further research of the relationship between needs analysis and learner autonomy is demanding related to the variables of self-directed learning under a language class.

Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom. (Stevick, 1980:4).
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