Enhancing Learner Engagement

in a Communicative Curriculum

by

Rob HIRSCHEL*, Gareth HUMPHREYS*, Levy SOLOMON* *and* Brian THOMAS*

Abstract

Throughout the field of English language education, communication skills are increasingly being emphasized. Within the Japanese university context this is particularly the case. There are however many challenges to fostering a communicative classroom. These challenges include learners accustomed to teacher-centered approaches and passive behavior in the classroom. Additional complications inherent to compulsory study include variations in learners' motivation, interest, and proficiency. This paper presents an attempt to improve learner engagement in speaking activities as part of a project of ongoing curriculum renewal.

Key Words：　oral communication, curriculum renewal, fluency building

1. Introduction

Curriculum renewal is a necessary task for any educational institution that seeks to remain relevant to its students. Richards (2001) emphasizes that curriculum development is a cycle of needs analyses and renewal that continually aims to meet the demands of the various stakeholders. The two stakeholder groups most immediately impacted by the Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) are the students and their teachers.

A needs analysis conducted among the SILC teachers determined that there was a demonstrable

---

* Senior Assistant Professor, Sojo International Learning Center

need for a larger array of teaching resources that elicit spoken English from learners. Underscoring teachers' requests for greater support in their teaching of oral communication is the clear institutional focus on spoken English.

Teachers perceived many (but not all) of the learners to be unmotivated and uninterested in actively participating in their compulsory English classes. Many of the same students also happened to be of limited proficiency as indicated by the Oxford Online Placement Test (2015).

It was determined that the center required more materials that not only explicitly address oral communication, but that do so in a manner that is both engaging and provides sufficient scaffolding

for lower level learners. It was also understood that, despite recent reforms and improvement in the provision of high school English lessons (Lockley, Hirschel, & Slobodniuk, 2012), many learners are still unaccustomed to learner-centered classrooms where they are expected to take an active role in communication efforts (King, 2013).

2. Rationale & Methodology

The challenge for the researchers was to prepare and trial effective materials that met the following four criteria:
① elicit spoken English from students
② provide scaffolding for low level learners
③ engage sometimes reticent students
④ can be easily incorporated by teachers

Firstly, eliciting spoken English from students might initially appear to be an easy and straightforward endeavor. Many of us have friends and colleagues who, when asked their opinion, can speak at length. When the desired speakers, however, are often indifferent toward their English study, of limited proficiency, and "known for their reticence in freely offering opinions," (Mork, 2014, p. 131) a veritable challenge is created. Given this situation, an important rule quickly becomes apparent.

Prompts such as "What do you think about X?" become ineffective. Japanese students are often reluctant to freely share their opinions in their native language, let alone a foreign one. It is true that some students might feel liberated to share more in a foreign language, but these students are arguably students who have chosen to study a foreign language as opposed to taking it to fulfill a graduation requirement. In addition to their hesitation to share, the impromptu "What do you think about X?" fails to provide scaffolding to many lower level learners. Even for those students brave enough to volunteer an answer, (or unlucky

enough to be called on by the teacher) a delayed and awkward one-word answer may often be the result, or a student may simply say "I don't know."

The second criterion, clearly, is that the researchers needed to carefully scaffold their materials. In practice, this deliberate scaffolding meant several things. First, sequencing is important. A free type of production never occurs at the beginning. The speaking tasks invariably begin with a listening task, a reading task, or a picture observation task. Thereon follows drilled practice of simple dialogues comprising high frequency words. Only after the drilled practice can *free production* take place. This *free production* is italicized because it is never truly free, but exhibits various degrees of freedom.

For the lowest level learners, single word substitutions may constitute the *free production*. For medium level students, the general pattern of a dialogue may remain the same as in the drilled production, but with whole clauses or even sentences individualized by the learners. For more advanced students, follow-up questions and answers could even result in departures from the scripted dialogue to something that might begin to approximate free production. Coming back to less proficient students, however, the important points for scaffolding include proper sequencing, simple dialogues of generally high frequency words, and flexibility to allow for the varied levels of the learners.

The third criterion is the challenging one of engaging the reticent learner. It is unfortunate that many tasks such as information gaps can be perceived as tedious or pointless. It is perhaps no surprise that students are often quick to place their *A* and *B* papers side by side and simply copy as opposed to properly completing the task. However, it is possible to create a more engaging task through adding elements of challenge (personal

and/or competitive) as in disappearing dialogues, requiring movement as in running dictations, and bringing in novelty as in shouting dictations. These are just three activities of many more that can effectively engage students even when the subject matter is not perceived as interesting.

Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) noted in their paper on foreign language classroom anxiety that it is the disconnect between what one is able to express in the native language and in the second language that causes anxiety. Arguably that same disconnect can also cause frustration, apathy, and boredom. Nevertheless, if teachers can challenge their students to achieve small but meaningful goals as in the above-mentioned activities, students are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward their English study, even if the language in use may seem basic.

The first three criteria aim to make the new materials effective for the learners. The fourth criterion aims to make the materials effective for the teachers. Successful incorporation of new methods and materials requires more than just the presentation of the materials. Teachers require guidance, but at the same time must feel a certain sense of ownership or *autonomy* in order to effectively adapt new approaches to teaching. A delicate balance between direction and self-determination is desirable in encouraging teachers to make best use of the new materials (Keesing-Styles, Nash, & Ayres, 2013).

In an attempt to achieve this balance, supplementary speaking tasks were developed, trialed and placed on a shared network. The materials for each task were placed in separate folders and each included a document with simple directions for teachers, a handout for students, a simple PowerPoint presentation in most instances (14 of 16 tasks), and audio files and other files where necessary. The materials were promoted in

faculty meetings and informally but were never prescribed as a mandated component of the curriculum. The goal was to provide simple and clear guidance to teachers without coopting their classrooms

3. Materials

The researchers developed 16 speaking tasks with topics corresponding to the first year of study in the SILC (see *Table 1*).

Table 1: An overview of the topics

1. Self-introductions	9. Invitations
2. My family	10. Hotel reservations
3. My hometown	11. Giving directions
4. My hobbies	12. Making dinner plans
5. High school interests	13. At the restaurant
6. Free time	14. Giving advice
7. My neighborhood	15. At the shops
8. My routine	16. Buying clothes

The tasks were carefully crafted, trialed and revised according to the criteria described above. Some of the more creative aspects of the tasks are described below:

3.1 Disappearing Dialogues

Disappearing dialogues are activities where a set, scripted dialogue is rehearsed by students before words are gradually removed, forcing the students to internalize and memorize the dialogue. The dialogues are usually short and displayed by a projector. The first step is to introduce the topic, often using a picture or listening, and then elicit some information about the topic. The teacher will then generally model the dialogue with a student and ask a few simple questions to confirm students' comprehension. If there are concerns about pronunciation, then the teacher may ask the students to repeat certain words or phrases. The teacher will often ask if there are any questions about the overall meaning or about specific words.

The next step is for students, in pairs, to rehearse the dialogue as displayed by the projector. After each reading, the teacher will advance the slides (see *Figure 1*), thereby gradually removing words. Some teachers will prepare handouts for students to refer to if they are having substantial difficulty.
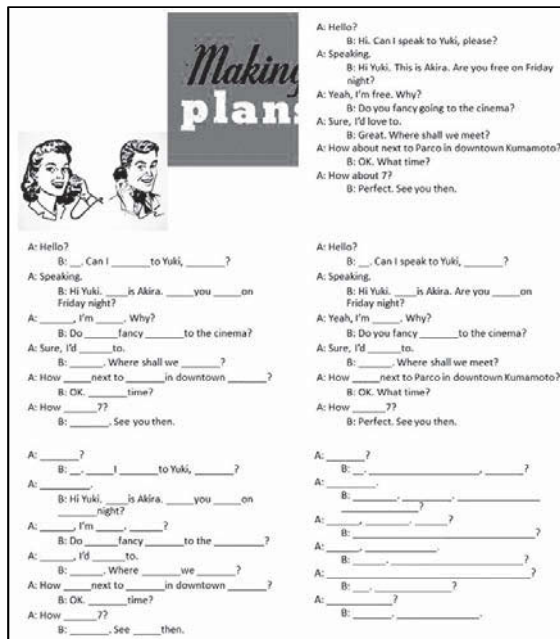

Figure 1. Disappearing Dialogue Slides.

Following the end of the disappearing dialogue, the teacher will usually ask the students to personalize the dialogue for themselves. For high level learners, it may not be necessary to provide any additional scaffolding. For lower level learners, however, a handout with blanks for substitutions may be provided.

3.2　Running Dictations

As with the disappearing dialogues, the first step is generally to introduce the topic and preview any necessary vocabulary. The teacher may wish for the resulting conversation to gradually emerge and may therefore only introduce the topic in broad strokes. The running dictations require students to take turns to leave their seats to read a text, retain, and report to a partner what they have read. Student *runners* are not allowed to write anything on paper

(or on their hands) and will need to go back to the text multiple times to give their *recorder* partners all of the required information. Teachers will often place separate papers in separate locations in (or near) the classroom for each member of the team, generally pairs. The student pairs take turns standing up and going to read and then report as the *runner* and waiting and then writing as the *recorder*. Often there is an element of competition as teams attempt to finish first.

If the teacher has mixed the sentences, the next step of the task will be for the two partners to collaboratively put the dialogue into the correct order. The students will then practice reading the dialogue at least a couple of times, each partner reading each part at least once. It is not necessary for the students to practice this dialogue as much as with the disappearing dialogue, given that they have already spent time memorizing chunks and reciting those chunks to their partners. The teacher will generally ask comprehension questions at some point to confirm students' understanding. As with the disappearing dialogues, the final component is usually some kind of freer production dialogue with or without scaffolding as appropriate to the learners.

3.3　Shouting Dictations

As with the other tasks described in this section, the first component is to introduce the topic and preview any necessary vocabulary. For the shouting dictation, the teacher arranges pairs of students separated by some distance. Each member of the pair has only one character's lines of the dialogue. The student pairs must therefore shout across the room so that the partners can complete the dialogue. Once the dialogue has been completed, the pairs come together and take turns reading both parts of the dialogue. As with the other activities, the teacher may ask questions as part of a comprehension check. Once again, this activity is followed by a freer production with

appropriate scaffolding as necessary.

4. Results

In order to evaluate the new materials, the researchers solicited feedback from both students and teachers. 228 student respondents wrote answers on a paper survey following completion of one of the tasks.

Table 2: Coding of student responses (quotation marks indicate direct quotes)
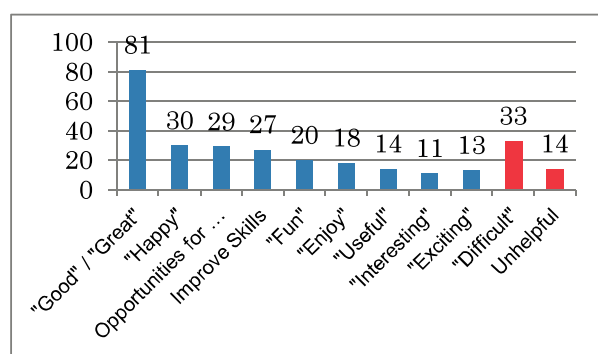
Analysis of the student feedback showed that most students found the tasks engaging and useful for speaking skills development (see *Table 2*).

Indications of positive responses were clear in the use of unprompted language such as: *good* and *great* (81), *happy* (30), *interesting* (28), *fun* (20), *enjoy* (18), and *exciting* (13). Additional responses demonstrated an appreciation of increased opportunities to speak English (29). Responses here included: ʻI felt it [was] interesting [because] I can enjoy and learn English conversation with my friendsʼ. Twenty-seven students mentioned improvements in vocabulary, listening, reading, and pronunciation.

Feedback from teachers was obtained via open-questionnaire to find out the extent the tasks had been utilized in individual classes, if they were perceived as useful, and what, if any, shortcomings or areas for development existed.

Overall, the teacher feedback was positive; however, there were some indications that the materials could benefit from some adaptations, particularly in regard to ease of use. Nearly 90% or the teachers reported using the materials to some extent. Approximately 45% of the teachers reported using four or more of the stand-alone activities. Only two of the teachers reported never using the speaking activities.

Most teacher comments indicated that the tasks were considered beneficial for students. Many of the positive comments referred to the activities as being student-centered and task-based. Numerous teachers expressed appreciation that the tasks were adaptable to suit individual classes and teaching styles and that the activities offered a successful approach that teachers might not otherwise have attempted. Teachers also commented that the students appeared to find the activities enjoyable and that there were indications of greater engagement in speaking tasks.

5. Conclusion

Developing English language communication skills is an important educational objective in the SILC. However, approaches taken to support their development are often faced with challenges. These include learners accustomed to teacher-centered approaches and passive behavior in class activities. This challenge is further complicated by issues associated with the compulsory study of English such as varying levels of motivation, interest and proficiency.

As part of a project of continuous curriculum renewal, we designed a series of tasks to help build fluency through improved learner engagement, taking into account these above-mentioned challenges. The broadly positive feedback from both students and teachers validate our attempt and we see this as an opportunity to develop more

material along these lines. This material is to be relevant to other areas of the curriculum and applicable to a greater range of classes. It will help us to address a perceived shortage of appropriate speaking materials that match the communicative aims of the SILC curriculum and will provide greater consistency across classes.

Acknowledgements

References

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal, 70*, 125-132.

Keesing-Styles, L., Nash, S., & Ayres, R. (2013). Managing curriculum change and 'ontological uncertainty' in tertiary education. *Higher Education Research & Development, 33*, 496-509.

King, J. (2013). Silence in the second language classrooms of Japanese universities. *Applied Linguistics, 34*, 325-343.

Lockley, T., Hirschel, R., & Slobodniuk, A. (2012). Assessing the action plan: Reform in Japanese high school EFL. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 9*, 152-169.

Mork, C. (2014). Benefits of using online student response systems in Japanese EFL classrooms. *The JALT CALL Journal, 10*, 127-137.

Oxford Online Placement Test. (2015). Retrieved from Oxford English Testing
Website: https://www.oxfordenglishtesting.com

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.