SIP (Simplicity, Imagination and Physicality): A Teaching Approach for Improving Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes in the Pronunciation Classroom

Marcellus Nealy

Juntendo University, Japan
marcellus@juntendo.ac.jp

Abstract

Many pronunciation teachers today face the dilemma of how to teach pronunciation in a way that allows students to get the repetitive practice they need without diminishing student motivation. The SIP approach aims to explore this question. SIP stands for simplicity, imagination and physicality. It is a pedagogical protocol that was inspired by Kieran Egan who wrote, "to bring knowledge to life in students' minds, we must introduce it to students in the context of the human hopes, fears and passions in which it finds its fullest meaning. The best tool for this is the imagination" [1]. Cognitive learning theory and experiential learning theory also contributed to the SIP framework.

Two SIP based classroom activities were given to the students to complete in the classroom. 70 students were surveyed to determine how they defined imaginative teaching and how much they valued it. They were also asked to evaluate the SIP activities. The results showed that 100% of those surveyed believed imaginative lessons helped them feel motivated. A majority of the respondents also stated that the two SIP based activities helped them to better visualize and recall the key pronunciation points that had been taught and practiced through the activities

Keywords: experiential, cognitive, Japanese, pronunciation, approach

1. Introduction

Many language teachers today face the dilemma of how to teach pronunciation in a way that allows students to get the repetition and practice they need to build muscle memory and more intelligible accents without diminishing student motivation. They also face the problem of how to help learners overcome the negative stigma they may have associated with English language learning so that students can attach positive meaning to the classroom experience. Pronunciation may be particularly problematic because it requires repetitive practice, which may easily doom any well-meaning lesson to becoming a perceived chore rather than something that grabs and holds the attention of the learner.

Motivation and passivity are key issues in most, if not all, English language classrooms in Japan [2] Part of this stems from what many of the participants in this study have described when they talked about that all-too-familiar scene of the teacher clutching a textbook as he or she blandly reads from it verbatim to the class. The misfortune of the student comes from the fact that the essential experience, which informs the assimilation of new information, has no depth, no intrigue, and no imagination. The classroom, as described above, may not serve as a conduit for cognitive expansion. Instead it becomes the prison from which the learner may feel there is no escape.

1.1 SIP

SIP stands for simplicity, imagination and physicality. It is a checklist that educators can use in the English language classroom to evaluate whether or not lesson plans and activities are designed in a way that makes them more engaging to the learner. SIP is applicable to most English language classes but it is particularly useful in pronunciation classrooms where teachers may run the high risk of being caught in a "repeat after me" rut.

Simplicity is a goal that aims to reduce difficult jargon and complex ideas down to the simplest forms needed for students to gain mastery of whatever learning objectives are being taught. Complexity may cause confusion and unneeded worry. Simplicity may help with reducing student anxiety, which may be a barrier to learning. In the pronunciation classroom, for example, technical terms like glottal stop, fricative, or labial consonant can be overly confusing to L2 students. Instead, lessons should be taught in a way that avoids complex jargon and allows students to approach pronunciation practice from a more natural perspective.

As Warrington points out, anxiety plays an important and debilitative role on learning attitudes. Prior experience with English, much of which has been negative, has a large impact on this [2]. Warrington's findings can be corroborated by this author's 24-year observation of Japanese students' attitudes towards English language learning, which reveals that, while not all negative, there are a large percentage of students who resist it. According to Warrington, part of this negative effect comes from the way students have experienced English classes. His study reflects some of the same student responses that this research has revealed. In Warrington's study students explained their lack of motivation by saying "It is difficult or impossible to learn", "I did not like the way I was taught in junior high and high school" [2].

Aside from simplicity, imagination is also meant to be a way in which teachers can reduce classroom anxiety that may be brought on by L2 learners' boredom or past negative experiences. Through lively, imaginative presentations and activities this researcher postulates that teachers can better stimulate learners' interest and deepen their experience. In this way, some of the issues that have been described by students in this study may be avoided so that students can be more engaged with pronunciation practice and learning.

Boredom may also be alleviated by activities that require students to use their hands and bodies in order to complete a task. The theory is that physical motion helps to create better concentration and deeper learner engagement. If the students are constantly moving, then they will not have time to fall asleep or get bored but only if the activities are varied over the course of a class period. Physicality is believed to strengthen the experience of the student in order to increase recall and deepen muscle memory, both of which are important for effective learning and recall of pronunciation.

In order to fit this paper within the guidelines of this publication, this paper will only focus on the imagination part of SIP.

1.2 Thesis question

Can the imagination part of SIP, when used in curriculum and activity design, improve student motivation, student attitudes towards English language learning, and the recall of information presented and practiced in the lesson?

2. Framework

SIP was based on Piaget's cognitive theory, Lewin's expansion of that theory and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory.

2.1 Cognitive Learning Theory

The cognitive theory of learning is based on Jean Piaget's cognitive development model. As a biologist, Piaget was most interested in how living things adapt to their environment [3]. For Piaget, knowledge is created through a continuously evolving interaction between internal structures, which he called schema, cognitive processes, and the environment. Individuals interact with the world around them by continuously gathering and organizing information. [4]. Kurt Lewin expanded on Piaget's theories to focus on aspects of motivation in learning. Through several studies Lewin discovered that rote practice of information yielded little or no success when individuals did not plan to learn the information. In other words, Lewin theorized that one only learns when one wants to learn. He further postulated that cognitive behavior was dependent on the individual's psychological environment, which has both positive and negative forces. According to Lewin, these forces greatly effect one's reaction to a given situation [4].

The SIP approach aims to incorporate positive forces into the learning environment in order to facilitate the learner's desire to learn. Just as Lewin described, once the decision to learn has been made then the learning process can begin. New information can then be engaged and assimilated into existing schema in order to take on meaning and become a permanent part of the learner's long term arsenal of information.

2.2 Experiential Learning Theory

The experiential learning theory was developed by David A. Kolb who stated that it was born from Lewin's social psychology and Piaget's cognitive development paradigm. It is defined as the process knowledge results from through the transformation of experience. Concrete experiences become foundation for observation and reflection. These are then absorbed and distilled into abstract concepts from which new behavioral implications can be made. These implications can serve as guides for creating new experiences [5].

There are many studies in higher education that use experiential learning theory. These include research on the interaction between learning style and teaching methodology, curriculum design, program design and lesson planning [5].

As Knutson wrote in his paper Experiential learning in second-language classrooms.

"Experiential learning in the ESL classroom builds on the principle that language-learning is facilitated when students are cooperatively involved in working on a project or task, and when the project includes the phases of exposure, participation, internalization, and dissemination. Projects that are challenging, communicative, and meaningful, and that provide opportunities for student ownership and participation in their own language-learning, create an environment conducive to sustaining motivation to learn the target language" [6].

3. Method

Two pronunciation practice activities, which are described below, were designed using the SIP criteria, which is shown in figure 1 below. The activities were adapted from non-pedagogical games and exercises in order to serve as a tool for repetitive pronunciation practice. Students were asked to complete the activities in class during the first half of the semester. At the end of the semester, students were given two questionnaires: one was an 8 question survey that focused on students' attitudes towards imaginative teaching and the SIP activities mentioned above. The second was an essay assignment in which students were asked to explain, giving 3 reasons and examples, whether or not they thought the class was fun and meaningful. There were 81 students in total who participated from advanced (A class), upper intermediate (B class) and lower intermediate (D class) levels.

	Criteria		
Simplicity	focus on one or two key learning objectives	eliminate unnecessary jargon	avoid overly complex explanations
Imagination	design activities in a colorful and creative way	avoid dull emotionless lectures	use silly, strange or intriguing elements
Physicality	avoid activities that require students to work alone	use activities that require physical motion such as marching	use activities that require students to work together

Figure 1: SIP chart

3.1 Activity 1: Battleship

This is a two player guessing game that dates back to World War I [7]. The objective of the game is for players to find their opponents ships, which have been hidden on a grid, using x and y coordinates. Comprehensive instructions on how to play Battleship are widely available on the internet. A typical Battleship grid is shown in figure 2 below. The grey blocks indicate how the ships are to be hidden.

Figure 2: Regular Battleship grid

By replacing the numbers on the y axis and the letters on the x axis with words that contain target sounds for the day's lesson, the traditional Battleship game can be easily adapted to the pronunciation classroom. The activity is simple because it straightforward and focuses on one or two learning objectives and needs no more explanation other than how to play the game. The activity is imaginative because the activity sheet was designed in an interesting way in order to stimulate the students' visualization. Adaptation of a common game for the language classroom also meets the criteria of imagination. The activity covered the SIP criteria for physicality by requiring students to work together to solve a problem or actively seek information. Through this activity, students could repetitively practice key phonetic sounds. Figure 3 shows the adapted Battleship grid.
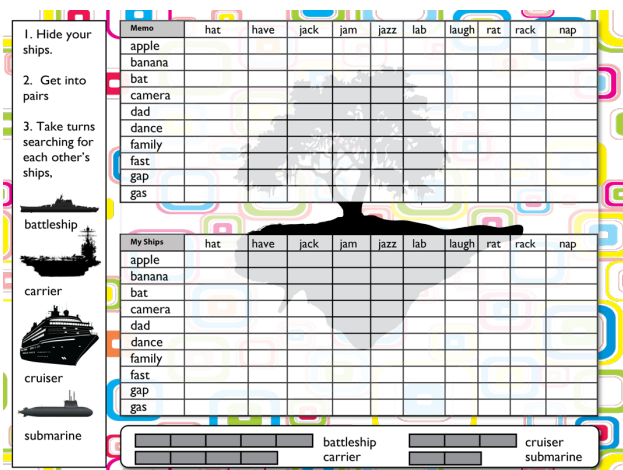
Figure 3: Pronunciation Battleship grid

3.2 Activity 2: Cadence March

The Cadence March activity is based on US military call and response marching songs. The objective is to practice rhythm, intonation, reduced sounds and linking. During this activity the students stand at their desks and march. The teacher or student leader calls out the cadence and the group repeats the cadence using the exact same rhythm, intonation and pronunciation. When students' repetition differs from the teacher. The teacher stops the march and slowly explains the differences and how to correct them. The Cadence March is started again so that students can practice. By the time the activity is finished students will have repeated the same cadence calls more than 10 or 15 times.

The Cadence March corresponds to the SIP chart in figure one because it does not use any technical jargon or long confusing explanation. It focuses on one or two objectives. By imitating the voice of a military drill sergeant the teacher can use body language, vocal pitch and dynamics to fulfill the criteria of imagination. Finally, the act of marching and singing gets the students out of their desk and requires them to use their bodies to do the activity.

3.3 Questionnaire 1

The questionnaire was comprised of 4 dichotomous yes and no questions, 2 Likert scale questions, 1 multiple choice question and 1 open ended question. The questionnaire was designed to get preliminary data on student attitudes towards the two activities that were described above as well as their attitudes towards imagination in the classroom and how much students valued it as part of the learning experience.

3.4 Questionnaire 2

The second questionnaire was given as part of the final exam in the form of an essay question. Students were asked the following question: "Do you believe this class was interesting and useful please explain your answer in the for of a 5-point essay". The five-point essay requires students to write an introduction that ends in a thesis statement, three paragraphs to support three reasons for the student's position and a conclusion.

4. Results

81 students were given questionnaires. 72 students responded. 43% (n=31) were from A class. 26%(n=19) were from B class and 31%(n=22) were from D class. The results from questionnaire 1 were as follows:

What do you value most in a lesson?
The materials being presented 20.83%
The way the class is being taught. 30.56%
How fun the class is. 36.11%
How interesting the teacher is. 11.11%
Chance to talk in English. 1.39%

How would you define an "imaginative teacher"? (see figure 4 below)

How important is creativity and imagination from your teachers?
Very 34.72%
Kind of important 54.17%
Mildly important 9.72%
Not so important 1.39%
Not at all 0.00%

Do you think imaginative and creative lessons would help you be more interested in learning?
Yes 100%
No 0.00%

On a scale of 1 to 5 how imaginative are your teachers on average?
Very 52.78%
More than average 33.33%
Average 13.89%
Less than average 0.00%
Not at all 0.00%

Do you think that activities like battleship and the cadence march are an effective way to practice pronunciation?
Yes 87.88%
No 12.12%

Do you think Battleship helped you keep a mental image of pronunciation after the class was finished?
Yes 75.38%
No 24.62%

Do you think the cadence march helped you keep a mental image of pronunciation after the class was finished?
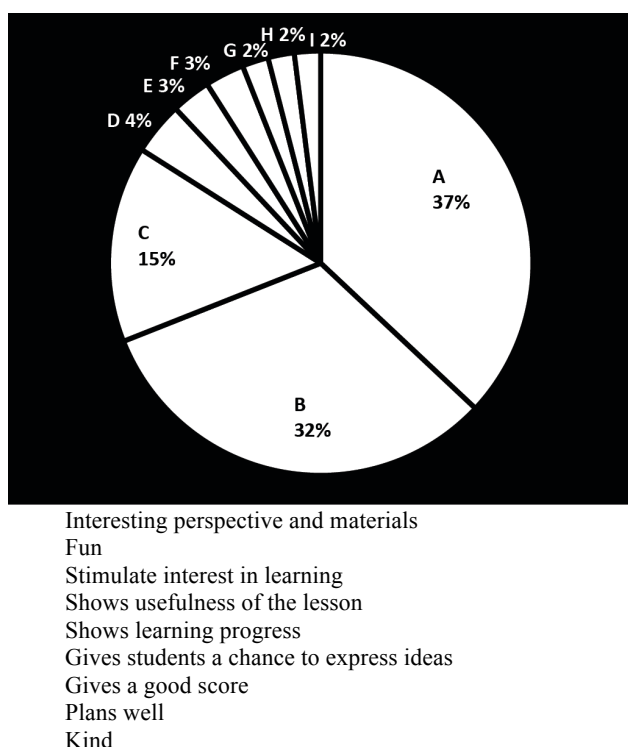Yes 83.33%
16.67%

Interesting perspective and materials
Fun
Stimulate interest in learning
Shows usefulness of the lesson
Shows learning progress
Gives students a chance to express ideas
Gives a good score
Plans well
Kind

Figure 4: Imaginative teacher

The results from questionnaire two were as follows: 81 students were given the survey. 100% responded. 98% said the class was useful. 100% of the students responded that the class was interesting. Of the reasons given that are relevant to this study 90% sited types of activities, 95% mentioned uniqueness of the teacher, 85% sited lots of group communication. Other reasons given in the body of the essay were didn't feel sleepy in class (85%), low expectation due to past experiences in jr. high and high school but happily surprised to find the class different than other classes (85%). Easy to understand due to deep focus on fewer objectives (70%), and could see usefulness beyond studying for the test (70%)

5. Discussion

In this study, as shown in the results section above, students sited boredom, complexity, and bad previous experience as the key reasons why they felt demotivated in English class. Although 11 years have passed between Warrington's study and this one, issues regarding student engagement seem to persist.

Although this paper describes SIP as a tool for improving student outcomes in the pronunciation classroom the focus has been on the use of imagination in the classroom and how it might affect student's attitudes towards learning. The remaining SIP protocols, simplicity and physicality, will be examined in subsequent studies.

It is important before moving forward to understand what students had in mind when they thought of the imaginative teacher. Since it is the students who have the expectation of what the learning experience should be like it was important to let them define the imaginative teacher. If, instead, they had been provided with a definition, then it was assumed that less insight would have been gained on the students' expectations and attitudes towards the lesson.

While there were various responses given to the question "How would you define an imaginative teacher" 74% of those who responded defined the imaginative teacher as someone who brings an interesting perspective and materials to class, someone who is fun, and someone who stimulates the students' interest in learning. These characteristics also coincide with the goals of the SIP protocol, which was created as a way of assessing whether lessons contained elements that would alleviate boredom and peak student interest. As shown in the results section above, no matter how the students defined the imaginative teacher 100% indicated that they believed imaginative and creative lessons would increase their interest in learning. Given this unanimous response it may be safe to say that exploring ways of developing more imaginative lessons should be a top priority.

This same attitude was reflected in the responses given to the question what do you value most in a lesson. The highest percentage of respondents, 36.11% indicated how fun the class is. The next highest, 30.56% indicated the way the class is being taught. The third highest 20.83% indicated the materials being presented. What is interesting is that only 11.11% of the respondents indicated that they placed high value on how interesting the teacher was. This is significant to note because it may indicate that imaginative teaching approaches can boost students' attitudes in classrooms where teachers might identify as being someone who is not interesting. For teachers who lack confidence in their ability to engage their students the SIP protocol can be an excellent framework for helping them to overcome insecurities and insure an imaginative and engaging class.

If Kolb and the other proponents of the Experiential learning theory are correct then providing a positive experience in the classroom could be the key to deepening the learning effect. This may be particularly true in the pronunciation classroom where repetitive drills and practice are necessary for building muscle memory, good speech habits, and long term memory. The experience of learning pronunciation can be compared to the experience of learning to play a musical instrument. In both cases physical fluidity cannot be attained without countless hours of repetitive practice. It can be assumed that many learners find such practice to

be extremely tedious. Only the most determined learners devote themselves to the process. Through imaginative teaching the results of this study suggest that teachers may be able to increase the number of students in their class who are determined to learn.

The results presented in questionnaire 2 support the idea that students do in fact feel demotivated by their past learning experiences. Many of the respondents started their essay by explaining that in the past they found English class to be so boring they completely lost interest and gave up trying. The majority of the students went on to explain that variation in teaching approach, physical movement, the creative style of the teacher, and the types of activities done in class completely gave them a new will to study English and practice pronunciation. Several respondents even wrote that they were looking forward to the next semester. In fact, the only negative response was from a student, who used to live for several years in the United States. She felt that class was fun but didn't challenge her enough. All other responses show a strong favorable attitude towards the SIP based activities and imaginative teaching.

The two activities that were presented to the students were meant to test the use of simplicity imagination and physicality in pronunciation practice. Most of the respondents indicated that they thought Battleship and the Cadence March were an effective way to practice pronunciation. The questionnaire was given to the students three months after they had done the activity in class in order to gauge the lasting effects the activity may have had on them. In each case, a vast majority of the respondents indicated that Battleship and the Cadence March helped them to retain a mental image of pronunciation after the class was finished. The ability to quickly recall a mental image of pronunciation and apply it to a real world situation could be a critical needed in order to successfully produce a clear utterance in L2. Based on the results of this study, activities like the ones described above could help. Furthermore, in order to increase the rate of success in each pronunciation classroom it may be crucial that teachers begin to examine their lesson plans to see if they include imaginative elements.

One drawback to this study is that a before and after assessment was needed in order to determine if there was a change in student attitudes after the use of imaginative activities in the classroom. Based on this study alone only the students' attitudes towards imaginative teaching and the SIP activities can be known. This study does not address the impact of simplicity and physicality on learners' motivation. Although all of the SIP elements were used in the design of the activities, it is impossible to say which of the three characteristics, if any, contributed to their attitudes towards the activities. Finally, more open ended questions were needed in order to more deeply assess student attitudes.

6. Conclusion

Despite the drawbacks in the study design one thing is quite clear. The students who participated in this study place a very high value on imaginative teaching, which includes the use of imaginative teaching materials. Based on these preliminary results further research on the topic is warranted.

7. References

[1] Egan, K. 2005 An imaginative approach to teaching. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

[2] Warrington, S., Jeffrey D. 2005. A rationale for passivity and de-motivation revealed: an interpretation of inventory results among freshman English students. Journal of Language and Learning Vol. 3 No. 2

[3] Huitt, W., Hummel, J. 2003. Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Educational Psychology Interactive. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/cognition/piaget.html

[4] Grider, C. 1993. Foundations of cognitive theory: A concise review. http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED372324.pdf

[5] Kolb, D., Boyatzis R., Mainemelis C. 1999. Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles. Sternberg, R. J., Zhang, L. F. (eds.), Perspectives on cognitive, learning, and thinking styles. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000.

[6] Knutson, S. 2003. Experiential learning in second-language classrooms. Tesl canada journal. vol. 20, no.2, Spring

[7] Hinebaugh, J. 2009. A board game education. R&L Education.