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Curriculum as Process and Curriculum as Product in Foreign Language Education

Michael CARROLL

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the terms ‘curriculum’ and ‘curriculum change’ are conceived of in the discourse surrounding language education in two very different societies: Australia and Japan. Several ways of understanding curriculum change are discussed. The paper argues that curriculum can be seen as a process or as a product, and that the former implies a view of learning as self-directed and autonomous, while the latter implies a teacher-centred, top-down view of learning.

A Teacher's story

At orientation day just before the opening of the new centre, when we were told there was a brand-new curriculum, most people were, on the whole, supportive. Of course some people didn't like the idea that, compared with previous programs we'd taught on, we seemed to be losing some of the freedom we'd come to take for granted. There'd really never been a curriculum to speak of here before, so we were all a bit apprehensive. But overall we were keen to be part of it. It was exciting. There was a lot of energy around on that day. One year down the track, though, there's a much more ambivalent attitude in the staff room. The curriculum turned out to be too prescriptive for some, and not prescriptive enough for others. Some people say it puts so many restrictions on what we can do that we're not really teachers any more, just glorified human tape recorders; others say that if we're going to be given a list of things we have to do in the classroom, we shouldn't have to go round trying to supplement the materials we're given. It's the same with the levels. You hear some people saying it's just too difficult for the students, and then you hear the opposite: It's too Mickey Mouse. The problem is no one asked the teachers what we thought in the first place. If we'd been a bit more involved at the start, we might have had more incentive to make it work instead of complaining or, as some of us did, just ignoring it and doing what we'd always done. Are we better off now than we would have been if we hadn't had the new curriculum? If I have to answer that question I'd say it

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could have been worse, but it could have been a lot better, too. The students seem to like the idea of an “innovative” curriculum, but whether they are learning more as a result is a question on which the jury is still out.

(From Carroll, 2007, pp1-2)

Background

Language curriculum went through rapid changes in most English-speaking countries starting in the 1990s, with the introduction of competency-based curricula to many institutions and types of programs (Mackay, 2000). In Australia this was realised through the Certificate of Spoken and Written English (CSWE) in the area of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (Hagan, Hood, Jackson, Jones, Joyce, and Manidid, 1993), and in Europe through the European Language Passport, and the Common European Framework of Reference, or CEFR. To some extent these ways of thinking about curriculum came from the concerns of teachers, students and administrators, but the strongest push to introduce the idea of competency-based planning, assessment, and program evaluation came from the providers of funding, such as, in Australia, the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs (DIMEA), the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), and various state Departments of Education, on the grounds that public funds should be accounted for in a transparent way (Smith, 1999).

In the initial stages of implementation some teachers and students disliked and opposed the competency approach, but many had their own reasons for welcoming a re-think of accountability. In the period preceding the 1990s ideas of ‘communicative language teaching’ and learner-centredness had replaced previous paradigms (grammar-translation, audiolingualism notional-functionalism) as the dominant theories in TESOL (Ingram, 1979; Willing, 1985; Nunan, 1988; Burton, 1998, Feez, 2001). While the rigidity of these earlier models had been conducive to the production of coursebooks and other graded materials, the communicative syllabus was more eclectic, often requiring teachers to make materials themselves. This created a more challenging environment for teachers, particularly those at the start of their careers, and could be difficult to make sense of for students, who often came from much more traditional educational systems (Burton, 1991, ADIMA, 2001). More recently, the increasing use of can-do statements based on the CEFR has had a similarly ambivalent response. On the one hand there are obvious advantages in reporting outcomes in real-life terms that make intuitive sense to the layman or laywoman, while on the other hand coming to shared understandings of the concrete criteria on which can-do assessments are based is no easy task.

In Japan, as in most Asian countries, while school curricula are often governed by very detailed

requirements in terms of materials, methods, assessment and outcomes, universities and colleges have traditionally been quite the opposite, leaving virtually every curriculum decision to the discretion of the teacher. For compulsory language courses, though, where there may be 50 or 100 groups (the entire first year cohort across a university) studying the same subject, this can be problematic, particularly where courses articulate one into another.

Today in Japan and other parts of Asia there is a flurry of activity in the implementation of curriculum reform (Mackenzie, 2002, Brewster, 2006, Hua Li, 2006). These reforms are motivated to some extent by national language policy (MEXT 2003), as was the case in Australia, but more pressingly by competition between institutions as a result of falling birthrates (Kaneko, 1997; Terada, 2007). Unlike Britain and Australia where almost all universities are government funded, in Japan there are more private than public universities, and in a time of falling numbers of university age students competition for enrolments is intense. In a sense, therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in many Asian countries is in the position that TESOL was in English-speaking countries two decades ago, in that accountability, and the importance of coordinated curriculum is becoming important in areas where it was not so important before (Venema, 2007).

In these contexts, the ways in which those changes impact on both teachers and learners are complex. On the one hand the autonomy of teachers is clearly under threat, in that they are required to conform more overtly than before to publicly specified standards and, in some cases, methods of teaching. Similarly, students on the face of it may have fewer chances to influence the activities in their own classes. On the other hand the changes also offer a chance for both teacher and learners to be part of the re-making of their curricula, and of the ongoing development. In fact, if the notion of teacher and learner autonomy is seen as educationally important, it might be built into the design of the new curricula. There is some evidence that this happened in Australia, where although there were strong criticisms of competency-based teaching (Cervi, 1993; Lewis, 1993), at the same time there were also those who surprised themselves by finding ways to be autonomous within competency-based frameworks (Burns and Hood, 1995 and 1997). Although there is research in the Japanese context on teacher perceptions of their work (Stewart, 2005, 2007; Cowie, 2003), there is relatively little that focuses on the experiences of both students and teachers in relation to curriculum processes. Nor is there research on autonomy in language curriculum in Japan that specifically focuses on learning outcomes. (Though the Burns and Hood studies referred to above, (1995 and 1997) have done this in relation to Australian migrant TESOL. Burns and Hood coordinated an Australia-wide project to examine the effects of the introduction of the Certificate of Spoken and Written English which has driven the migrant TESOL curriculum since the mid 1990s. The 'Teachers' Voices' series of books documented the experiences of teachers from each of the States as they grappled with this new assessment regime.)

Reforms to date in Japan have often conceptualised curriculum in a superficial manner as little more than a list of subject titles (Gatton, 1999; McVeigh, 2001, 2002). This means that while curriculum reform and review is a frequent occurrence, often undertaken every five years or so, substantive changes are few and effects on learning, so far as these have been measured at all, are minor (Blight, 2002). In addition there has been little empirical research at the curriculum level into just what teachers and learners do, and how they experience the programs in which they take part.

In order to understand curriculum activity, in particular curriculum change, in these two situations, it is useful to examine the underlying beliefs that surround language education. One area relates to curriculum itself, not just in the field of English language teaching but also more generally in secondary and tertiary education. This area concerns definitions of curriculum itself, research into how curriculum processes are instantiated in practice, and research into how changes are implemented. The second area concerns the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Japan. The third area covers one specific aspect of language learning. It relates to research into autonomy as a feature of learning, and as an element in teaching practice and the curriculum process. This paper will therefore examine these three areas.

Understanding Curriculum

The word 'curriculum' is typically used in lay terms in ways that can easily mislead. Particularly misleading is the tendency to conceive of it as if it were a physical entity, something to be acted upon, or to be created and distributed to its 'users'. Marsh (1997, p 3) gives the following list of usages frequently found in official institutional contexts:

1. Curriculum is that which is taught in school.
2. Curriculum is a set of subjects.
3. Curriculum is content.
4. Curriculum is a set of materials.
5. Curriculum is a set of performance objectives.
6. Curriculum is that which an individual learner experiences as a result of schooling.
7. Curriculum is that which is taught both inside and outside of school, and directed by the school.
8. Curriculum is everything that is planned by school personnel.

The first of these is vague enough to encompass the general lay understanding, but is not particularly useful if we want to use it as a starting point for further analysis. Many teachers and administrators typically think of curriculum in terms of the second to fourth items, as simply a set of documents. Sometimes these are lists of content items for a particular program, or prescribed

endpoints; sometimes they include outcomes, as in the fifth item above. Many also think of curriculum as something wholly organised and planned by the school, as in the seventh and eighth above. These usages all fit within what Grundy (1987) calls curriculum as product. However these sorts of documents are only a small part of what curriculum theorists mean when they talk of 'curriculum'. Curriculum can also be defined by what the learner experiences, as the sixth definition recognises. It encompasses the whole array of social relations that operate in classrooms and throughout educational institutions, and might be described more inclusively as all those things that happen in, and in relation to, a given educational setting. Marsh recognises this aspect of curriculum, but nevertheless prioritises the role of the school in his own working definition: 'an interrelated set of plans and experiences which a student completes under the guidance of the school' (Marsh, 1997, p 5).

The work of Shirley Grundy begins from a similar perspective, focussing on learners' experiences, but also introduces the notion of curriculum as something created by the teachers through their practice. Grundy claims that for a curriculum to be effective in any meaningful way it needs to be 'coherent, ... conscious .. and consensual. [...] Within the shared professional community of the school there needs to be a shared culture which supports the construction of a worthwhile curriculum.' (Grundy, 1994, p 12.) This definition recalls the ground-breaking work of Lawrence Stenhouse, who saw curriculum as a set of understandings shared by teachers (Stenhouse, 1977). But Grundy goes beyond this, recalling the view of David Tripp of curriculum as 'a systematic set of relations between particular people, objects, events, and circumstances' (Tripp, 1987 p. 7).

These are perhaps perspectives that many teachers intuitively understand, though they may not usually think of curriculum in these terms. And indeed such perspectives are rarely acknowledged formally when a curriculum is designed. To varying extents, Grundy, Marsh, Tripp and Stenhouse all situate the curriculum to a large part in the consciousness of those who participate in educational activity: teachers, learners and administrators. This kind of view of curriculum as a process is essential in thinking about institutional changes, how they come about, and how they work their way through the systems to which they are applied. A common perception is that all that is necessary to change a curriculum is to draw up a plan and give out instructions. But if curriculum is viewed as residing in the social situation of the classroom, as all those things that go on in and out of the classroom which have an influence on student learning, then we need to go beyond this kind of prescriptive documentation. Marsh's definition, although it focuses on the learner to the extent that it recognises that curriculum is what the learner receives, rather than what the institution provides, does not go far enough beyond this kind of prescriptivism. Grundy's notion of not only teachers but students as well as 'active participants in the construction of learning' (1987, p 102) takes this extra step. Building on Freire's characterisation of teaching and

learning as reciprocal, of students as 'critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher' (1972, p 54), Grundy's (1987) view of curriculum as praxis positions students as co-creators of the curriculum and teachers as co-learners.

It is important to realise too, that there is a dimension of curriculum that goes substantially beyond the immediate environment of the school. The number of interest groups who have a say, or would like a say in curriculum policy, is wider than those comprising simply the putative actors in the classroom itself. Besides teachers and learners, and those who administer the running of the school at a technical level, modern education at all levels is influenced by a huge number of stakeholders. Politicians, education department bureaucrats, assessment bodies, unions and professional associations, the media, commercial interests, and lobby groups all influence curriculum policies both at national and local levels. (See Hall, 1998 and McVeigh, 2002 for a discussion of these influences in Japan; and Reid, 1999, and Grundy, 2002 for Australia-based accounts.) These influences may be explicit, as in the directives issued by managerial bodies which may be largely imposed on teachers, as in the curriculum as product view (Grundy, 1987); or they may impinge on the consciousness of the primary actors (teachers, learners and school-based administrators) in less obvious ways through the media, and by virtue of their being part of the everyday discourse within their own individual surroundings. These latter influences may reflect the curriculum as product view or they may reflect views of curriculum as socially constructed.

These conflicting views of what curriculum is - the handed-down view and the constructivist view - are reflected in what Harris and Marsh (2005, p 16) call the 'competing discourse of curriculum change'. When words such as 'reform' or 'innovation' are linked with 'curriculum', the power of those in decision-making positions - higher level administrators, whether teachers or not - is acknowledged and fortified. The curriculum which can be reformed or subjected to innovation in this view is thus reified to a far greater extent than a 'coherent, conscious and consensual' one (Grundy, 1994, p 12), in which changes are seen to happen through Tripp's 'relations between people, objects, events, and circumstances' (1987, p 7), Marsh's 'interrelated set of plans or experiences' (1997, p 5).

The importance of these competing discourses cannot be overemphasised. Though the traditional curriculum as product view is now frequently challenged by curriculum theorists, it nevertheless continues to underlie public discussion. Shirley Grundy, in considering the 1992 'Statements and Profiles for Australian Schools' (See Mayer, 1992), notes that denials that the statements and profiles did not represent a national curriculum were not to be taken at face value (Grundy 1994). If we acknowledge that a curriculum is 'that which is produced through the interaction between [...] teacher, students, subject matter, and milieu' (1994, p 10), it is clear that to the extent that the statements and profiles specified outcomes of teaching they were indeed a

significant part, although certainly not the whole, of a curriculum (Grundy, 1994).

It is possible to see clearly here how the two kinds of discourses compete even within single documents. The framers of the statements and profiles wanted to project an image of the document as based on a constructivist view: flexible, open to a variety of pedagogical approaches, and welcoming of learner needs and desires. At the same time, though, they wanted to avoid the word 'curriculum', suggesting a 'handed-down' view.

Models of Curriculum Process and Change

Traditionally the discourse surrounding curriculum has been of the first sort, envisaging top-down models in which changes are initiated and more or less fully formed at higher management levels. Markee (1997) calls this approach the centre-periphery model. It describes the situation in which changes are decided centrally by managers whose authority is derived from their position in the hierarchy, then passed on to teachers to implement. In this model the teacher's role is simply to carry out instructions from above, in a more or less mechanical way. They are thus peripheral to the design process (Markee, 1997). A variation on this model is the research-development-diffusion (RDD) model. In this model, the instigation for reform, and the locus of decision making remains in the centre, but the authority of the change agents lies in their expertise in curriculum matters, and the flow of information from all parts of the organization is seen as an important part of the process, allowing at least some role for teachers in giving feedback during the development and diffusion stages. This model is theory driven, techno-centric, and rationalistic, and assumes that rationally justified changes will inevitably be taken up. It is therefore sometimes criticized as paying little attention to the implementation stage, since it often fails to consider issues of relationships between the various people involved.

These centrally directed models are similar to the 'authority - innovation - decision-making' model (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). This model posits five functions that are carried out by participants in the curriculum, according to whether they are decision-makers or implementers. Decision makers (authorities) carry out the functions of creating and organising knowledge, persuading others to engage in action, and formalising decisions - giving the stamp of authority. Implementers, who include co-ordinators and middle managers as well as the teachers themselves, put into action the decisions in the classroom, and also have a communication function through which they monitor the implementation, pass along directives, information, and sometimes evaluations (both of the program itself and of individual teacher 'performance') from the decision makers to the teachers, as well as feedback, questions and critiques in the other direction. The implementer group, though, may have little or no influence on either initial decision making or on changes following program evaluations.

Markee's model also has similarities to, though is not to be confused with, curriculum diffusion models. (Fullan, 1993; Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000; Harris and Marsh, 2005). While Markee focuses primarily on the how changes originate, curriculum diffusion theory concerns how they progress once implementation begins, and are concerned with explanations for success and failure, and with mapping the interaction of the various actors within curriculum networks. Innovation diffusion theory is fundamentally a way of conceptualising change based on searching for factors in the situation which influence the change process, particularly the roles of the various actors and the different rates at which they adopt change, the loci of authority when decisions are made, the stages that innovations pass through, the channels through which communication occurs, and the ways in which individuals fit into or clash with the social system (Bigum and Harris, 2004). The chief drawback of this sort of category-based theorising is that categories are determined following analysis of the innovation after the fact. That is, the innovation is seen as something static that can be drawn up as if it were a map, and then analysed and explained (Bigum and Harris, 2004). This approach may be attractive to managers in that it suggests that there is an optimum configuration of factors - developers and those who implement, technologies, system elements and so on - which, if correctly selected will lead to success, and which allows for a predominantly top-down process. However it ignores the dynamic nature of innovation itself, the unpredictability of the human element which suggests that communication and dialogue is an essential part of both the initiation and implementation.

Harris and Marsh criticise top-down models on a number of grounds. For instance, such models exclude teachers from decision making roles, but lack any acknowledgement of the power that teachers in fact exercise, both through professional discussion and through resistance to or uptake of changes (Harris and Marsh, 2005; Gibbons, 1982; Hood, 1995). This is a factor of the de-contextualised nature of such models, in which the context of curriculum is restricted to superficial, technical areas and excludes consideration of the wider social network within which the educational enterprise exists. They also assume a linear pattern of change which fails to reflect the back-and-forth messiness of actual change experience. In short, by imposing pre-defined categories (managers are superordinate and teachers subordinate) they place tight limits on the freedom of teachers and students to have any influence.

A similar critique is made by Grundy (2002), describing her secondment to the Education Department of Western Australia as District Director of Education at a time when the school system there was introducing outcomes based education: 'one of the most far-reaching curriculum change programs ever introduced into West Australian schools (2002, p 56). Grundy concludes that any large scale reform such as this, 'carries within it the seeds of its own failure' (2002, p 59). Such a large scale necessarily involving substantial direction from the top means that there

are significant factors unconnected with the educational situation itself: uncertainty created by changes of political leadership; the performance based terms of executive contracts; demands for physical evidence of progress, and the need to 'trade' this evidence for continued financial support. All of these factors 'militate against sustained long-term, large-scale educational reform.

Markee also dismisses top down approaches as fundamentally ineffective in the long term, and proposes two other, more inclusive, models. The problem-solving model is a more democratic model in which the impetus for the change comes from problems and issues identified within the organization, primarily from teachers themselves. It is therefore a bottom-up approach, and is often realised in small-scale action research projects. The model is widely favoured in recent work on curriculum change, but it has significant obstacles, most notably that it demands more time, commitment and skills than many teachers are willing or able to provide (See for instance, Warhurst, Grundy, Laird and Maxwell, 1994). Thus Markee proposes a 'linking' model which recognizes the complexity of real life teaching situations and is flexible enough to allow for both top-down initiatives, and the support that can come with them, as well as bottom-up feedback, amendments and involvement in decision-making, particularly at the implementation level.

A quite different, and more complex, way of understanding curriculum is described by Harris and Marsh (2005) and Bigum and Harris (2004) who make a case for the usefulness of actor network theory (ANT), as a means of investigating the social phenomena of curriculum processes without forcing such investigation into a pre-determined frame. Actor network theory claims that social phenomena can be understood by seeing them as networks comprising both human actors and physical objects: classrooms, computers, documents and so on. By not allocating preconceived roles to participants, and by acknowledging the impact physical aspects of the environment have on actions, ANT would seem to be an appropriate way to investigate the complexities and richness of curriculum processes. In addition, ANT has the advantage that while it recognises the formal limits on the agency of teachers, it also allows analysis of informal, actual influences not only of teachers but of all other actors.

ANT theorists claim that traditional social science is reaching a dead-end and produces less and less useful knowledge. 'The expression [science of the social] would be excellent except for two drawbacks, namely the word 'social' and the word 'science'.' (Latour, 2005, p 2). Latour contends that in the 150 or so years of sociology our understanding of both words has changed drastically. In particular 'society' has come to be thought of more and more as a entity with known and set categories, no longer to be investigated in its own right, but only as one 'domain of reality', one factor that helps to explain other domains - biological, linguistic, natural and so on. But in fact this reification of a 'social context' in which other activities take place, now an unchallenged 'common sense' for all of us, not just social scientists, hides the dynamic nature of human (and non-human)

association. The 'network' in actor network theory is not a 'domain', something that might be seen or touched, like a circuit board, but is 'visible only by the traces it leaves [...] when a new association is being produced between elements which are in themselves in no way social.' (Latour, 2005, p 8)

Thus an ANT approach to curriculum research does not begin with pre-decided categories, looking at curricular contexts in order to slot people (actors) into already known roles, but starts from a position more akin to that of an anthropologist studying some previously entirely unknown community, looking to find out what categories and roles there might be. The 'network' to be studied therefore, in addition to the infrastructure through which the program is realised consists of a wide range of people who have some involvement in a particular course or program,. This includes teachers and learners of course, but also those in administrative roles (using 'roles' here in the sense of formal positions in the organisation); those who, for instance, co-ordinate teaching responsibilities, materials, testing and so on; those who maintain computer and audio-visual hardware; those who allocate classroom space and timetables; those who market programs outside the institution and so on. The institutional connections between these actors (for instance as might be shown in an organisation chart), do constitute one facet of the 'network', but not the only one. There will very likely be many other 'traces between elements'. Personal relationships between two teachers who share materials might leave one trace, while personal animosity between two others might leave another. Learner's excitement at using computers, or dislike of drama techniques, or discomfort under poorly managed air-conditioning might leave others. The way in which all these 'traces' inter-relate constitute a curriculum as Tripp suggests above, as 'a systematic set of relations between particular people, objects, events, and circumstances' (Tripp, 1987, p 7).

Curriculum and Language Teaching

Just as thinking about curriculum in general terms went through major changes in the last 30 years, moving broadly from top-down approaches towards more participatory ones, so too did understandings of curriculum and curriculum innovations, in English language teaching in particular. While a bewildering number of methods and techniques have come into and fallen out of fashion during that period, theoretical changes can be said to have moved from fundamentally structural approaches, to approaches which revolve around the learner, his or her needs, and communicative activities (Feez, 2001). In structural approaches, languages are seen as quasi-physical systems made up of words (lexis) and rules for combining the words (grammar and syntax) and for producing them (pronunciation, stress and intonation). A structural approach to language curriculum proposes that these language systems (English, Japanese, Chinese and so on), need to be

mapped, organised into sequences according to 'learnability', and then passed on from expert users (teachers) to novices (learners) (Richards and Rogers, 1986, Yalden, 1987). Learner-centred, needs based, communicative approaches, on the other hand propose that since using language is both a cognitive and a social activity the characteristics of the learner, their needs, abilities and motivations at the time of learning are central to the learning process. The course or curriculum designer in these approaches is very often the teacher. He or she must begin by finding out what needs the learners have, negotiating objectives with the learners, and using these needs and objectives to create activities which scaffold learners as they engage in real (or at least realistic) social interactions and meaning-making in the target language (Brindley, 1984, Nunan, 1987).

1 Structural Approaches

Structural approaches, sometimes called 'situational' approaches, are those which begin with a map of the language as a system, which itself then forms the content of the instruction. Languages were traditionally taught by the grammar-translation method, in the same way that classical languages had been taught for centuries, and though used less frequently today grammar-translation can be thought of as the proto-typical structural approach. Grammar-translation, roughly speaking, involves learning vocabulary and grammar rules, often by rote, and writing or translating largely decontextualised sentences in order to 'practice' these items one by one. This method made some sense when it was used to teach dead languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek, where the goal was not communication but the explication of written texts, but few students ever learned to speak living languages in this way (Nunan, 1987), even though a not inconsiderable number attained considerable skills in decoding written texts. People who can gain substantial mastery of foreign languages in this way, including speaking and listening, are exceptional. One problem for language curriculum reform is that a sizeable number of these exceptional individuals seem to become involved in language education, often through the delegation of language teaching to Departments of Literature. Not realising the extent to which they are different from the average student, these people may often promulgate the traditional methods by which they themselves learned the language, reasoning that since it was effective for them it ought to be similarly effective for others (See Bolatti, 2009; Heigham, 2009; de Abreu-e-Lima, de Oliveira, and Augusto-Navarro, 2009). In short, teachers have a tendency to teach in the same way that they themselves were taught.

The limitations of grammar-translation as a teaching method were realised rapidly once increasing numbers of people began to learn foreign languages as travel became more commonplace in Europe and the USA in the years during and following the second world war. The audio-lingual

method arose out of the need for military administrations to teach foreign languages much more quickly than had hitherto been possible (Brown, 2000). The situational method was a similar attempt in Britain. Both methods identified a set of basic situations which learners, potential travellers in countries where the target language was spoken, would very likely come across in daily life, the mastery of which would allow them to get by. Both audio-lingual and situational methods relied on behaviourist models of learning, teaching 'correct' words and grammatical structures through repetition, drilling and substitution exercises. The audio-lingual method in the USA, and situational language teaching in Britain were certainly improvements on what had gone before, particularly in contexts where learners were highly motivated and small in number. Many of the innovations that they brought remain widely practised today: a recognition that all four macro-skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, are important; topic-based syllabuses; the so-called 'three Ps' of the teaching process - Presentation, Practice, Performance; and the framing of objectives in terms of what the learner should be able to do after teaching interventions (Feez, 2001).

2 Learner-centred, communicative approaches

In the USA, Australia and Europe, structural (grammar-translation, situational or audio-lingual) approaches have now almost entirely disappeared as guiding frameworks, in favour of what is loosely called the communicative approach. The communicative approach initially grew out of the work of the Council of Europe Language Policy Division (van Ek, 1975), which in the early 1970s produced functional-notional specifications of appropriate learning objectives for language learners. Functional-notional syllabuses specified learning goals in terms of functions, "things speakers want to do using language", such as greetings, apologies, requests and so on, and notions, general areas of meaning such as possibility, causality, temporality (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Although functional-notional syllabuses have in common with situational approaches a recognition of the importance of different language forms being appropriate for different contexts and situations, they are qualitatively different. While situational syllabuses were constructed out of language forms relating to specific situations, they continued the structuralist tradition of presenting these forms in isolation. Functional-notional syllabuses, on the other hand, proposed that learners acquire proficiency by trying to use in real or realistic situations (including notional situations) the ostensible content, the functional language that they learned through drills and exercises. In other words functional-notionalism went a stage further than situationalism in bringing context into the classroom.

This approach gradually became known as communicative language teaching (CLT), a term which covers a wide range of new understandings about the language learning process. In its

simplest terms communicative language teaching asserts that learning to communicate can only be achieved through communicating. Just as no one teaches their child to ride a bicycle through lectures and the learning of rules, so it is no use expecting to learn a language simply through listening to instructions: in language the only way to learn is to get on the bike and try it: to learn language through using language.

These new views of language teaching could be said to originate in the dispute in language acquisition research between behaviourists and cognitivists. In the behaviourist view language use was seen as an agglomeration of small, discrete items of behaviour which could be learned through imitation and repetition, similar to the way children learn multiplication tables. In this view children learned their first language by listening to and copying the language they heard around them. In the cognitivist view, on the other hand, language is far more complex. If children could only learn through copying not only would language learning take immeasurably longer than it in fact does, but also that there could be no explanation for the creativity that all human beings display in their use of language. The cognitivist view, based on the work of Chomsky claims that human beings are born with a dedicated language acquisition device, hardwired into the brain. This allows children to subconsciously infer the rules of whatever language environment they find themselves in, after hearing a relatively small sample of utterances and testing out their speech by communicating with those around them (Chomsky, 1965).

Although Chomskian linguistics has little to say about second or foreign language teaching and learning, this cognitivist view of language acquisition occurring as a result of interaction between the individual and their surroundings led easily to set of beliefs which constitute the now dominant paradigm in language learning theory, at least in English-speaking and European contexts. These beliefs can be summarised as follows:

1. Learners are at the centre of the learning process, making inferences from what they see and hear, and testing those inferences by their efforts to communicate. (Feez, 2001.)
2. Interlanguage, learners' non-standard utterances, rather than consisting of mistakes to be avoided, are in fact indicators of progress and contribute to effective learning if attention is paid to them. (Corder, 1981.)
3. The ideal learning environment is one rich in language input at a level slightly above the learners' current level. (Krashen, 1988.)
4. Fluency is as important as accuracy in many contexts (Selinker, 1991).
5. Classroom material should be based as much as possible on authentic materials (Feez, 2001)
6. Effective learning relies on the materials and activities meeting learners' needs. Therefore negotiation of curriculum is a crucial component of effective teaching (Nunan,

1987)

These beliefs bring together the related ideas that language curriculum should be communicative, needs-based, and learner-centred.

It is not uncommon in the literature on second language learning and teaching to detect a sense that the current communicative language teaching paradigm represents a kind of modern day enlightenment that liberates us from older, less effective theories of teaching and learning. (It is certainly true that re-reading classic texts that informed much the language teaching throughout the early part of the 20th century (for instance Sweet, 1899; or Jespersen, 1904), there is plentiful reference to grammatical and lexical aspects of language systems, but relatively little mention of learners. In fact research into language learning processes, as opposed to teaching methods, is relatively recent (Rampton, 1991; Spolsky, 2000). Benson (2004) points out however, that this cannot in fairness be attributed to a simple lack of thought on the part of researchers at that time. The exponential increase since the 1970s in the numbers of people learning foreign languages, primarily English, and the diversity of their backgrounds, has in fact created a quite new reality for language teachers. For language teachers prior to this period to assume that differences between learners were negligible was to some extent justified by the homogeneity of their actual student groups. Benson speculates that before the 1970s, researchers, “failed to *see* the learner largely because diversity was in fact far less visible in their classrooms than it is today”. (Benson, 2004, p 7.) Obvious as the point is, it may be one reason why learner diversity is less often central to curriculum thinking in foreign language learning situations, than it is in second language situations.

3. Language Teaching in Japan

Education in Japan, both at school and university level, is in turmoil at the beginning of the 21st century. Teacher dissatisfaction, student absenteeism, bullying, unsatisfactory academic standards and demographic changes, all feature regularly in articles in both newspapers and educational journals. (See for example Terada, 2007; The Asahi Shimbun, 2007; MEXT, 2003, 2009, McVeigh 2002). This is as true of English education as of other subjects. Reports of Japanese students’ poor showing in TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores, as well as of poor basic communication ability despite compulsory English classes throughout junior and senior high schools and universities are plentiful (McVeigh, 2002, Koike, 2003, Okada, 2004).

English, along with German and French, was first introduced into school curricula during the Meiji period (1870–1912), and for most of the period from then until the end of the second world war was directed predominantly at national development goals. These goals were to create an

elite with sufficient understanding of foreign languages to allow them to survey European and American societies and introduce into Japan the social and scientific ideas and technologies they found there. (Koike, 2003, McVeigh, 2002). The education system was highly centralised, and stratified. That is to say that after the six years of mandatory schooling and a generalised middle school experience, those students who continued were streamed into a range of academic and vocational high schools, for each of which there were strict national curriculum regulations. Foreign Languages were not compulsory, but restricted to students in the academic-leaning high schools, and the purpose of instruction was to ‘harvest’ information from overseas rather than to develop two-way avenues of communication. Indeed during the 1930s foreign languages were positively discouraged for all but a very small number of students (Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999). For this group, reading foreign books, in particular scientific and technical texts, was most important for national development. Such language teaching as remained was therefore heavily biased towards reading, and to a lesser extent writing, since there were few opportunities for travel and few foreigners in Japan.

After the Second World War, by contrast, English became a key component of the ‘reconstruction’ of Japan as an internationally-oriented society. To this end, the centralisation of the curriculum was relaxed, and became a set of guidelines giving somewhat greater freedom to schools in deciding how they taught specific subjects. At the same time the guidelines specified what those subjects should be, the time that should be allocated to each one, and the list of textbooks from which schools could choose. (Koike, 2003). More importantly English became a compulsory subject at all junior high schools, and a massive project was instituted to train teachers, not only because of the huge increase in learner numbers, but because the new objectives were quite different from those that had gone before. All of the periodic Education Department statements of intent since 1947 have been couched in terms of the 4 macro-skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing), self expression, cultural exchange and internationalisation (Koike, 2003). Since the 2003 “Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” (MEXT, 2003), English has slowly been introduced at primary level, and semi-compulsory professional development for English teachers has begun, while the current MEXT guidelines advocate that all classes should be taught in English.

Counteracting this consistent rhetoric of communication and cultural exchange objectives, however, is the pervasive system of university entrance examinations. In addition to every university having its own entrance examination, there is The National Centre for University Examinations test, often referred to as ‘The Centre Test’, taken by approximately 500,000 students each year (DNC, 2014). This test, as well as the great majority of individual university entrance tests, is widely believed to have enormous influence on English curriculum in high school, and to a lesser

extent junior high school. Teachers often complain that they would like to teach with a focus on communication but are constrained from doing so by the necessity to teach to the test (Stout, 2003). At least one study (Mulvey, 2001) has pointed out that in fact The Centre Test has in fact changed into a whole-text, communicative instrument far from the grammar-centred, decontextualised test that it is often claimed to be. However, high school curriculum practice is still overwhelmingly predicated on the assumption that grammar study at the sentence level is the only way to prepare for university entrance tests.

For the universities, the result of students' long history of studying language as an artifact rather than a means of communication is that although entering students have a minimum of six years of English study behind them, the great majority are almost totally unprepared for any kind of communicative activities in English language classrooms. In addition, neither the Education Department's 2003 Action Plan (MEXT, 2003) nor the more recent 2009 Course of Study (MEXT, 2009) have concrete proposals for universities, or for the development of skills on the part of university teachers, apart from the vaguely worded suggestion that students graduating from universities should be expected to be able to use English in their work (Okada, 2004, Underwood 2012). In spite of this, many universities are scrambling to reform their language curricula, partly in response to the underlying sentiments of the action plan, and partly in response to falling enrolments caused by changing demographics (Kaneko, 1997, Underwood 2012)). Thus while the traditional free hand that teachers had, not only in deciding content, but also teaching methods and assessment practices is now being challenged in relation to English language teaching, as more and more universities introduce language learning objectives, required texts and common achievement tests (Carroll, Douglas, Harrison, Tsurii, 2004). In such a situation teachers are placed in an unenviable position, as they try to cope with a flurry of directives, with little institutional support in terms of facilities, materials and provision for professional development.

Language teaching, learning and autonomy

The twin ideas of the autonomous teacher and the autonomous learner now have a substantial literature associated with them (Reinders, H. 2007). The Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) has had an active special interest group in Learner Development since the early 1990s, organising regular well-attended workshops, meetings and conferences, publishing a bilingual quarterly journal, (*Learning Learning*), and most recently two anthologies of autonomy-related research. (Barfield and Nix, 2003, Kohyama and Skier, 2005). There is thus considerable interest in the notion of autonomy in relation to teaching and learning. In fact, autonomy, as a key aspect the language learning process, is now a commonplace in the discourse of English language teaching. In the classroom, however, it is not as widespread as this may suggest. Practice lags

significantly behind theory (Stout, 2003). In this it has followed a similar trajectory to the ideas of communicative language teaching and learner-centred language teaching. All three notions entered mainstream discussion during the 1970s and 1980s, and revolutionised the way classrooms operated by first being adopted by daring, adventurous, and highly enthusiastic teachers, but eventually becoming, in a substantially diluted form, unremarked curriculum objectives (Little, 2007).

As noted above, communicative language teaching rests on the premise that it is not sufficient for language learners to be able to construct grammatically correct sentences, but that they must also be able to use their language abilities to get things done in the world outside the classroom. Communicative language teaching, then, tries to create opportunities for learners to use of language for communicative tasks which they have some interest in carrying out aside from their desire to learn the language (Nunan, 1988, p 25). In other words, carrying out communicative tasks clearly requires some degree of autonomy, and this has led some to advocate the ‘teaching’ of autonomy as part of language programs. However the concept of autonomy needs some unpacking. We may talk about fostering autonomy, or ‘giving’ it to students, or perhaps about students ‘acquiring’ it. But we ought not to forget that, like curriculum, autonomy is a more of a process than an end-state. Autonomy comprises specific: ‘ways of doing, perceiving and acting’ (Auerbach 2007, p 84).

This means that the teaching of autonomy is not the same as strategy training. It is very likely that strategy training has beneficial effects for many learners (Oxford, 1990), and there is certainly some relationship between the two. However, while an autonomous learner will very likely have access to a range of strategies for learning, it is not necessarily the case that simply learning to use one or more learning strategy constitutes acting in an autonomous way.

The word ‘autonomy’ came into common use in the field of language learning following the report ‘Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning’ prepared by Henri Holec (1979) as part of the Council of Europe’s Council for Cultural Cooperation established in 1962 with the aim of “encourag (ing) the development of understanding, cooperation and mobility among Europeans by improving and broadening the learning of modern languages by all sections of the population.” (Holec, 1979) The idea of autonomy in relation to learners was (and still largely is) counter intuitive to many learners, and indeed to many teachers who have grown up with the traditional idea of education as being a simple transfer of knowledge from the person who has the knowledge (the teacher) to one who doesn’t (the learner). The movement came about as part of the much more broadly-based socio-political changes that were changing Europe during the 1960s and 70s. As the material wealth of most Europeans came to be taken for granted, social progress became more and more defined in terms of improvements not just in economic terms, but in terms of

what is today called quality of life as well. The increasing awareness of the rights and needs of the individual not only as an entity to be acted upon but also as an actor in society, naturally provided an agreeable environment for those educationalists, often with a background in child-centred education, who advocated a new role for the learner in the learning process, and in particular in the classroom. Holec's paper, drawing on Illich's (1970) notions of deschooling, Freire's (1972) attack on the 'banking' concept of education, and Stevick's (1973) humanistic, discovery learning approach, was a turning point in this movement.

Beginning with Schwartz's (1973) definition of autonomy as 'the ability to assume responsibility for one's own affairs', Holec notes that it is not something human beings are born with, but something which needs to be acquired. It may be acquired naturally, but is more often a result of systematic, formal education. This part of Holec's definition immediately raises issues that need to be considered in relation to young adult learners. Where students have not had a sustained emphasis on assuming responsibility for their own learning, and perhaps very little experience of it, they may be simply unable to carry out many of the activities that teachers ask of them without a significant amount of 'training' in how to do so.

It's important to note that autonomy defined in this way as an ability is couched in terms of the power or capacity to do something, but it is not, in itself, a type of behaviour. While we may look for particular behaviours as evidence of the presence or otherwise of autonomy, we need to keep the two separate in our minds when we come to evaluate student learning. This mirrors the situation of language learning itself. The objective of language learning is an ability, the potential to carry out certain tasks in the target language. But when we assess language learning we cannot directly assess this potential, but can only gather evidence for its existence by observing behaviours.

A corollary of this distinction leads to the second important part of Holec's (1979) definition. He points out that self-directed learning, though closely related to autonomy, is not the same thing. Self directed learning is a behaviour which is dependent on autonomy. In other words a learner who directs their learning to whatever extent, is an autonomous learner to that extent. But the reverse is not necessarily true. An autonomous learner does not necessarily direct their own learning all the time. A person may have the ability to take responsibility for their learning, but in some circumstances decide not to exercise that ability, or even to exercise it through resistance (Oxford, Meng, Yalun, Sung and Jain 2007). Or they may decide, in a responsible way, to delegate to another person the responsibility for making a learning plan. This point is also important to bear in mind when we try to evaluate the presence or otherwise of autonomy in any given situation. It is not uncommon, particularly in cultures where teachers are accorded high levels of personal respect, though not only in those cultures, for motivated and autonomous learners to

defer to the teacher's ways of organising learning, even in cases when they may not see those ways as the most effective. This should not be confused with simple unquestioning obedience. Carroll and Tatsuta (2009) report just such a situation when, as learners of Chinese they often found myself being asked to do activities far more traditional than they were used to in their own classes. Thinking of themselves as relatively autonomous learners, they nevertheless deferred to the teacher even when their instincts tended to distrust an activity. By doing this they often discovered learning opportunities in places they would not have expected.

The idea of autonomy in learning rests on a view of knowledge as socially constructed. In other words, if knowledge, of whatever kind, is simply there, in the world, waiting to be discovered, then there is little need for the learner to be active. The 'banking' concept that Freire (1972) criticises as the traditional underpinning of education constitutes this sort of theory of knowledge. The teacher's role, as expert, possessor of knowledge, is to pass it on to learners whose role is that of passive receivers. However a constructivist theory of knowledge places the learner in an equal position with the teacher. Both have reservoirs of knowledge and experience which, when brought together, 'construct' new knowledge, new ways of understanding the world, for both of them (Freire, 1972).

However, whereas Holec (1979) and Freire (1979) situate the pursuit of autonomy in a constructivist view of knowledge as *consciously* created, there is a different tradition which sees this process as occurring largely *unconsciously*. For instance, Barnes (1992) claims that there are two types of knowledge, school knowledge and action knowledge. Action knowledge is the knowledge that human beings acquire simply by virtue of living and interacting with their surroundings, but not through conscious intent. The job of the teacher, and by implication the learner too, is to bring these two together: to allow learners' action knowledge to develop through interaction with school knowledge. This is the approach that led to the development of communicative language teaching's emphasis on creating classroom situations that were favourable to 'natural' learning. Strongly didactic teaching methods focus primarily on school knowledge and have little impact on action knowledge. But if knowledge construction is mostly the unconscious cognitive process that Barnes claims, then autonomy is far more than simply a technique to be fostered in the pursuit of improved learning outcomes; it is in fact a basic part of the definition of what learning is. To the extent that learning is the integration of new knowledge with existing knowledge, it must always be autonomous, in the sense that at a fundamental level the learner him or herself puts these two together, and the task for education is to provide circumstances conducive to this.

A definition of autonomy in language learning that fits in with this theory of how knowledge is produced, is the following by one of the primary authors of the European Language Portfolio (See Schärer, 2004) the now widely used language credentialing tool that places autonomy at the

centre of the language learning experience.

Success in language teaching is governed by three principles. The principle of *learner involvement* entails that learners are brought to engage with their learning and take responsibility for key decisions; the principle of *learner reflection* entails that they are taught to think critically about the process and content of their learning; and the principle of *target language use* entails that the target language is the chief medium of teaching and learning – because language use plays a key role in language learning, autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin, the scope of each constraining the other. (Little, 2007, p 7).

These three principles - learner involvement, learner reflection and use of the target language – could equally be used to describe communicative language teaching as well as autonomous language learning. In other words one is a corollary of the other, and communicative language teaching and autonomy in language teaching, are both based on the same constructivist view of what constitutes knowledge.

This paper has argued that while the terms ‘curriculum’ and ‘curriculum change’ are commonplace in the language education discourse of both Japan and Australia, they often refer to quite different entities, and are often used misleadingly. The dominant paradigms not just of curriculum but of language learning and teaching are quite different in these two countries. On the one hand is the view of curriculum as a process, and learning as necessarily a self-directed and autonomous activity, and on the other there is the view of curriculum as knowledge transfer, in which those with knowledge (teachers) transfer their knowledge to those without (learners). For curriculum change to be successful, it is essential that these starting points be recognised.

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