POWER, PEDAGOGY, AND THE PROCESS SYLLABUS:
TEACHER CULTURE AS “GATEKEEPER” FOR ELT THEORY
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This paper documents one teacher’s implementation of a process syllabus in a three-week ESL course, paying particular attention to the reactions of program administrators and fellow teachers. It reports the successes and limitations of the implementation as perceived by the author and co-participants and examines the role that teacher culture plays in influencing educators’ responses to classroom innovation. It affirms that traditional concepts of language education can be perpetuated by teacher culture, despite exposure to innovation. Some factors that affect teachers’ perceptions of new ideas are identified, suggesting that a greater understanding of teacher culture will lead to improved communication between theory and pedagogy. In conclusion, it recommends that collaborative research efforts examine teacher culture as “gatekeeper” for ELT theory.

Proponents of the process syllabus (e.g., Breen, 1984, 1987; Candlin, 1984), argue that it addresses the problems of design/context incongruence and empowers learners. However, critics (e.g., White, 1988) argue that the mere notions of flexibility and negotiation, which characterize the process syllabus, reflect a western cultural perspective. These skeptics assert that any syllabus inherently assumes its audience to share the values and world views of its designers. Therefore, given the wide variety of learner perspectives, it is unlikely that any single teaching philosophy, even one designed to adapt, can satisfy the needs of all learners. A third perspective which has been neglected in many discussions of this issue is that of the teacher. Teachers form a formidable subculture which is pivotal in the success of any syllabus implementation. With this in mind, my study reports and examines the reactions of one small group of educators and their students to the introduction of a process syllabus by one teacher in a three week (thirty hour) ESL course. The goal is to uncover and examine salient factors that influence teachers’ reactions to pedagogical experiments or innovations through the presentation of five individual case studies, followed by an interpretive-qualitative evaluation of the syllabus itself.

THE DEBATE OVER THE PROCESS SYLLABUS

Numerous ethnographers have identified incongruencies between the cognitive styles, discourse systems, and world views taught in certain cultures and those assumed at school (e.g., Heath, 1983; Au & Jordan, 1981; Watson-Gegeo, 1992) and examined sociopolitical factors which serve to isolate and discriminate against specific cultural groups (e.g., Delpit, 1988; Watson-Gegeo, 1992). Works that specifically examine the significance of source culture in second language teaching express a wide range of attitudes. Holliday

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(1994), for example, postulates that current communicative teaching strategies are universally applicable and that their alleged failure in some EFL classrooms is due to poor communication between SLA researchers and teachers. This viewpoint is opposed by authors such as Taylor (1993) who advocate methodological customization for each unique cultural context. The process syllabus, as outlined by both Breen (1984, 1987) and Candlin (1984), represents a perspective somewhere between these two extremes. Designed as a single teaching philosophy that continually adapts lesson content and activities to the changing needs of the learners, the process syllabus appears on the surface to satisfy both sides of the controversy. On the one hand, it is widely applicable and communicative in nature. On the other hand, it is theoretically adaptable to each unique cultural context.

Scholars have noted that Auerbach’s (1995) participatory approach bears a strong resemblance to Candlin and Breen’s process syllabus and is based on a similar theoretical framework. Christianson (1995) illustrates the similarities between the two models and comes to the following conclusion.

[Th]ough she does not specifically refer to her syllabus model as “process”, Auerbach depicts one of the most salient examples of the process syllabus in action yet seen in ESL literature. (p. 7)

Auerbach’s rationale for the participatory approach is grounded in the assertion that education is a political act that can either support or undermine a learner’s natural language use. Any syllabus, she maintains, inherently reflects its designers’ values and attitudes towards power relations in the classroom. By empowering learners to control their ESL learning process, Auerbach maintains that the cycle of marginalization for immigrants in the United States can be broken. While simultaneously adapting to the needs and wants of the learner, the participatory approach (or process syllabus) fosters communication and high-interest language learning activities, but this compromise does not satisfy everyone.

As Candlin (1984) and she point out, any syllabus inherently expresses the worldview of its creators. Therefore, given the wide variety of language learning contexts, it is questionable whether any one language teaching philosophy, even one characterized by flexibility and negotiation, can be consistently successful in all of them (Davis, 1995). Perhaps for this reason, Auerbach confines her examples to specific ESL contexts in the US and does not promote her approach as universally applicable. Nevertheless, her

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1 The approach documented in this paper is my own interpretation of the process syllabus model. Whether or not it truly exemplifies the visions of Breen and Candlin may be subject to debate.
approach is still subject to many of White's (1988) criticisms of the process syllabus. He argues that the process model places too great a responsibility for course content on learners who may not be amenable to or capable of accepting the challenge. He also questions whether the dismantling of conventional classroom power dynamics is culturally appropriate in all contexts. His skepticism here is supported by the findings of recent studies. Kuo's (1995) study of an "imported" pedagogical model in Taiwan, for example, shows Taiwanese teachers and learners alike, are uncomfortable with the "uncontrolled," student-oriented nature of so-called communicative teaching practices, preferring all student activity to be teacher directed. Kuo provides both practical and cultural reasons for this preference. Although it does not examine a process syllabus implementation specifically, her study illustrates how a teaching philosophy by itself, independent of tasks or materials, reflects the cultural values of its inventors. White is also pessimistic about teachers' willingness and ability to abandon their materials-oriented models for one that affords them less control over course content and demands a greater understanding of educational theory, and a greater time commitment. He cites Kuraogo's (1987) study of in-service programs in Burkina Faso, as evidence that teachers, when given a choice, resist changing their practices and teaching models.

Additional criticisms of the process syllabus come from Long and Crookes (1992, 1993) who point out that learning tasks based on students' perceived needs, rather than a formal needs analysis, may not be the most efficient way to use class time, supporting White's claim that learners may not have a well-developed understanding of their own language needs. Furthermore, the continually changing design of the process syllabus precludes any logical sequencing of tasks. Long and Crookes also point out that no psycholinguistic or SLA theories provide support for the process syllabus in language pedagogy.

TEACHER CULTURE

The debate over the process syllabus is dominated by voices from ideological perspectives. Most of the arguments formulated in favor of or against the process model concentrate on the relationship between syllabus design and learner success. With the exception of Auerbach's selected ESL contexts, very few of these voices cite evidence from actual evaluations of process syllabus implementations. The pivotal role of the teacher in facilitating any syllabus type has been largely neglected in these discussions. Kuraogo (1987) details the widespread suspicion teachers have for pedagogical theory, saying "[Teachers] always strive to find faults in anything imposed from above (syllabuses,
teaching materials, etc.)” (p. 173). Davis and Golden’s (1994) study of teacher culture in an urban kindergarten center reports that teachers resisted or rejected outright offers to discuss and critically evaluate their established practices and materials with the researchers. The reasons for this resistance is complex, as several scholars have indicated. Among the many factors affecting teachers’ attitudes are administrative policies which serve to restrict their freedom (Davis & Golden, 1994; Delpit, 1988; Kuo, 1995). Extremely difficult working situations also promote cynicism or a feeling of inadequacy among many EFL educators (Kuraogo, 1987; Kuo, 1995). Because archetypal power relations of the society are typically replicated in educational institutions, educators tend to perceive offers for professional development as recommendations for change from authority figures rather than opportunities to experiment with new practices among peers. Therefore, it is essential to understand the teacher’s role as the vehicle through which pedagogical theories affect learning. It is not only important to identify factors that affect teachers’ reactions to pedagogical theory, but how these factors interact with one another and in what contexts. For this reason, my study asks the following questions: How do education professionals from different educational backgrounds react to new pedagogical approaches and on what conscious and unconscious factors do they base their judgments? Is there evidence to support Kuraogo’s claims of insecurity among teacher populations? If so, what are the possible bases for this insecurity?

THE HILLSIDE COLLEGE STUDY

Hillside College² (HC) is a small junior college located in the western United States. In addition to its standard curriculum for community students, the college annually hosts a number of brief (three-five week) English Language and American Culture immersion programs for college students from various nations which serve as a source of revenue for the college. In most cases, these programs are arranged with individual colleges, and are not open to other foreign students. As a result, students in each program share a very specific cultural perspective. One such program is the subject of this study. The students were Okinawan women of ages 19-22 from Arakaki Junior College (AJC). All were natives of Okinawa as were their three escorts. The students were split into two groups according to their field of interest as identified by their college: English Literature (EL), and Early Childhood Education (ECE).

² Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect the anonymity of participants and institutions.
Each year, the program is coordinated by different administrators, some of whom are hired on contract only for the duration of the program. This year, the program was coordinated by Anne, a short-term contract employee, and Marie, an HC staff program coordinator. At the request of AJC, every day of the program, except Sundays, was scheduled with activities for the students from 9:00 am to at least 4:00 pm. Academic sessions were held Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. AJC had no other special requests for the program other than that a formal graduation and farewell ceremony be scheduled on the last night. Three teachers were hired to conduct the regular academic sessions: Kate was hired as the English literature instructor, John and I were the ESL instructors. HC has hosted both ECE and EL students from AJC for over five years; however, they have only developed a program for ECE students. There are no established programs or materials for EL or ESL. Kate, John, and I were told to design our own programs based on our judgment after meeting the students. For this reason, I chose to implement a process syllabus.

This situation provided a tremendous opportunity to investigate the reaction of teachers and students to a new teaching philosophy. Despite the fact that no structured curriculum was available as an alternative, my decision to include students in the direction of their ESL program prompted reactions that ranged from ambivalent to disapproving by HC and AJC administrators. I gathered their opinions as well as those of my students and fellow teachers as a participant observer. I conducted informal interviews which were recorded on tape or in field notes later the same day. In addition, I recorded approximately seven hours of student and administrator interaction during lessons, class excursions, and staff meetings. I also asked the students to complete a course evaluation anonymously in Japanese at the end. During the three week course, I kept a journal in which I reflected on each day’s activities, paying particular attention to the brief exchanges and conversations I had with my colleagues.

THE SYLLABUS

I began the syllabus with two hours of ice-breaking activities with three goals in mind. The first was to introduce students to a casual classroom dynamic in which they were free to ask questions and comment without my permission. The second was to introduce myself to them and give them the opportunity to adjust to their foreign classroom context.

3 The EL group received three hours (9:00 am - 12:00 p.m.) of English Literature instruction before lunch. Lunch was followed by a one-hour special topic lecture (1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.) and then ESL (2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.).
The third was to assess their English proficiency and observe their classroom demeanor. Approximately one-half of the class adjusted to the casual classroom dynamic quickly. By the end of the first two hour lesson, six of the eleven students were asking questions and volunteering comments without being called upon, although two of them persisted in raising their hands and saying “excuse me” first. The remainder, though reluctant to speak out, showed interest in the class by whispering comments and suggestions in Japanese to the more confident students. One student displayed a moderate level of English proficiency. She had spent six months in the US previously. The rest, however, were very limited in all English language skills. Their reading comprehension and writing ability understandably surpassed their speaking and listening comprehension skills, but all of them were challenged by an elementary reading comprehension exercise.

I began the second session by initiating a discussion of their interests, their reasons for visiting the US, and their perceived English language needs. Their prevailing interest was shopping and they indicated their desire to learn conversational skills that would help them accomplish this and other tourist activities. After further discussion, we determined that their first priority was to learn to ask for and follow directions when navigating the city. Their second priority was to learn skills that would facilitate shopping. I designed four lessons to help them achieve their first goal. Two of the lessons were carried out in the classroom. These included group and individual map reading exercises, reading bus schedules, and following and giving oral and written directions. All exercises used authentic materials taken from tourist brochures and detailed maps. The second two lessons were conducted at large. Students approached and interviewed HC students and wrote down directions to places of interest that they wanted to visit on the weekend. They also navigated their way to a local monument relying on verbal directions which they elicited from strangers. Seven of the lessons revolved around shopping activities. These involved role play activities in the classroom, treasure hunt activities at a local mall, bargaining challenges at outdoor markets, and price comparison activities at local supermarkets. The remaining four lessons were spent on special events: pre-arranged field trips, a video, and a farewell luncheon. I periodically asked the students for feedback on lesson activities and most felt free to volunteer their opinions. The decision to move on to shopping activities after four lessons on following directions was theirs as was the emphasis on naturalistic learning opportunities.
THE HC PROGRAM'S STAFF CULTURE

The program staff for the AJC program at HC came from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds and varied in the degree of professional training and experience they had relative to their jobs. Marie, the permanent HC program coordinator, had the least amount of teacher training but had much more program management training and experience than Anne, the contracted program coordinator. Anne had a variety of teaching experiences ranging from elementary education in the South Pacific to adult special education in the US. Kate, the youngest, had less than two years of teaching experience, primarily with elementary school children and had never held a full-time teaching job. She had earned her Bachelor's degree and teaching credential two years prior to being hired by HC for the AJC program. I had two years of full-time EFL teaching experience with students ranging in age from 12 to 22 as well as some experience in adult technical training. I did not have a teaching credential and was in my second semester of a four semester Masters in ESL program. The bulk of my work experience had been gained in an unrelated profession. John, the other ESL instructor, had several years of experience in ESL instruction and had earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education. He interacted primarily with the ECE students; whereas Kate and I worked exclusively with the EL students. For this reason, I had little contact with John, and his impressions of the program are not included in this report.

Our first staff meeting was held one week before the students arrived. Its purpose was to review the program schedule and give us a chance to meet one another. Both Kate and I were aware that we would be responsible for designing our own curriculum, but were unclear as to the course objectives. This prompted several questions from us which were not on the meeting agenda. Kate was especially concerned about the lack of a program to follow, saying, "What am I supposed to do with them for three hours on Tuesday? I mean...I have some ideas. But, I don't want to plan a project and then find it's over their heads."

Marie responded that in her experience the students' level of English proficiency was "very, very low" and that children's stories and coloring exercises would be appropriate, saying "Tell 'em to color the cat pink. It teaches them the names of animals and the colors." She then demonstrated the type of interaction she had in mind. With slow speech and raised volume, she said, "This is a cat. This is pink." while pointing to imaginary objects on the table. It appeared that her image of the language classroom was based on outdated models. "You could start with the sounds of the letters. You know...phonetics," she suggested later. Kate's persistent questions about program goals and
students’ language needs generated replies like this one from Marie: “They just study English because that’s the thing to do.” She suggested that the academic merit of the course was of little consequence to the students, saying, “Most of them will be housewives in five years.” Anne suggested that reasonable course goals would include getting the students “to look you... you know, look people in the eye [and to] build their self-confidence.” Although Marie and Anne did not directly state any expectations for pedagogical approach, nor express strong opinions regarding course content, they showed a keen interest in classroom practices once the program began.

Marie observed the last ten minutes of my first lesson unexpectedly, during which the students were struggling with a reading comprehension exercise beyond their reading level. Several students asked for word definitions and clarification of the text. One student became confused when I used the word “brief” in an explanation, thinking I had said “belief.” Marie took note of this event and approached me afterward to offer advice, saying “I think, maybe, if you’d started off with phonetics, you’d have done better.” She recommended that I “work on their L’s and R’s.” Contrary to the ambivalence she had expressed at our initial meeting with regard to course content, Marie was very interested in my pedagogical activities. During the first few days of the program, she readily volunteered advice to me, suggesting traditional tools and structured activities that she felt would benefit the students, such as flash card-based vocabulary drills. On the fourth day of the program, Marie and I met between classes and briefly engaged in conversation. I mentioned that I was planning activities that would take them out of the classroom in the afternoon and described my plan to have them guide me to a local monument, asking directions from strangers. She remarked, smiling, “Cruel, very cruel, Martin. Throw that education at them.” I interpreted the statement as being ironic. She continued to communicate her skepticism toward my approach in subsequent exchanges. In an informal meeting with Anne and me the second week, Anne expressed dissatisfaction with the progress of the program thus far, basing her assessment on what she perceived to be student apathy. With apparent puzzlement, she explained, “We’ve never had a group as disinterested in the academics as these guys are.” When Anne expressed an interest in how my classes were going, I took the opportunity to describe the participatory approach and the students’ first “facilitated” interactions with native speakers. Anne passively sanctioned the activities with affirmative nods, but Marie showed no reaction.

Marie did not have a background in language teaching nor had she had any recent teacher training. Her job as program administrator did not require these skills. Her suggestions for language activities were most likely drawn from her observations of teachers in previous programs and her own experience as a language learner. It was not
surprising, therefore, that she was unfamiliar with current theories of language pedagogy. Nevertheless, she frequently volunteered suggestions for classroom activities. It is possible that her desire to ensure the program's success contributed to her preoccupation with classroom issues. However, she may have felt insecure as an education professional which could also have contributed to her controlling behavior (Kuraogo, 1987). The fact that the program still lacked a curriculum and educational goals after two years of Marie's administration suggests that curriculum development and syllabus design may not have been her strengths. A lack of confidence in program design may have prompted her to pay extra attention to the pedagogical facets of the program, the overall success of which would reflect on her. After the second week, Marie stopped volunteering pedagogical advice, but she continued to communicate her skepticism for the process approach through her silence, whenever I described our classroom activities to her.

Anne was also interested in lesson content although she showed greater interest in the students' responses than specific classroom practices. She frequently inquired about my planned lesson activities and would ask the following day how the students had responded to them. Initially, she suggested pedagogical activities, such as requiring the students to keep a vocabulary notebook (in ESL), discussing and writing English poetry, or performing a play (in EL). But, like Marie, Anne offered fewer suggestions as the program progressed. At the beginning of the second week, Anne expressed her concern to me that the students were not enjoying the program. She reported that they had shown little interest on their weekend bus tours. She commented that they had responded unenthusiastically to the daily special interest lectures and asked me if they had made any comments about the program. She conjectured that their escort, Professor Yagi dampened the students' spirits with her authoritarian presence. Like Marie, Anne focused her energy on the aspects of the program that provoked feelings of insecurity in her. Anne had many years of teaching experience in a variety of contexts, but was less comfortable with her administrative position. On more than one occasion, she mentioned to Kate and me that she was new at HC. She apologized for her inexperience when logistical problems necessitated that she make changes to the program schedule. Although it was not obvious that her inexperience was to blame for these changes, she apologized, nevertheless.

Her lack of confidence with regard to job performance was also evident in her persistent concern for how the students responded to the program. Student evaluations were typically not elicited by AJC when evaluating the program. Therefore, her concern most likely arose from a personal need for affirmation. Because she was not a permanent employee, job security was less of a motivating factor for her than it was for Marie. Anne never expressed a direct opinion regarding the participatory nature of my teaching
approach, but she encouraged the use of naturalistic learning contexts. Because of her varied international teaching experiences, Anne’s concept of the language classroom may have been broader and more flexible than Marie’s, enabling Anne to see the value in non-traditional learning activities more readily. In addition, because professional peer pressure often serves to maintain the status quo in educational institutions (Kuo, 1995), and can inhibit, with or without intent, classroom innovations that are not accepted by the dominant institutional culture (Wolcott, 1974), Anne’s temporary status at HC, may have relieved her of social and political pressures to accept the beliefs and attitudes of the local teacher culture.

Kate, though also not a permanent employee, had worked at HC before and had a personal friendship with Marie. She had limited teaching experience and was, therefore, probably more susceptible to the influence of peer attitudes. She had undergone recent teacher training but had no ESL teaching experience. She repeatedly expressed her frustration at the lack of academic guidelines and course objectives in the AJC program. In a private conversation with me at the end of the first week, she suggested that Anne was to blame for the program’s lack of structure. “[Anne] doesn’t seem to know what she is doing.” Her preference for structured teaching contexts was reflected in her own authoritarian teaching style. She was disturbed by some students’ reluctance to speak English. On the second day of teaching, she mentioned, “There’s one girl who refuses to speak English. Even when I ask her to. I’m wondering if I should make them speak only in English.” A few days later, she warned me to supervise the students closely during their field activities to discourage them from copying each others’ written work. Despite the fact the students were all over eighteen, she referred to them as ‘girls’ and employed an interactional style with the students that was reminiscent of elementary school discourse. For example, during one bus tour, she scolded the students for not sitting up straight and listening to her announcements. Kate expressed interest in my teaching activities and suggested that we meet to brainstorm, coordinate, and share ideas. When we met, however, she was more interested in knowing my professional background, my impressions of the students, and my salary. She was curious to know how I had learned about the job and was interested in knowing which, if any, of the extracurricular activities I would be supervising. She explained that Anne had asked her to chaperone a weekend bus tour and that she had resented the imposition. “Isn’t that her job?” she asked. When the conversation turned to the students, Kate ventured that they were not motivated or enthusiastic and, like Anne, posited that Professor Yagi’s presence in class promoted a tense atmosphere.
Kate’s concerns about salary and the equity of workload was understandable, given her lack of professional experience and her unfamiliarity with the ad hoc nature of this short-term ESL program. I shared her initial apprehension in this respect. As we worked together more, she expressed frustration that she had been unable to secure a permanent full-time teaching job within the state school system. This frustration seemed to have eroded her confidence. There was no explicit feedback from the students or Professor Yagi to indicate that Kate’s performance was unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, Kate persisted in negatively evaluating her own performance: “I doubt [that they will hire me back]... not after the way I bombed with this class.” Like Anne and Marie, Kate focused her attention on aspects of her performance in which she lacked confidence, most notably, professionalism. This aspect appeared to form the basis for her evaluation of herself and others, ultimately determining her overall assessment of the program’s EL component. At the end of the program, she suggested that EL be replaced by American Culture for the next group, reasoning that the students lacked sufficient interest and proficiency in English to study literature. One might deduce from such reasoning that Kate did not view her method as a variable in the teaching equation. For her, student and teacher competence were the factors that decided success or failure. Kate’s initial curiosity about my teaching approach waned when she determined that a similar approach would not be appropriate in an EL classroom. She viewed the process approach as a logical alternative to a structured program that lent itself well to ESL. But, it did not match her preconceived notion of a serious learning context. As Davis and Golden (1994) illustrate, teachers bring, sometimes inflexible, concepts of learning to the classroom, based on their cultural values and personal experiences. It is not surprising that Kate did not consider altering her teaching approach to remedy the problems that she identified.

**ARAKAKI JUNIOR COLLEGE STAFF AND STUDENTS**

Professor Yagi was an English teacher at AJC. She had done her graduate study in the US, and her spoken English was flawed but fluent. She was the senior of three escorts who were accompanying the students, but she alone interacted with the HC staff. For this reason, only her impressions are included in this study. The professor only attended two of my lessons, but I observed evidence to support Anne and Kate’s claims that her presence affected student behavior. Their demeanor changed noticeably when she was present and, when given a chance, the students tended to distance themselves from her. On the day the students were to guide me to a local monument, two students approached me as the group assembled and initiated a dialogue in an obvious effort to practice their
English. I was pleased with and encouraged their initiative. Moments later, Professor Yagi joined the group and announced her intention to accompany us. The two students ceased their efforts at conversation and moved away from me. As the trek began, Professor Yagi walked along with me. The two students who had initiated conversation walked ahead of us. When the professor encouraged them to ask me questions and practice their English, as they had done voluntarily before her arrival, they remained silent. Some students who moved ahead of the group, began to joke with one another, producing bursts of laughter. These bursts were followed by wary glances in the direction of the professor. The students' guarded behavior around her suggested that the professor had established a very traditional, authoritarian power dynamic with her students. Her concepts of learning activities proved to be equally traditional as she repeatedly asked me to explain the educational merit of our activities. “What are you hoping they will learn from this?” she asked in reference to our excursion to the monument. On another occasion, prior to a treasure hunt activity at a local mall, she inquired, “What is the educational reason for this activity?” It appeared to me that the professor's image of an ideal language learning setting was shaped by a different sociocultural perspective.

Similar to the Taiwanese high school teachers described in Kuo (1995), Professor Yagi never seemed to accept my “uncontrolled” tasks as legitimate language learning activities, referring to them as “interesting cultural experiences.” She did not comment on the negotiated course content directly; rather, she focused her attention on the individual lessons and tasks. I explained the purposes behind our activities and the approach that motivated them to her. However, I gathered from her puzzled expressions and comments (such as, “I’m sure that will be very fun for them”) that she viewed the activities mainly as entertaining diversions for the students. In her speech at the farewell dinner, the professor did not acknowledge the academic content of the program but focused her comments on the topic of cultural differences and the challenge of overcoming them. The ESL and EL teachers, she concluded, had done the students a tremendous service by exposing them to various aspects of American culture, putting a small “crack in the ice of their minds.” It is unclear what the precise referents for this metaphor were.

Professor Yagi's perceptions seemed to be shared by the majority of the students, although they reacted to the approach with much more enthusiasm. The students adapted quickly to the casual classroom dynamic. However, their freedom to speak freely in the classroom prompted some, after a few days, to disengage from the language activities and simply chat in Japanese. Once they understood that they could control the direction of the class they took the opportunity to avoid challenging themselves. They would spontaneously suggest changes to our negotiated schedule when a classroom activity was
planned, proposing excursions to the local shopping mall for a free afternoon as an alternative. One afternoon, they wrote a large note on the blackboard before I entered the class which said, “We want to go (sic) Kaplan Center Mall” surrounded by drawings of hearts. Meeting this request was impossible for logistical reasons, and it would have interrupted the sequence of tasks designed to develop their questioning skills. Furthermore, their request indicated a misunderstanding of the participatory approach. Like their professor, they were unable to reconcile the flexible nature of the process syllabus with their image of the language classroom, once again supporting Kuo’s (1995) findings. As a result, they deemed the class to be of dubious academic value. They did recognize that the participatory approach was a deliberate innovation and not simply based on whim; one wrote on a thank you note at the end of the course, “Thank you for your special plan.” However, the course’s student-directed orientation proved too foreign for them to embrace as is evidenced by this student’s choice of the word “your” rather than “our” despite the inclusive language I used throughout the program. Accustomed to a classroom atmosphere in which they are relatively passive recipients of demanding grammatical tasks, it appears that they used their empowered state in this context to avoid challenging themselves.

In addition to cultural factors which inhibited the success of the process syllabus with these students, motivational factors also appeared to play a role. Although the women had a sincere desire to be fluent in English, they seemed to lack the internal motivation to engage in the learning process. The rigorous and disciplined nature of the Japanese educational system appears to act as an external source of motivation and discipline. The process syllabus philosophy is at odds with such a structured system, expecting students to be self-motivating and to set challenging goals for themselves. My students’ entered the classroom with an educational background that was grounded in very different cultural values and educational expectations. Understanding and shifting to a radically different philosophy of learning was a tremendous challenge that most did not accept. However, their rejection of the foreign teaching philosophy did not completely diminish its positive effects. Without exception, the students reported in their anonymous evaluations that they had learned much about American culture during the course and that they had enjoyed the naturalistic learning activities. One student volunteered the following positive evaluation after our hike to the monument.

S: I think this class is good.
M: In what way?
S: Because we go about and talk. In Japan, everything is formal.
Although no formal assessment was made of their language skills before or after the course, many had improved in their cross-cultural pragmatic competence. At their farewell dinner, they interacted competently in English with HC’s senior administrators. Although the conversations were largely one-way, the students answered questions confidently, made eye contact, gave firm handshakes, laughed at their interlocutors’ jokes, and with the exception of an occasional unconscious bow, displayed a very high level of non-verbal pragmatic competence. For some, this was in marked contrast to their behavior upon arrival, when downcast eyes, hesitant handshakes, and frequent backchanneling (relative to American discourse) had characterized their interactions with native speakers of English.

One week after the program ended, we held a final staff meeting to discuss our impressions of the program and make suggestions for the next one. Kate remarked that student morale and participation seemed to have improved in the latter half of the program. Marie responded, “Sure, ‘cause we let ‘em do whatever they wanted.” Kate nodded in agreement. It appeared from Marie’s statement that she viewed the staff-student relationship as adversarial and viewed their improved morale as evidence of our weakness. The fact that the only clear course objective (improved pragmatic competence) had been achieved did not seem to be factored into her assessment. In her estimation, we had failed by relinquishing control of the program content. No one directly pointed out the irony of Marie’s statement; however, Anne suggested that we might be able to design a more satisfying program for the students, if we tried to determine their interests early in the program.

Two interesting ideas for future programs arose from the ensuing discussion, one of which followed a process model. Anne suggested establishing contacts with a variety of local volunteer organizations, such as the Salvation Army or SPCA, and building a “bank” of venues in which to conduct naturalistic learning activities. Depending on the interests of each individual group, contacts from this bank would be approached to provide the students with volunteer assignments that provided opportunities to interact with native speakers. Another syllabus model was suggested that integrated both product and process elements (e.g., see Hyland & Hyland, 1992). In this model, the students wrote and produced their own video documentary on a topic of their choice. The project would last for the duration of the course. HC communications students would provide technical assistance, and transportation would be provided to topic-appropriate locations. Though neither of these ideas resembled a traditional syllabus model, Marie actively participated in the brainstorming, pointing out logistical and
financial obstacles, but simultaneously offering solutions or alternatives. Kate also participated actively and was especially enthusiastic about the video documentary idea. One possible explanation for their support of these particular non-traditional approaches stems from the context in which the ideas developed. These models were not imposed from the outside as illustrated by Kuraogo (1987). Rather, the educators were the designers of these innovations. In addition, we were actively incorporating these process models into their program plan, rather than adopting them out of desperation. Such conditions contributed elements of control and deliberateness which were important for Marie and Kate. I also felt a sense of sureness about these ideas that I had not felt with my own process implementation. Sanctioned by group consensus, these new process models possessed a cultural legitimacy that mine had not.

CONCLUSIONS

Many of White’s (1988) criticisms of the process syllabus were supported by this study. While the students were able to adapt to some aspects of a foreign classroom dynamic relatively quickly, their culturally-defined notions of language education remained at odds with those assumed by the student-directed philosophy. Nevertheless, the mere opportunity for self-direction may have provided a window into American mainstream culture that a traditional approach would have missed. Therefore, this syllabus’ role in promoting target-culture pragmatic competence in the students should not be overlooked.

When evaluating the success of any syllabus, it is crucial that the educators’ roles be thoroughly analyzed. It was apparent in this study that local teacher culture played an important role in determining teachers’ attitudes toward pedagogical innovation. This was especially true of relatively inexperienced teachers. Each of the participants exhibited insecurity in different areas of performance which affected how they viewed and reacted to new ideas, supporting Kuraogo’s (1987) claims. These individual differences co-reacted with the dominant institutional culture to create a unique climate in which the syllabus was implemented. For this reason, the appropriateness of any methodological model cannot be assumed in all contexts. A more thorough understanding of teacher culture, based on collaborative research, is needed to augment the SLA field’s knowledge base. Continuing to rely on materials alone to revolutionize the ESL classroom will not reduce the gap between theory and practice.

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4 It should be noted that Marie did not abandon her traditional notions completely. For example, she suggested that structured vocabulary exercises centering on video equipment be incorporated in the documentary model.
REFERENCES


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