Designing an Interaction-centered Language Classroom

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Although speaking classes have become part of the standard language curriculum at tertiary level institutions in Japan, the physical layout of the typical college classroom is rarely conducive to natural interaction. Students are conditioned to equate rows of desks facing the blackboard with teacher-centered communication. In this article I would like to describe how some minor changes to the classroom learning environment can impact significantly on the communication that happens there.

I originally trained as a primary school teacher in Australia, where teachers are assigned a classroom of their own and can therefore set it up in the way that best suits their teaching approach. In the lower grades student-centered models tend to be the norm, and it is common to see desks positioned in flexible clusters that allow students to talk in pairs and small groups.

In most Japanese universities, on the other hand, teachers share their classrooms with other professors and rarely have a say over how those rooms are set up. EFL practitioners often use the same rooms in which economics or physics lectures take place, and in the vast majority of cases this means the desks are arranged in rows facing a chalkboard. Sometimes the chairs are even attached to the desks, which are in turn bolted to the floor.

Of course, this setup may be fine for teacher-centered lectures, where the assumption is that the students' role is not to speak but simply to listen to the professor. However, in communicative language classrooms, the first thing many

teachers do each week is to have the students rearrange the desks into pairs or groups. Teachers then spend the remainder of the class negotiating the narrow space between the clusters of students and the unused desks that fill up the rest of the room. Having endured this style of teaching for many years, I finally had the opportunity to design a classroom of my own, and so I made sure that it was a place that naturally encouraged learner-centered interaction (Figure 1).

It is often pointed out that the physical setting has an incredible influence on the way college students learn (Brase, 1988; Hill & Epps, 2010). Even beyond issues of physical comfort and audibility, the arrangement of furniture will affect the sorts of learning that takes place there (Jones, 2007). In addition, as Veltri, Banning and Davies (2006) have noted, many classroom design flaws stem from a lack of understanding about how teachers use the space. Unfortunately, in most universities, it is administrators and accounting staff rather than teachers who make fundamental decisions about classroom layout, such as how many desks to have in each room and where to place them. When it comes time to refurbish, office accountants no doubt reflect on their own background knowledge about

Figure 1. Students in Kobe University's group-work classroom

what a classroom "should" look like, and therefore they play a part in perpetuating the teacher-centered classroom as the default model.
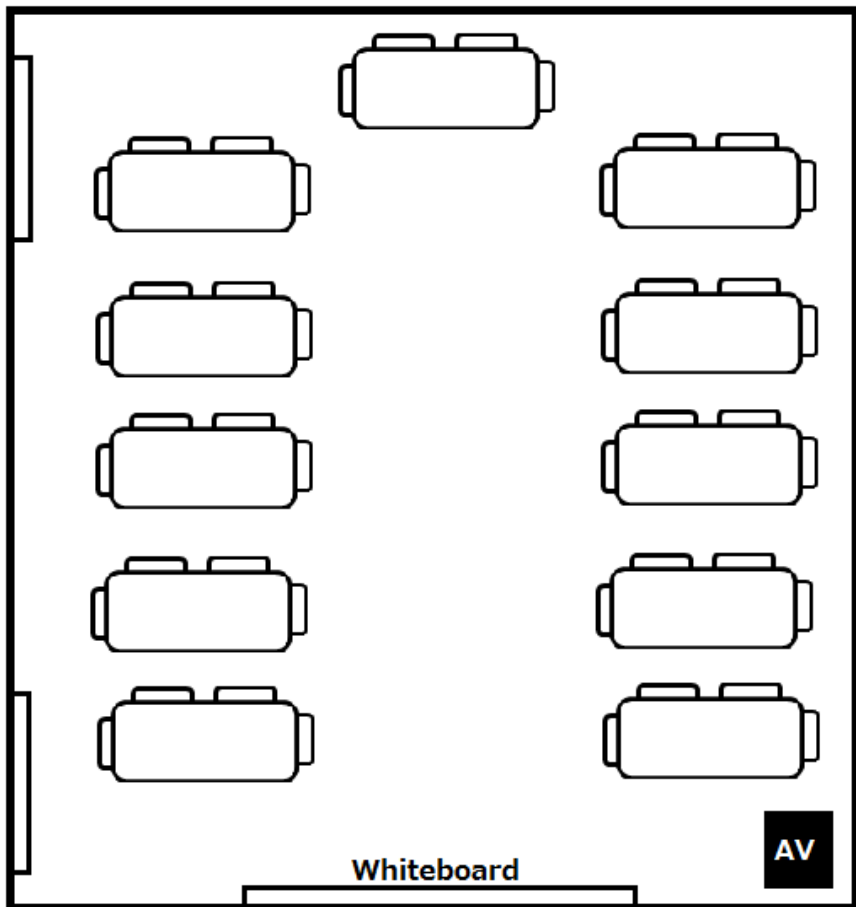
I would argue that many language teachers, on the other hand, would prefer to have a student-centered classroom layout that helps develop collaborative group work and co-operative learning as well as increase retention (Cohen, 1994), and also provide valuable opportunities for negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, both traditional SLA and sociocultural approaches recognize the value of pair work and small group interaction in fostering oral communicative proficiency (Naughton, 2006). Whole-group instruction puts the focus on the teacher and therefore constrains the sort of communication that takes place. However, teachers who view learning as a sociocultural practice aim to provide students with opportunities for dialogic interaction (Haworth, 1999). Sitting at individual desks is obviously not compatible with a communicative approach to language learning.

In short, the classroom design places limits on the interaction that takes place there, which in turn determines whether the learning is likely to become teacher-centered or student-centered. With this in mind, I started to consider a classroom design that would promote interaction between students.

In 2010, the general education building at Kobe University was due for renovation. Although the office staff was responsible for the majority of the plans, they did consult the teaching faculty about the rooms where we would be teaching. The language teachers came up with a list of essential elements, including sound-proofed walls, carpeting, audio-visual equipment, and a permanently installed projector. These were accepted without much problem, and for my Japanese colleagues this seemed to be the end of the story. Surprisingly, there was hardly any discussion about the desks, which would suggest that the majority of the professors were satisfied with the teacher-centered layout. As a result, the vast majority of rooms were refurnished with heavy single-person desks that were positioned in rows facing the whiteboard, leaving the classroom layout essentially the same as before. Since the rooms had to accommodate 44 students in an area of just 68 m² (6.2 m x 11 m), there was little space left between the desks for students to walk, let alone store their bags.

Thankfully though, I was given the chance to select a different seating arrangement for one of the classrooms. Although limited by space and class sizes, I decided to make this an environment that would be conducive to conversation by replacing the single desks with larger tables that seated four people instead of one. This economical solution also left more space and ensured that the students were already in a physical position to talk.

The desks were arranged in two rows of five with one more desk at the back of the room (Figure 2). The layout mimicked the U-shaped configuration that is

Figure 2. The classroom layout

often found in language classrooms designed for smaller classes, while still catering for group-based interaction. This left a reasonable space in the center of the room which enabled the teacher to move freely between the groups. Though ideally it would have been even bigger, the space was sufficient for students to stand and talk to other students, such as during survey interviews and "find-someone-who" activities. Most classroom interaction, however, takes place at the tables. As shown in Figure 3, the two-plus-two seating arrangement naturally put the students into both pairs and groups yet still afforded them an uncompromised view of the whiteboard.

We were able to salvage some swivel chairs that were being discarded from a nearby meeting room, which not only saved us money but also gave the students additional mobility. Since there were wheels on both the chairs and the desks, the furniture arrangement became more flexible, encouraging teachers to use it in innovative ways. During poster presentations, for example, the tables could be easily pushed up against one wall and the chairs quickly moved into the corridor to provide a large open space in which to move.

Overall, the rather simple change of replacing individual desks with group-based tables had a huge impact on the classroom and the learning that went on there. While the chairs were still facing the front of the room, the implicit message was that the teacher was no longer the sole source of knowledge. Sitting
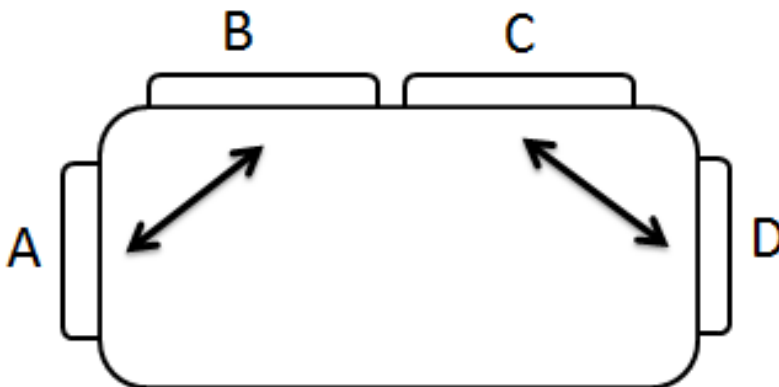

Figure 3. The seating arrangement at each desk

in groups meant that students could no longer ignore the person next to them, and I noticed there was a lot more interaction happening between them before I even walked in the room. Even quiet students came to know their regular group and started to break down the barrier of silence that often exists in Japanese classrooms.

Although it is still not perfect, the classroom is much better than the rows of individual desks that have been the bane of many language teachers at our university up until now. It has proved a popular layout among the foreign teachers particularly, and reservations for classes in this room are competitive.

My aim in writing this article has been to document the way that some simple changes to the physical layout of one university classroom have enriched the language learning that goes on there. However, a secondary theme that has emerged is the issue of how to make your voice heard in matters of educational planning, such as classroom design. While it was undoubtedly a rare opportunity, it may not be as unlikely as it first appears; even part-time teachers can use feedback surveys to make specific requests for the classroom layout they need.

Sometimes enacting change just involves knowing who to talk to and being there at the right time. At first I hesitated to mention my ideas during our meeting with the administration because it seemed that the majority of the professors were not concerned about the layout of the desks. However, later I talked about it with an approachable colleague who was more closely involved with the renovation project, and he was supportive of my suggestions and helped me negotiate further with the office. As is often the case in Japan, the best way to make your voice heard is quietly. And I am glad that I did. The group-work classroom sends the message that student-centered learning takes place here, and slowly that is challenging the way my colleagues think about what can go on in a language classroom.

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