Revisiting Andragogy: Applying Knowles' Instructional Approach to Adult Learners in Japanese University Classrooms

Paul A. R. Rowan
Nihon University

Hideyuki Kumaki
Nihon University

Though *pedagogy* is a term generally used by educators in regards to their instructional process, does it truly reflect the learner's knowledge and experience with the subject being studied at the university level of education? That is, surely university students are not children, which the term pedagogy implies. For, in fact, these students have experience with life and learning skills, gained through their childhood education, and university is the setting where they are expected to apply their experiences and to expand them during their courses of study. In this article, we argue that it is time for university educators, and the university system in general, to rethink the terminology used to describe the instructional process. We focus particularly on the concept of *andragogy*, its principles, and how it should be applied to the Japanese university context and to English language programs in particular.

What is Andragogy?

Malcolm Knowles (1913-1997), in particular, is accredited with popularizing the concept of andragogy. Andragogy is commonly defined as coming from the Greek words *anere*, meaning adult, and *agogus*, meaning the art and science of helping students learn. In contemporary use, andragogy is a methodological approach that seeks to enhance and complement adult learners' previously acquired knowledge and experience. Knowles left a legacy that continues to impact on how educators guide their adult learners through to their desired learning objectives and goals. Like other great thinkers in education, such as John Dewey, Edward Lindeman, and Lev Vygotsky, Knowles believed that learning was better affected by developing the learner's experience rather than by a teacher-centered pedagogical approach that is based on the students' simple reception of knowledge and experience of others (Knowles, 1950). Unlike Dewey, Lindeman, and Vygotsky, Knowles focused not only on general learning trends, but specifically on adult learners by amassing research centering on the educational concepts for adult learners who strove to attain their educational goals (Fiorini, 2003; Henry 2009; Knowles, 1950, 1970; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Smith, 2002).

Formal learning is a process where interactions between teachers, students, and the materials of instruction culminate to meet desired outcomes. The andragogical function of the teacher is to guide or facilitate the students' educational experiences by allowing the students to further develop knowledge. This approach allows them to build and develop their own natural potential (Knowles, 1950).

Pedagogy, in contrast to andragogy, is essentially, as Knowles (1968) states, "the art and science of teaching children" (p. 351). In a pedagogical, teacher-centered learning environment, students wait for information to be imparted by the teacher because they do not have the experience to apply the new information to their learning circumstance. Instruction does not concern itself with the interests of learners, but with meeting requisite outcomes. Knowles understood that the objective of adult education is not to expect the learner to be interested in what the instructor offers, but for the instructor to be the facilitator of

information that is of interest to the learner.

The andragogical approach will have the instructor as the facilitator of learning, guiding the learners to find answers that supplement their experiences and increase their self-reliance as they define and meet their educational goals. There are, of course, similarities between pedagogy and andragogy as both instructional methodologies seek a defined set of outcomes. However, the key difference between the two types of learners centers on learner perception, their background, maturation, and how they receive learning.

Knowles' (1970) Andragogical Principles of Learning

Andragogy is a methodological approach to adult education that replaces the instructor from the central position with the learner. Andragogy is based on four assumptions. First, the learners have gone through a process of growth/ maturation from a dependent human being to a self-directed individual. Second, they have experienced a growth of learning that they can depend on. Third, they become increasingly oriented to the "developmental tasks of [their] social role" (Knowles, 1970, p. 39) Fourth, with respect to the postponed nature of childhood subject-centered learning where knowledge is stored for later use, the shift in adult learning is where the students gain the opportunity to apply their youthful knowledge in an adult environment where learning shifts to a more problem-solving centered structure.

From these assumptions, five principles center on how we view the adult learner, and this impacts on how we deliver our course. As the adult learner wants to know the what/how/why of something, the want becomes the main objective for meeting the learner's goal.

The first principle is the *learner's need to know*, which is to say that the adult learner needs to be cognitively aware of their situation, why they want to know, and how their past experiences relate to what they study and/or how they apply their studies to given situations. This principle implies that when the second language (L2) learner understands the why, and/or how of a language act for example, they are better able to work with the subject and gain experience that can be used in future situations.

The second principle, *self-concept,* is where the learner comes to be responsible for his/her actions in learning. For the language learner entering university, for example, here in Japan the notion of self-concept/responsibility is relatively new. One example of learner responsibility is with error correction. Most students want teachers to correct every mistake in their work (Richardson, 2011). However, andragogically speaking, this is not the function of the instructor. Rather, it is the task of the learner to seek out answers to their questions/problems by themselves, with the instructor being there to aid them in this process. The instructor works with the learner's concepts to reach requisite outcomes and in doing this, the instructor is facilitating learning. Indeed, with andragogical instruction, the instructor cannot interfere with the learning of the adult learner by "substituting [the instructor's] own pedagogical sequence of steps rather than flowing with the learners' natural sequence" (Long 1985, p. 42).

The third component of the andragogical model is *experience*. This means that the adult learner is able to apply their life experiences, schema, to their learning situation. Looking at the past experience in L2 English classes, these young adult learners now entering a Japanese university have studied how the English language works, but few learners have had the opportunity to engage in actual English language exchanges. Simply put, they do not have experience using the language, and this is a particularly important point for students where English is a foreign language, not frequently heard outside a classroom. Indeed, meeting the learner's needs, which is to gain experience with L2 English, is where the instructor's role as a facilitator is most meaningful. As a facilitator, it is the instructor's role to create the L2 learning environment where students can gain the necessary experience they need to be successful in their studies.

The fourth principle is focused on the student's *readiness to learn,* which is a rather complex concept but one that is particularly notable. Readiness implies a willingness to learn, which then implies that they understand why they learn what they want to learn. They have an interest in their study, and this then is linked to their motivation to learn. Yet, when students want to learn but they do not understand why they learn in the manner they do, this readiness wanes. For example, Rowan (2009), by asking students in a survey that asked

about their impressions of their English study at a university in Japan (where they were required to attain a 500 TOEFL score in order to pass the English requirements), the feedback showed that learners were more motivated to learn a language than they were to simply pass a test. Indeed, the test focus of the study resulted in student comments such as "system doesn't make us want to study" and "we don't understand the [English program's] purpose" (Rowan, 2009, p. 235). Unfortunately, the formal education system in Japan continues with a pedagogical approach to language learning where success is measured by a test, not with a demonstration of the students' acquired knowledge gained through their studies.

The fifth principle is the student's *orientation to learn*. Adult learners view how they receive content differently from children. With children, learning is delayed in that an application of their gained knowledge is not expected, so information is abstract and stored for when it may be needed or applied. Adults have the view that they may need to apply their information or knowledge at any time. There is a potential immediacy for them to utilize their knowledge.

As noted, this discussion focuses on the L2 English learner at the university level in Japan and on building learners' experiences. But what are their previous experiences? In the following section we take into consideration our own personal past experiences as L2 learners and instructors here in Japan.

English Language Education and the Japanese Experience

In the Japanese educational system, there is constant consternation as to why students cannot produce or function in their acquired second language after six years of study prior to their entering university. Generally speaking, students have only experienced pedagogical learning typified by the teacher-centered grammar-translation method. This method focuses on student textbooks for visual learning of English in preparation for a paper-based test, especially university entrance examinations. Little or no speaking practice is given in their studies, nor is there practice with creative writing. Of course most teachers will state that they want a positively engaged class, yet understanding how the Japanese L2 learner builds

their L2 ability, which mirrors that of many other cultures' approach to English as a foreign language (EFL), is important in understanding how an andragogical approach to L2 English learning may impact on students as they enter and begin their university career.

A seemingly universal L2 learning trait is when people speak in a second or foreign language, they become more apprehensive and tense, and thus more unwilling to participate in a conversation (Chen, 2003; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). With respect to this noted trait, we consider five key concepts, which are often cited by Japanese students and personally experienced by us, for their reticence to use/speak English in or outside of the classroom environment. We also make some suggestions to overcome these issues.

1) *Peer pressure*. The fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence are inter-related factors. Japanese students tend to focus on accuracy rather than fluency. They often place more emphasis on the details, especially grammar, of their utterances before they are willing to speak. Simply put, they do not want to lose face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in front of their peers and teachers. Therefore, they tend to be less responsive. To overcome this problem, it is necessary to create a welcoming and non-threatening classroom atmosphere. To gain a rapport, the quality of the working relationship between a teacher and his or her students is essential. Indeed, there is ample research proving that rapport plays a significant role in teaching and learning (Fleming, 2003).

2) *Low Japanese proficiency*. In some cases, a lack of Japanese (L1) proficiency influences a student's low English proficiency. When attempting a written composition in English, lower level students tend to translate their Japanese directly into English. This means that if their Japanese ability is incomplete, their English will also be filled with grammatical and syntactical errors. Therefore, the first thing that teachers and students focus on is building up their Japanese language proficiency. This is a problem as the English teacher's function is to teach English, not Japanese. Without having an adequate L1 knowledge/ability, to expect these English learners to speak another language, especially when those languages are linguistically far apart, is one of the real challenges of L2 education.

3) *Lack of experience with oral communication even in Japanese*. As a great

many junior and senior high school students in Japan do not have opportunities to express themselves in front of people (including their classmates) in their L1, let alone in L2 English. This partially explains why students do not feel sure/comfortable with what/how they might express their ideas in both an L1 or an L2. This issue is also closely related to the previous one in that if students cannot complete something in their L1, it is unlikely they will be able complete it in their L2.

4) *Inability to keep up with native English speakers.* Japanese students tend to regard L1 speakers' English (especially the West Coast North American dialect) as the norm. Considering the usage of English all over the world, the West Coast dialect of English is a minority dialect. However, students tend to think that they should speak as these native speakers do. In fact, many students end up speaking Japanese accentuated English or simply give up learning English. Therefore, it is necessary for students to know that there are many different dialects of English spoken all over the world and that what is more important is the content of the speech, not how closely you speak like a native speaker of English.

5) *Different learning styles.* During the student's general secondary schooling, they are taught to memorize many things, with little opportunity to discuss or explore the information provided by their teachers. This may be due to the number of students in one class, which often exceeds thirty-five members. Indeed, student numbers will affect the classroom dynamic as the management of large classes often results in a more teacher-centered classroom (Knowles, 1968). Furthermore, teachers answer their own questions in the class due to the time constraint or the lack of students' active participation. To solve this issue is not an easy task, but students should be streamed based on their language proficiency and classrooms should be more interactive.

Although the above five points that outline learner apprehension for active communicative engagement with the Japanese students' coursework may seem stereotypical, these five points can be found in our personal experiences both as instructors and as students. The above statements may seem to be a condemnation of the Japanese education system; however, it must be remembered that they

are in fact generalized statements of learner perceptions of their educational experiences and based on our own personal learning (as an L2 English student) and as teachers at all levels of instruction here in Japan.

Andragogy Applied

At the university level, educational opportunities change based on how they are or can be delivered. Of course, not every student enjoys self-actualized learning of a second language; however, it must be noted that university education is about building experiences of the learner for their future careers.

With respect to an andragogical approach to instruction, andragogy's primary goal is to have the learner seek out what they need as they attempt to meet requisite course outcomes. It is to have the teacher facilitate learning by guiding learners to what they need to learn/study in order to meet curricular objectives. Learners must understand that learning is an applied activity that requires practice, objectives, and self-responsibility. Students must be engaged with their learning opportunities, and the instructor must facilitate learning by adjusting their understanding of the course content with the learner's perspective so that the learner can build their skills/self-reliance and apply them as needed.

Lessons at the university level, akin to how L2 business English instructors approach their lessons, must not be designed pedagogically. The five guiding principles of andragogy are there to remind us of whom we teach and of the students' knowledge/experience, as well as to approach instruction as facilitation of learning centered on student objectives/needs. The discussion concerning learner experiences prior to entering university should remind instructors that learning must transcend simple and ineffective tests like vocabulary recognition, but not acquisition or competence.

For Japanese students studying English, up to the university level, study has held a testing objective. A good score on a paper-based test that does not creatively engage the test-taker's L2 communicative abilities has been more important than actual communication skill using their L2. Students have come from schools where there was little opportunity to use their L2 and where their teachers focus on testing, not communication. With few support staff to aid large

class sizes (usually they are capped at 36-40 students per class), teachers at the secondary teaching level use instructional methods that best accommodate their working environment. These are just some of the factors that make the grammar-translation methodology the first choice for pre-university L2 English study. This awareness of the general student population's experiences can aid the adult university educator to facilitate these L2 learners' educational and possible career goals.

Though seemingly insignificant, it is important to consider the words we use when we explain our work at the university level of instruction. Though teachers may describe students entering university as "kids," the use of this term does not mean that the instructional model most often used to describe these curricular objectives must also be pedagogy. Indeed, university students are not children, and the methodology of instruction and how we describe it must respect the knowledge and experience of the recipients of instruction—and this is called andragogy. This approach must be shown both in the instructional methodology used by instructors (which for the most part it is) and in how we describe or discuss their curriculum and lessons.

Instructors at the university level should set objectives with learner needs taken into consideration. Students need to know what and why they study, and it should not be just to write a TOEFL paper test. The need to know what and why they study is an andragogical need of any adult learner. Although the pedagogically stylized grammar-translation method may show results with passive tests akin to the TOEFL or TOEIC paper-based tests, this type of instruction does not necessarily meet most of the learner's future needs: Communicative ability in using their written/oral L2 skills are what students themselves recognize as a need.

While many will agree with some of our postulations, and some will agree with none, our discussion is centered not on the methodology or purpose for what we teach, but how we explain our approach to students and how it fits with their potential needs beyond their formal educational experiences. This is not political correctness but a call for a clear articulation of what professional language instruction is at the adult level. The content of our classes may not

change, but how we describe it should. University is a place for adult learning and our students need to accept responsibility for their learning. Andragogical principles referred to above will help students to better understand the why and how of their studies and to better understand their application as they move beyond their university education.

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Author bios

Paul Rowan *is currently an assistant professor of English languages at Nihon University holds a Doctorate of Education from Nova Southeastern University. He is deeply interested in the uses of technology in education, many of which are adult-learner centred, hence his interest in andragogy. p.rwn@edu-designing.com*

Hideyuki Kumaki *is currently an assistant professor of English languages at Nihon University. He is very interested in how non-native speakers of English learn English more effectively with student-centred learning being the most powerful system of instruction. hiderin224@hotmail.com*