Expanding Affordances for English in Kyushu Area Studies On Campus 2017

Ellen Head

Abstract

The "Area Studies On Campus" course offers students opportunities to get insight into aspects of Kyushu issues, culture, business and economic development through community field work and service learning. This article looks at how course leaders attempted to build in opportunities for using English in the Area Studies course. Traditionally, the course attracts both Japanese and overseas students, giving Japanese students a role as explainers of local content. However in 2017 there were no overseas students on the course. Moreover the vocabulary and structures needed for translating local content was above the ability level of many of the group. There was a need to bridge the gap between students of different ability levels and between classroom and out-of-class learning. In the future it is suggested that certain classroom activities would

be helpful at the start in order to help students to make a supportive group and learn the basics of observing, report-writing and interviewing.

Area Studies at MIC

Area Studies at MIC is a course for second years which is an alternative to a semester abroad. From 2015 to 2017 the course was offered as team-taught course with one subject lecturer from Social or Political Sciences and an EFL teacher. Links to local organizations and experts including fluent English speakers, were built up, giving a full program of visits and presentations from visiting speakers, ending with a service learning placement. The brief for the EFL teacher was, to stimulate students to explain things in English and to help them to re-draft written work for their portfolios.

During fieldwork early in the course in 2017, it became clear that a significant proportion of students could not easily deal with the cognitive challenge of using English in the field when input from local NPO representatives was in Japanese. The vocabulary was sometimes technical and consisted of words that they did not understand even in Japanese. The content of the course was challenging for students at a personal level due to the need to establish new relationships, evaluate situations and work out how to be of use in the field. So the questions arose: "How can we create a perceived need for students to use English?" "How can we design a program which

offers affordances for English despite being in an EFL context rather than an ESL context?" It is hoped that this article, focusing on the latter question, can be part of a developing conversation about Area Studies.

Affordances, SLA and Study Abroad

There are varying accounts of the relationships between language acquisition and study abroad, but it is generally agreed that exposure to language in an ESL context through study abroad is helpful in many ways. (Kenne, 2014).   However, research reminds us that factors such as affect, attitude to the target culture, and the specific opportunities for interaction and study, play their part as well. In fact Dewey, 2015, found that students of Japanese as a foreign language in an immersion environment in the home country did better than those who studied abroad on vocabulary learning. What matters is the opportunities that students have to focus on the target language, to engage and to produce the language.

Opportunities to use the target language have been termed affordances by Van Lier. Affordances are a metaphor from ecology which Van Lier uses to describe relationships between elements in a sociocultural perspective on learning.

"Language emerges out of semiotic activity…affordances consist in the

opportunities for interaction that the things in the environment possess… the

environment is full of language that provides opportunities for learning to the

active, participating learner." (Van Lier 2000, p. 253).

In our course, people such as the teachers and former students who joined the class

provided affordances which were stimulating to the learners. However the imperative to

use English, which would be provided by an ESL context, was largely absent.

Students as mediators or interpreters

Area Studies in Kyushu presents a situation in which students have a potential

role as mediators of Japanese content for a non-Japanese speaking audience. On the first

field trip we sowed radish seeds and peeled leeks outside the farm house, an idyllic

setting for "Eigo Kaiwa in the field". The input in this session was all in Japanese,

consisting of instructions about how to plant seeds and a talk over an hour long about

why the farm owner had left her comfortable company job selling agricultural

chemicals and sunk her savings in an organic farm. As the EFL teacher, I wanted to find

a role for English so I tried asking students to explain some points. The replies were

brief or resulted in long searches for vocabulary on cellphones. Considering our learners

were struggling to understand what to do on the farm, my requests for interpreting may

have produced "cognitive overload". Interpreting is known to be a more challenging skill than simply communicating in L2.   Therefore in 2017 we allowed students to use both English and Japanese when dealing with content that was originally in Japanese. In mid-term feedback three students wrote positively about the mix of languages:

もっとお互いの考えを素直に言える雰囲気があれば Good. 英語と日本語を混ぜていいのは、どうしても最後まで続けてほしい！！[It will be good if we can create atmosphere where people can speak honestly to each other. I want us to continue speaking in English/Japanese.]

However one disagreed:

もう少し英語で話す機会を強制するべき。もしくは他学年も多く交える機会を増やしてほしい。[English speaking should be forced a little bit more. Or I want to interact more with students in other grades.]

　　　This feedback is highlighted not with any intention of undermining the L2 only norm of the classroom in MIC but in order to raise the question of finding an authentic audience for students' communication in L2. Some of the most successful projects which students undertook were concerned with translating information for tourists in Aya Town Biosphere area and in a museum near the college. When students knew that their English would be heard or read in a real-world context, then their motivation grew.

Using e-portfolios to connect with an on-line community

Research shows that virtual communities can provide a powerful stimulus and place to practice English. (Liang 2010). Since 2015 MIC has developed an e-portfolio system which potentially offers students a virtual space to share and grow in English. One way to expand the affordances for Area Studies students' use of English could be to ask students to exchange drafts of major pieces of work at the report stage and critique each others' drafts. In 2017 students exchanged links and commented on each other's work. In the future it might be beneficial to encourage peer review of content and establish a work-flow which includes continuous work on formative portfolios from which students select work for their final portfolio. As the technology improves, we hope to be able to ask students to share Mahara links with students at colleges overseas who are interested in Japan. This was attempted in 2017 but did not work well because the partner school was using Wordpress and were not open to using Mahara.

Active Teaching Learning Strategies in Area Studies

Area Studies Fieldwork sounds as if by definition it will provide an active role for students. Yet in practice, given the logistics of connecting with local organizations and speakers, the schedule needs to be arranged months beforehand, meaning that at least for the first month the locations and content of research were decided by teachers

and not by students. Classroom activities were therefore vital to building up group

dynamics and norms in which students could take the initiative and use English.

Teaching for active learning is characterized by "explorative activities, problem solving,

the development of higher order thinking skills that enable [students] to analyze,

synthesize, evaluate and create". Mork et al. (2017) divide active teaching learning

strategies into those with inward focus (such as writing a diary) versus outward focus,

(such as a discussion), and planned/extemporaneous from the point of view of the

student. For the purpose of understanding our Area Studies course, we will arrange the

activities according to whether they focus primarily on group dynamics (outward focus),

or academic know-how such as reading/writing skills (inner focus).

Making a safe environment through reflection: Language Learning Histories

At the start of a new semester students may feel anxiety about their new group

and uncertainty about the norms and aims of the class, particularly since the class

content includes trips off campus and fieldwork. In addition, there was a very wide

range in ability level, (TOEIC 375-720), and some demotivation. Falout (2012) suggests

that if learners have become de-motivated, it can help them to write about why and how

they lost their motivation. Students were asked to write "language learning histories"

after the first meeting of the class in order to find out about prior experiences which

might be affecting their current motivation. The questionnaire included items about

students' future goals, positive learning experiences, and metaphors for learning, in the

hopes that they could draw on their past positive experiences to help them. Students

were asked to read through the questionnaire in class and talk about their answers with a

partner, so that they could check their understanding of the questions, start to get to

know each other and open a dialogue about metacognitive aspects of learning. The

questionnaire is original but draws on work by educators such as Murphey, (1997) and

Benson (2004). (Questionnaire: Appendix 1)

One student mentioned in their learning history that social pressure had

deterred him from speaking English as well as he could:

[At high school] I was reading aloud English text book because I was thinking

the people who speak English are cool. I pronounced many times with an

English teacher. On the other hand, I was scare to pronounce cool. Because

some people think that I am pretending as clever.   [LLH student M]

Another student also alluded to "reasons why Japanese people can't get command of

English" in vague terms:

I wouldn't say details right now, but these process of learning English in

Japanese education has certain reasons why most of Japanese people still can't

get command of it, even though in this globalization, there is necessity to get it.

[LLH student N]

This student recommended learning vocabulary first:

I'd strongly suggest that to memorize basic 2,000 words first which means grammar is secondary.

This kind of insight could be helpful to other learners. The group included two students who talked about positive experiences at NARPI peace building camp who had experienced using English as a Lingua Franca. Writing a language learning history helped students to make connections between experiences outside class and inside and to take responsibility for their own learning. Such activities could help to scaffold elements necessary for critical thinking, such as comparing and evaluating experiences.

Brainstorming Ground Rules

In this activity, students were asked to suggest rules that would be useful for the class. Typically this should be done at the start of a new semester, though we did it a little late in 2017. If students are of a lower level then they can be given a set of rules and asked to critique and add to them. This allows teachers more control over what the rules are going to be! Making ground rules about when to use English allowed for more explicit discussion about which language to use for particular activities.

In our case the ground rules were brainstormed by students in groups, written on posters, and then the whole class voted which rules to keep. The final rule set was written up by a student leader. At some stage after the activity teachers realized they would have liked to edit the rules further but we decided that in the interests of student autonomy we should stick with the students' rules.

Ground Rules for the Area Studies Class

Speak out and ask questions actively.

Use English as much as you can.

Start and end the class on time.

Speak to your classmates in a friendly way.

Group building activities: River of needs

The "river of needs" activity originated in workshops on Non-Violent Communication, a communication training methodology aimed at conflict resolution and used in situations such as the Israel/Palestine conflict. It provides a structured way for students to talk about needs and feelings. (Rosenburg 2015). In Japanese society it may not always be considered polite to draw attention to one's own needs especially in a situation with people one does not know well, such as a new class. (Yoneyama, 1999). We did this activity while away on a four day fieldwork trip to Minami Aso.

The teacher prepared sets of small flashcards with words for various human needs such as "connection", "understanding" and more basic needs such as "food", "sleep". (A list of needs is available at the Nonviolent Communication Centre Website.). These cards were placed around the room forming a "river". Students walked around and picked up three cards representing needs they had which have been met recently. They made a group of three and talked to their group about what they chose. Students then went back and picked three cards which expressed needs which had not been met, and talked about these. This let facilitators see which needs have not been addressed. This activity was very suitable when on a field trip during which students were out of their usual environment as it enabled them to raise needs that were not being addressed and to be honest about their problems.

Interviewing Guest Speakers

Since 2015, the course lecturers have built up a network of guest speakers which includes bilingual or very fluent Japanese using English professionally and former students who have taken the Area Studies course in previous years. Speakers in 2017 included representatives from a children's respite camp, a life guard, and UNESCO world heritage sites. They were also asked to prepare by reading the webpages about the speaker's NPO and preparing two questions.

In terms of activities, asking students to prepare questions gave them an active role in the interaction. Comparing sessions in which students asked questions to those in which they were lectured by guest speakers, one student had this to say: "When we talked with Eri Otsu at first she didn't speak from her own [initiative] unless we asked questions. Nervous feeling left us by degrees…[Teachers should] cherish students' intention and talk with students as equal and with respect…Excessive support makes dependence."

It was interesting to observe the impact of various speakers on the students. Murphey (1997) believes that students are more strongly influenced by role models who are similar to them in age.   Others have pointed out the importance of non-native speaker role models. "NPRMs provide examples for students of successful L2 users with similar backgrounds to themselves, separate from the unattainable, and often daunting, native speaker construct." (Cook, 1999, in Murphey, 1997). Eri Otsu was a particularly impactful speaker. In her early 40s, educated in England, Germany and Japan, she was instrumental in developing her area as a United Nations Agricultural Heritage site and promoting the identity of female farmers.   Her session was held at her farm in Minami Aso. Her belief in learner-centered education was evident from her session as she announced at the beginning that she was not going to lecture or try to

teach anything, but would reply to questions asked by the class. In contrast, although they were impressed on other occasions by two guides who gave their speeches in English, the fact that these guides were over 70 years old did create something of a distance. The presentation by a third year student, who had taken the course in previous years, was more exciting for students. "Structuring classroom experiences to enhance near peer role modeling may be one of the most powerful ways teachers can enhance learning." (Murphey, 1997). Until now, we generally left it to each guest speaker to decide how interactive to make their presentation. In future courses it might be a good idea to change the format from "guest speaker lecture" to "guest speaker interview" in all cases in order to make the students more active.

Reading and Writing Activities

Skim reading and matching questions and answers

Material for content based study about Japan can often be found in bilingual form for tourists and NPO developers. Students may not have the time or self-discipline to read all the English material first and their vocabulary level may also make it inefficient to do so. We decided to ask students to tackle the material about the Global International Agricultural Heritage developments at Minami Aso by reading the

Japanese first and then looking at a set of questions in English and skimming the

English text to find the answers. The aim was to help students get used to skimming

English academic text without looking up every word, using clues such as photos and

headers and subheadings to locate the information they need. Questions which focus

students' attention on main concepts, statistics or dates work as scaffolding for

understanding. Rather than checking the answers with the whole class, we made an

answer key and distributed one copy per 4 students. One person in each group then had

to explain the answer orally without showing the key to their classmates. This was an

example of how an activity which is "inner" (reading comprehension) could be given an

extra stage which takes it into the outer dimension. Discussion questions relating to the

issues in the text were added too.

Analyzing a Model Report

Analyzing models of the desired kind of writing to be produced, can help to

scaffold the output of academic essays and reports. We faced a lack of appropriate

material since the students in Area studies need to write reports which are based on their

fieldwork but EFL writing textbooks do not usually deal with genres other than essay

and personal narrative. A model report was written and distributed to students before

they went on their long field trip. They were asked to read and analyze features such as

the use of paragraphing, subheadings, text organization around themes and analysis of the main lessons learned on the trip. After reading the model report, most students imitated the use of subheadings, paragraphing and the analysis of the purpose of the trip. It gave a clearer target for those who did not understand what they were aiming for.

Analyzing the content of last years' portfolios

To help students understand what an e-portfolio is and start to think about their own options in terms of design and content of their own portfolios, we asked students to look at last years' portfolios and spend some time browsing the articles in them. They were given a grid to fill in to heighten awareness of features such as organization, content, layout and style, before talking in threes about which portfolios they liked and why. Members then moved around the groups leaving one spokesperson behind with a laptop, to explain the discussion to other group members.

Three Point Feedback

While on the field trip, we wanted to get quick feedback in a manner which would maintain confidentiality. We asked them to write three point feedback. Students were given a very small piece of paper (4 cm by 4 cm) and asked to write their answers to the following three questions:

1. What was good about this course/lesson/activity?

2.   What was not good about this course/lesson/activity?

3.   What suggestion do you have (something you would like us to do or you would like

to do)?

Feedback could be written in English or Japanese. Having a small piece of paper meant

that students did not feel pressure to write a lot but if they had a lot to say they could

write in small letters. The fact that it is a piece of scrap paper showed students that it

was not part of their evaluation.

We used this activity during our field trip when it seemed that communication

was not flowing smoothly in the group. We felt it was important to provide feedback to

the students so that they know what the overall picture was. In the next class we wrote a

summary of the main points on the whiteboard in English. The purpose of this was to let

students see that their opinions were valued and to offer a sense of the spectrum of

opinion within the class. It is quite common to have diametrically opposite points of

view represented in feedback, for example "I do not like group work" and "I enjoyed

talking in a small group". Even if the teachers cannot implement the feedback, it is

worth doing as a reality check as a stage in moving towards a solution. In our case there

were points that could be implemented such as making a plan together at the beginning

of the day and making opportunities for students to have choices about the order in

which we did activities.

Conclusion

Teaching Area Studies in Japan with a monolingual group of Japanese students offered challenges in terms of finding suitable goals and audience. Classroom activities played an important role in expanding the affordances for English since the activities allowed students to play a variety of roles. Students needed practice in how to play their role as "observer", "recorder" and "initiator" rather than simply "responder" or "translator". Paradoxically, when fieldwork was more challenging and complex, the students sometimes tended to retreat into passivity or use of L1. It is hoped that some of the scaffolding activities which were offered above might be useful to teachers in future Area Studies classes and other content-based courses.

References

Benson, P. & Nunan, D. (2004). Learners' Stories: Difference and Diversity in Language **Learning.** Cambridge, C.U.P.

Dewey, D. (2007) Japanese Vocabulary Acquisition by Learners in Three Contexts, in Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, retrieved from

https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ878387

Falout, J. (2012) Coping with Demotivation: EFL Learners Re-Motivation Process, in

The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Vol. 16 No. 3, retrieved from

http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume16/ej63/ej63a3/

Liang, M. (2010) Exploring communicative practices in the blogging of female

university EFL students in JALT CALL Journal Vol 6 No 2

Kenne, E. (2014) Study Abroad is an Essential Part of Language Acquisition, retrieved

from http://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt/147/

Murphey, T. (1997) Motivating with Near Peer Role Models, retrieved from

http://www.kuis.ac.jp/~murphey-t/Tim_Murphey/Articles_-_Humanistic_and_Commun

icative_files/MotivatingNPRMing98.pdf

Mork, C. M. et al. (2017) A Heuristic for Categorizing Active Learning Teaching

Strategies, retrieved from

https://www.academia.edu/31114854/_Feb._2017_A_heuristic_for_categorizing_active

_learning_teaching_strategies

Occhi, D. (2017) Benefits and Challenges in the Introduction of an E-Portfolio System:

A PDCA-based Analysis

Retrieved from http://www.mic.ac.jp/issue/c_culture.html

Rosenberg, M. (2015) Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life. Encinitas,

California, Puddle Dancer Press

Van Lier, L. (2000) From Input to Affordance, in Lantolf, J. Sociocultural Theory and

Second Language Learning. Oxford, OUP

Yoneyama, S. (1999) Silence and Resistance in the Japanese High School Classroom.

London and New York, Routledge

Non-Violent Communication Centre Website (For Feelings List) retrieved from

https://www.cnvc.org/learn/resources

Appendix 1

**Your   Language   Learning   History   (Guided   Writing)
Name_____**

Your language learning history means all the experiences you have had learning languages in your life, including learning outside class, listening to foreign music or movies, chatting to foreigners or travelling in foreign countries.

  Step 1
Interview a partner about her or his language learning history.
Step 2
Write about **your own l**anguage learning history. It does not need to be perfect!

Here are some questions you could use to ask your partner about their language learning history.

1. When did you start learning English (or another language)? How were those first classes?
2. Do you like writing? Which is your favourite skill? Why?
3. What was one good learning experience you had? Why was it good?
4. What was one negative learning experience you had? Why?
5. What is one of your language learning goals right now?
6. Think of a time you were communicating well with someone. What was it like? Try to find an image or metaphor for that experience.