

## A Stronger Communicative Language Teaching Design in University Classrooms.

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### 抄 録

一般的に、英語を学ぶ日本人は標準的な試験の合格を目指して、書物を使って勉強することに長けている。しかし、長年勉強しても会話力が低いことが知られている。それは日本人が無口だからとか、意見を強い口にしたがらないからだとする見方が多い。多くの場合、言語教育者は、これは対話の能力不足のせいだと見ている。これが巡り巡って、基本的な文法や、オーディオリンガルスタイルのドリルを通じた会話パターンを再度教えることになる。Howatt (1984) はこれをコミュニカティブ言語教育の「弱い」導入と称し、「強い」スタイルと対比している。このアプローチは主に、意味や正確な用法を身に着ける手段として、わかりやすいコミュニケーションに焦点を当てている。この学習者中心アプローチを様々なクラスで用いると、習熟度の低い学習者でさえも、目覚ましい結果が表れている。

### Introduction

"The students just can't speak" is a common lament among English instructors throughout Japan. "Japanese students are shy," "They have no opinions," or "they do not know what to say" resonates among university instructors. After a minimum of six years of compulsory English study, many students entering university cannot engage in a basic English conversation. As Mulligan (2005) observes, "Japanese students study English 3 to 5 hours a week or more, anywhere from 6 to 10 years, yet Japan has one of the lowest levels of English language proficiency of any developed country in the world. This is further reflected in their international TOEFL scores, which languish at the bottom (p.33)."

A vast and colorful array of four-skills English textbooks is available to university teachers attempting to address this staggering proficiency deficit. However, some instructors find themselves starting all over again, re-teaching a limited set of basic language forms embedded in a notional-functional syllabus to so-called "false beginners." This may be a sufficient practice for compulsory "General English" classes at Japanese universities, but it can be particularly frustrating when students resist the speaking tasks that the common textbook approaches call for. This report examines what happened when the instructor (present author) changed the speaking activities and speaking test format in General English classes from re-teaching of high school material to a more communicative approach, a redesign in order to better reflect the way English is used for communication in the real world.

One of the highest hurdles on the track to getting students to practice communicating in English

is getting them to speak in English in the classroom (Brown, 2005; Fellner, 2005). Nunan (1998) stresses the importance of using classroom time for activities that practice real conversation (p.27). However, inevitably instructors will encounter classes where students are staunchly resistant to engaging in classroom activities that practice speaking in English. This is a particularly frustrating situation when teachers have already committed to a textbook for the academic year. Out of a sense of responsibility to use what they have made their students purchase, or for lack of a better alternative, teachers push the class through the motions of the activities prescribed in the text until the end of the semester. Some may ascribe their inability to foster a more “communicative” classroom to inherent “low motivation” among students. They may make a few adjustments to lesson plans, wash their hands of the matter, and hope they get a more eager group of students next year.

Or, they may radically overhaul their entire syllabus and teaching approach altogether. One alternative is departing from the textbook structure altogether. This paper, an action-research-based case study, outlines one such departure, one which more closely reflects Nunan’s (1998) vision of a communicative classroom.

### **Students’ & Teacher’s Backgrounds**

English language learners in Japan are exposed to a limited number of teaching approaches. These may vary depending on the school and English instructors, however, two methods are commonly referred to: (1) “*Yakudoku*,” whereby instructors mainly use the learners’ native language (L1), students learn English through analysis of grammar forms, and translation between English and Japanese is the main method of language learning (Hino, 1998; Gorsuch, 1998, 2001); and (2) portions of the Audiolingual Method, in which the learners are led by the instructor to practice grammar forms in oral repetition. This method focuses on engraining form-correct statements, questions and responses as habit. Language forms are explained in L1, practiced in isolation and later applied in possible communication situations through a variety of drills.

Far less frequently, an English language learner in Japan might encounter one of the more current Communicative Approaches. Lessons are student-oriented as opposed the teacher being the center of instruction. In short, students use English in order to learn English (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Although it is arguable which methods are actually in use and which are the most beneficial to language learning (Saito, 2012), it is clear that many English language classrooms in Japan remain very teacher-centered and language-form focused (Nishino, 2008).

It is well documented that the dearth of communicative activities in pre-tertiary Japanese EFL classrooms is in part attributable to teachers’ attitudes that they should use classroom time to prepare students to take university entrance tests (Law, 1994; Gorsuch, 1998). However, in her 1998 study of two Japanese teachers using the *yakudoku* method, Gorsuch observed that the teachers “reported that they did not ask the students to produce their own original spoken or written English utterances or sentences, because it would be too ‘difficult’ for students” (cited in Gorsuch, 2001, p.4). Prior to the end of the 2011 academic year, I used what I considered to be a communicative, learner-centered lesson style *only* in classes with higher-proficiency learners. In these

lessons, classroom speaking activities focus on small-group discussions, and included no drills, very little explicit grammar-form instruction, and almost no controlled practice of language forms. Like the teachers in the Gorsuch (1998) study, perhaps, I was fully vested in the idea that lower-proficiency students could not—or would not—handle open-ended speaking tasks, or anything beyond controlled practice of basic language forms. Therefore, for students whose placement test scores put them in the so-called “lower level” classes, a typical language-form-focused textbook with well-established activities seemed appropriate.

On the other hand, because my small-group discussion lessons at the higher levels tended to be successful and, in fact, more enjoyable for both me and the students, I began to test them out on some of my non-higher-level classes. The positive response among students to these activities was encouraging, even though the language level was not as high. After awhile, the remaining textbook-based classes began to seem tedious, cumbersome, and frustrating for both me and the students. Feeling I had nothing to lose, I decided to attempt the same discussion-based lesson format in my “lowest level” classes as I was doing in the higher level classes. The response from students was surprisingly positive. Particularly surprising was the amount that students in all classes were willing to talk in English. In order to assess the difference in student speaking output between the two kinds of lesson formats (textbook-based vs. discussion-based), I compared the results of two different oral testing methods I used for each lesson format.

### Participants

This mini-case study documents the mid-semester replacement of one teaching method with another among two classrooms of English language learners during the 2011 academic year at a Japanese university. All students were first-year, non-English (Business-Finance and Social Information) majors. Both classrooms were streamed into class levels by a placement test created and administered by the university. Classroom A included 15 students, streamed into the second of six classes, a “mid-level” class. In Classroom B there were 23 students, streamed into the lowest class—the seventh of seven, a “low level” group.

### Lesson Type #1: Textbook Format

At the beginning of the 2011 academic year, both Classroom A and Classroom B had been assigned an EFL textbook from a series widely used in Japan and internationally. In the foreword, the textbook read that it focuses on “communicative skills.” Each chapter had a storyline, and the activities were centered on possible conversations in an English-speaking office environment. Functions included, among other things: introducing oneself, making requests, making invitations and describing things. Chapters were arranged around grammar structures and verb tenses. Relevant vocabulary was introduced within lists of phrases and in model dialogues. The textbook included a class CD for self study and in-class listening. Typically, I covered one chapter per week, or in some cases two weeks. Many of the speaking activities challenged the students to elicit information through information gaps and short role-plays. Topically at least, these textbook-based classes seemed like a middle-ground compromise between practice with language form and structure,

and practice with English as a means of communication. Superficially, students would “speak” in English, and the tasks *seemed* as “communicative” as they could be.

I taught the material to the best of my ability. Where possible, I supplemented the textbook with my own material, but I generally adhered to the overall structure of the textbook. Midway through the second semester of using the textbook, I abandoned it in favor of a radically different classroom approach, one based on a discussion-focused lesson format that I had been using in English classes at Otaru University of Commerce, where English proficiency levels are considerably higher.

### Lesson Type #2: Discussion Format

Compared to the textbook-based format, the discussion-based format is highly communicative. The main goal of the lesson is for learners to become familiar with a debatable topic and discuss it with fellow classmates. Theoretically, communicative competence is improved—and English learning is achieved—through discussion and negotiation of meaning.

Discussion is the endpoint of the lesson. Nearly all the activities involve semi-structured conversation, and culminate in “final discussion” at several points during the semester, about one of a number of debate topics covered. Each topic—typically one every week or two weeks—is one which can be argued for or against. A simple example would be “You are what you eat” (fast food—a good thing or a bad thing?). Each topic opens with a “find someone who” activity. Learners become familiar with a topic by asking questions and eliciting opinions and real experiences from their classmates. Depending on both their English ability and their motivation to learn—or to do well in the class—students ask follow-up questions. Some students carry out this task more diligently than others, however, the learner-centered nature of the task leaves students free to pursue an understanding of the topic to whatever degree they choose.

Compared with the textbook-based lesson format, language forms are not pre-rehearsed. Questions and answers are not given to the students to be read verbatim. Rather, students generate the questions themselves. If necessary in low proficiency classes, and the teacher jots them on the blackboard, making adjustments to grammar only as needed. For example, in a lesson where the topic is about education problems, the handout reads: “Find someone who . . . sleeps in class.” Students may generate questions like, “Do you sleep in class?” “Do you fall asleep in class? . . . Or “Do you see others fall asleep in class?” A follow-up question might be, “Why?” or “Why not?” Possible answers include “I didn’t sleep last night,” “I have a cold,” “This classroom is hot,” or “this class is boring.” Positive participation is encouraged, and students are specifically told that there is no set answer to the questions, and that they are free to talk as much as they can with whatever English they can manage. This activity serves two purposes: moving beyond mere automatic yes / no answers to probing for more information, and practicing a wider variety of English. The process of this activity allows the students to be creative and talk to many other classmates at their own level of competence.

The next exercise in the lesson is a role-play in pairs or groups of three. It is another chance for the learners to generate questions, understand answers, and use arguments in a setting that does not expose what they might really think about a given topic. For example, a role-play might be

a conversation between parents and a young adult. One is an adult who thinks that children should never stay out late, another is an adult who thinks that it's OK sometimes, and a third is a young adult who wants to stay out late. Another example might be a conversation between a teacher and students: one is a teacher who thinks studying English is absolutely necessary, and the other two are students who hate studying English. Because students have spent the majority of their lives interacting with parents and teachers, they tend to have a lot of personal experiences to draw from and contribute to the role play. They are able to live out a scenario and think of other useful vocabulary or points of view.

The final task is a discussion in groups of three where not everyone agrees. Continuing the example topic on education problems, students hone their arguments about problems in schools. Possible approaches are the attitudes and habits of the students: they lack motivation or willpower, or they have other problems that make them not interested in their education. Or is it the teachers and schools that are not up to task? Three students debate the issue. The rules are simple: all students cannot agree. Having practiced with the previous activities, students should understand both sides of the issue well enough to take a position on either side of the debate. After a set amount of time, the group members change. In a group of three students A, B and C, Student A moves to the group on the left, and Student B moves to the group on the right. Student C doesn't move. Figure 1 illustrates this group rotation.

Figure 1. Group rotation

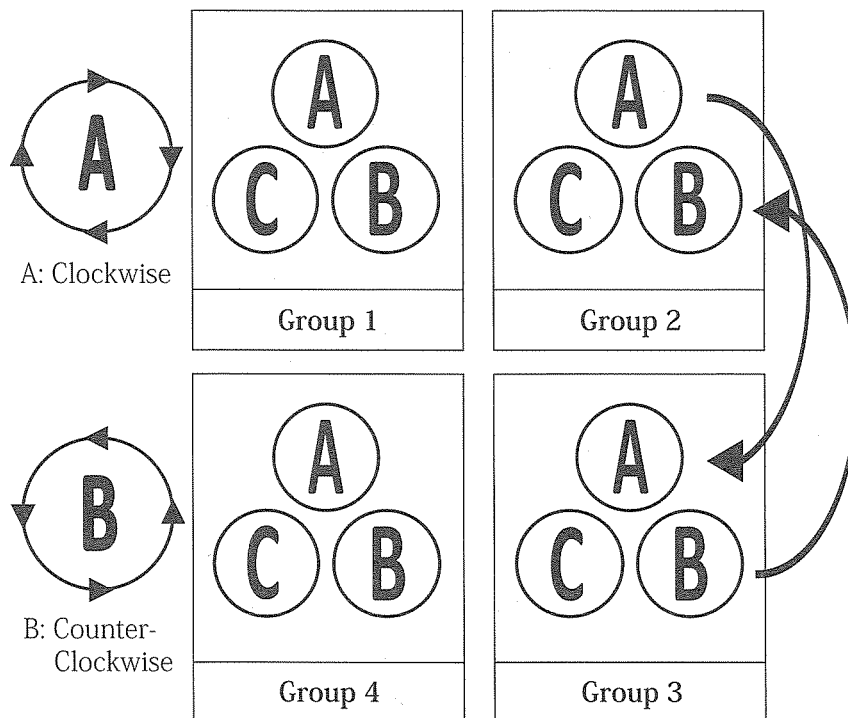


Figure 1: Classroom configuration. In groups of three students, All A Students move clockwise and all B Students move counter-clockwise, making completely new conversation practice groups. C Students do not move.

The students start again with completely different partners. With each change of group members, the learners have a chance to experiment with what worked in the previous group—or revise what did not work. They pick up new ideas from classmates and have a chance to use those ideas as tools in the next discussion. This changing of partners and restarting the discussion was found to be highly effective in practicing the material several times without drilling or rote memorization.

In addition to the *not everyone can agree* rule, another key rule in this discussion activity is: *no non-sequiturs allowed*. Arguments must follow logically from other partners' previous statements. Meaning is paramount, so if they do not understand their partners, they must seek clarification by asking "What do you mean?" or "I don't understand." Or, the conversation must be skillfully shifted to another aspect of the topic: "That's true but..." "On the other hand, ...". Previously, the textbook-based lessons focused on a particular set group of phrases in a narrow situation, and learners generally sought an established piece of information from a partner. In contrast, the discussion-based lessons are much more open-ended. Learners are free to expand on a dialogue for as long as they want or are able.

### Oral Test Comparison

In both the textbook-based lessons and the discussion-based lessons, oral testing followed what was practiced in class. In the textbook-based oral test, students reenacted the office conversation—a hypothetical conference call. The task was to take down telephone messages about travel plans, and to relay sales and profit figures. The language functions were making requests, and communicating complicated business-related information and large numbers. In the discussion-based oral test, the final debate activity mirrored the group rotation activity exactly, a discussion about education problems. In both tests, three students were chosen lottery-style by picking numbers from a hat, designed to thwart coordination with friends to memorize a scripted conversation. Table 1 & Table 2 compare two different oral tests between two classrooms in terms of time taken to complete the test, group grade, and number of pauses and hesitations.

**Table 1. Classroom A, textbook-based vs. discussion-based oral tests**

Classroom A	Time taken	Group grade	Pauses, hesitations
<b>Oral Test 1 (mid-semester), textbook-based lesson</b>			
Group 1	2:00	A/A-	None
Group 2	2:40	A-	2 brief pauses (anticipation, waiting)
Group 3	3:10	B+	2 brief pauses; 1 long (confusion)
Group 4	4:55 DNF	B-	Several short (hesitations); Long final pause.
Group 5	5:10 DNF	B-/C+	Several short (hesitations); 2 Longer pauses.
<b>Oral Test 2 (semester end), discussion-based lesson</b>			
Group 1	9:30	A/A-	Several brief throughout, natural pauses soon filled
Group 2	8:00	A-	Several brief
Group 3	5:10	A/B	Several brief
Group 4	4:50	B+/B	Several brief Long final pause
Group 5	4:30	C/B	Several brief, Long final pause

\* DNF = Did Not Finish the conversation or gave up

Table 2. Classroom B, textbook-based vs. discussion-based oral tests

Classroom B	Time taken	Group grade	Pauses, hesitations
<b>Oral Test 1 (mid-semester), textbook-based lesson</b>			
Group 1	3:00	A-	3 short or brief
Group 2	3:20	A-	3 short or brief
Group 3	4:30	B+	5 short or brief
Group 4	4:30	B-	5 short or brief; 1 long (confusion)
Group 5	4:40 DNF	B+/B	Several short (hesitations); 2 Longer pauses.
Group 6	5:00 DNF	B	Several short (hesitations); 2 Longer pauses.
Group 7	5:00 DNF	C+	4 long
Group 8*	5:40 DNF	C	4 long
<b>Oral Test 2 (semester end), discussion-based lesson</b>			
Group 1	12:00+	A	Several brief throughout, natural pauses soon filled
Group 2	7:20	A-/B+	Several brief throughout
Group 3	6:20	A/A-	Several brief throughout
Group 4	4:50	B+/A-	Several brief throughout. Long final
Group 5	4:50	B	Several brief, throughout. Long final
Group 6*	4:40	B-	Several brief, throughout. 1 long midway
Group 7	4:30	B+/B	Several brief, throughout.
Group 8	4:30	C+	Brief and 2 long

\* DNF = Did Not Finish the conversation or gave up

Classroom A was a mid- to high-level class in terms of English proficiency and in terms of academic ability and motivation to learn. Classroom B was a lower class, although in my judgment, a number of students with better ability were mistakenly or inadvertently streamed into this class. In some cases, an individual who performed well in a group was given a higher individual grade than the group grade. Grades were given based on a holistic appraisal of each group's conversation fluency, knowledge of and use of the topic content. Strength of opinion was added in the discussion-style conversation.

### Salient results

*"Less is best" vs. "More is better"*

In the textbook-based oral test, students had drilled for pronunciation and accuracy using set question and answer pairs such as: "When does the flight leave?" "It leaves at 2:00p.m." And "Can you ~", "Sure, no problem / Sorry, I can't". In the textbook-based classroom practice, there was a more free form communicative task at the end of each chapter. However, the only real incentive to do well on the test was merely to memorize the script: Memorize the questions and then give a memorized reply if asked. This was the safe way to not lose points and get a higher grade.

On the other hand, the discussion-based oral test was open-ended. The instructions were "to discuss as long as you like, or as long as you think is enough to reach a satisfactory treatment of the topic." Except for the beginning of the test, where one student opened the conversation with an opinion statement, there was nothing predictable about how the discussion would develop. Instead of proceeding like a board game from one square to the next, discussion was like a chess game with

many variations and a lot of unpredictability. The test taker might be faced with a completely unanticipated argument from another student, one that they had not encountered in the classroom practice. Whereas in the textbook-based test students only had to memorize and be alert for an item such as a flight time, in the discussion test students had to be ready for any argument—even something not covered in what was covered in class.

In Table 1 and Table 2, an inversion in the amount of time used to complete the conversations in Test 1 (textbook) and Test 2 (discussion) is apparent. In Classroom A, the top threesome quickly finished the entire Test 1 in two minutes. The three-student group that struggled the most—and were evaluated the lowest—took over five minutes and gave up (DNF = Did Not Finish). They were unable to remember the appropriate responses to all the items which appeared in the scripted cues. The same pattern was evident in Test 1 for Classroom B, whose times taken ranged from 3:00 to 5:40. Half of the groups sputtered to an end, unable to cover all the material.

In general, it was the groups with more fluent students who finished Test 1 the quickest. The task was done, the conversation terminated. These groups, although more fluent, seemed averse to taking risk and straying from the prescribed script, and included only what was necessary in the conversation. In the case of Test 1, less was best, and the fewest mistakes equaled a higher grade. Meanwhile, the weaker groups struggled to remember and recite the set phrases of the previously rehearsed dialogue.

For the discussion-based Test 2, the speaking times were considerably longer. Again, groups of three students were chosen at random. The weakest group carried on for 4:30. The strongest group went on for over 12 minutes (Classroom B, generally the less proficient of the two classrooms) and had to be stopped for lack of time. The weakest group exhausted their ideas for the discussion. However, in terms of fluency, range of arguments used and degree of logic in the discussion, the strongest group filled their test time with considerably more language. In the case of Test 2, more was better. The incentive to do well on the test was not to utter a set of memorized phrases, but to fully explain a point of view and to persuade classmates—to understand as well as be understood.

#### *Types and frequency of pauses*

Looking at the nature of pauses and hesitations reveals another difference between the methods. I categorized these pauses in speech into brief, short or long pauses. This was a subjective judgment based whether the student was naturally (briefly) pausing in the conversation—such as using fillers like “uhm” or “ah...”. Short pauses were the uncomfortable silences brought on by an inability to immediately come up with the correct form. Long pauses were a complete breakdown in conversation from students being unable to comprehend each other’s questions or to answer.

Classroom A, the higher proficiency group, quickly handled the office script from the textbook. However, students who were not familiar with the script paused more often, and there were several short and long hesitations. Immediately after the tests, I informally asked students how they thought



they performed. For the textbook-based Test 1, some students indicated that they could not remember the words and/or that they were nervous.

During the discussion-based Test 2, however, there were no such pauses or hesitations. All the gaps in the conversation were quickly filled with the next line of argument, agreement or disagreement. In many cases one student pressed another: “. . . what do you think?” This type of interaction seems to reflect the unscripted, unrehearsed nature of a real conversation. Because students are not tethered to uttering certain phrases in a pre-established way, the general atmosphere of Test 2 was more relaxed.

More remarkable was the comparison in conversation breakdowns in Group B. The Test 1 office scenario, with set phrases and anticipated answers, generated many uncomfortable silences and long pauses, indicating that students did not understand the questions or had not memorized a properly formed answer. The discussion-based Test 2, on the other hand, with its loose nature in which any member could take over the conversation, flowed more naturally. Again, immediately following the test, I asked each student for his or her impression of the test and their own performance. Nearly all students described the discussion as easier—despite the fact that the conversation was longer and required much more language production.

#### *Strong CLT, Weak CLT*

The nature of the oral test for each lesson format illustrates another important difference. Howatt (1984) distinguishes between a “strong” and a “weak” version of communicative language teaching, or CLT:

The “weak” version which has become more or less standard practice in the last ten years, stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching. . . . The “strong” version of communicative teaching, on the other hand, advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. If the former could be described as “learning to use” English, the latter entails “using English to learn it (p. 279).”

As pointed out above, although the textbook-based lesson format purports to be communicative, it is perhaps best called a “weak” variant of CLT with many listen-and-repeat exercises and pattern practice that more closely resemble the Audiolingual Method. Most of the speaking tasks in this lesson format are, as Littlewood (1981) observes, designed “to equip the learner with some of the skills required for communication without actually performing communicative acts (p.8).” On the other hand, the discussion-based lesson format can be considered to be a “strong” version, in the sense that learners generate their own language. Sometimes these include items learned in previous

years of English study. Sometimes students put together phrases and useful arguments on the spot by struggling to communicate.

### Excerpted transcripts of student dialogue

To illustrate how lower-proficiency students structure arguments, I have provided several transcripts of in-class conversations below. Transcript 1 is from the very first day free conversation practice introduced to the class under the topic “You are what you eat.” Although Student A studied several years of English in junior and senior high school, he struggles to put together sentences when faced with being thrown off the deep end of the English communication pool and told to swim. He starts with just a few words.

#### **Transcript 1: Developing language structure**

##### Group One

B: “Why do you like fast food?”

A: “Tastes good.”

B: “It tastes good?”

A: “Yeah, it tastes good.”

##### Group Two (after rotating to the next group)

A: “It tastes good.”

C: “I think, so. It’s delicious. I love it.”

A: “Yeah, I love it. Delicious.”

During the group rotation process, Student A picked up other positive aspects of fast food—ideas such as convenience and cheap price. Because of the not everyone can agree rule, all students must be prepared to put aside whatever personal opinions they may have in order to argue from the other side of the topic. In the end, Student A was able to form sentences and communicate ideas about the adverse effects of fast food to a person’s health and to the environment.

This simple example illustrates what the instructor witnessed many times over in every class at every level: learners building arguments and language structures starting with basic vocabulary. Through practice, students eventually learn by means of experimentation how to fit the vocabulary into sentences and how to use these sentences in proper context. In lower-proficiency classes, if students lack confidence I initially overlook the use of L1. Slowly they come to terms with the debate arguments and relevant vocabulary. This scaffolding allows the students to work out meaning and nuance. Gradually as they succeed in understanding the topic, the scaffolding falls away and I insist on complete L2.

In classes with higher proficiency, from the start there is very little L1 and the basic meanings of useful vocabulary and terminology is communicated through use of communication strategies. These include requests for repetition and clarification. The arguments used are more highly nuanced to convey exactly what the student wants to say—at least, to the best of his or her ability.

There is no pressure to memorize items that the students might feel the instructor wants them to repeat later on an exam. I explicitly encourage the open-ended, creative nature of conversation. Also, if a student seems to have a difficult time communicating, I encourage group members to help each other.

Transcript 2, recorded using a digital video camera in an oral test in a first year general English class in the Social Information Department at Sapporo Gakuin University, further illustrates the open-endedness of the discussion activity. Here, the students started on the topic of fast food and ad-libbed ideas about culture broadly.

### **Transcript 2: Going off topic**

- A: . . . If there are many fast food restaurants, Japanese ramen and soba shops will close.  
B: But I do not like Japanese food.  
A: Do you like ramen?  
B: Yes.  
A: It is Japanese tradition.  
B: That's true, but I do not like Japanese tradition. I like hip-hop . . . and American style.  
A: Me, too. But I like Japanese tradition. We should protect (sic).  
B: I don't care. I am young; I like American style, music, fashion and jeans. Young people make new traditions.  
A: Me, too. I wear jeans and I like music. But aren't you sad? Kimono is beautiful.  
B: Japan changes. I like American style. . . . and hip-hop. . . . Japan tradition changes. . . .

After the dialogue, I confirmed with the students that this line of argumentation was never brought up in the in-class practice. It was completely spontaneous. Student B diverged from the main topic and Student A played along. With no set pattern to follow, it was natural to respond freely within the role-play.

While this sort of radical divergence from the topic is rare, it illustrates what even low-proficiency learners are capable of. What is common in many dialogues is the creativity, individuality and self-expressiveness of the students—a testament to the learner-centeredness of the lesson. In another oral test (not recorded here), another student was able to speak expertly about issues of safety. He worked in a fast food restaurant, so he was able to attest to problems he saw personally, issues of quality and hygiene. With no L1 and no non-sequiturs allowed in the oral test, his randomly chosen partners were tasked with clarifying what he meant until they really understood his story. They were challenged to use their receptive knowledge of English from previous study to check for the precise meaning of a complicated situation. In still another oral test, students spoke of using restaurants as a place to study. Again, the dialogue was unrehearsed and students used words never introduced or practiced in-class. One student countered the others with the opinion that such places are too noisy and poor places to study.

Another key difference between the textbook-based lesson format and the discussion-based lesson format is the level of predictability. In the latter, the students are on-guard for arguments that

they might not have read in the teaching materials or heard from a classmate. Understanding each other fully a premium, communication strategies become a key to the progression of conversations. An illustration of this is in Transcript 3 (several groups) from discussion tests on the topic of politics and apathy.

### **Transcript 3: Seeking clarification**

#### Group A

- A: . . . Senkaku and climate is a big problem. Politicians change a little.  
C: Hmm. **You mean** politicians little problem solve ... solve little problems? (self-corrects)  
A: Politicians will solve problems little by little. It's not easy to solve the big problem. . . .

#### Group B

- B: . . . I think that we don't have to vote because politicians' opinions is not real.  
A: Uhm...**You mean**, you do not trust politicians' statements ...their manifestos?  
B: Yes. . . .

#### Group C

- A: . . . We can change by voting.  
B: So, we can change by voting?  
C: Politicians? (pause) **I don't understand.**  
A: We should learn, we should study. It is important for us.  
B: So, we can be informed . . . about politics? . . .  
. . .  
A: Our living is influenced by politicians.  
. . . We should choose by learning about policy and vote.

In each of these dialogues, meaning and nuance was a priority. Students rephrased and made attempts to re-cast their partners' sentences to clarify meaning. This was completely different from re-enacted conversations using textbook-based role-plays. The office role-play resulted in students focusing on—and being distracted by—pronunciation and precise word order. However, the discussion-based format necessitated the students being clear about the entire meaning of a sentence. In Group C (Transcript 3 above), all three students became involved in trying to understand who and what changes by making an effort to vote. Later in the conversation, Student A eventually was able to explain that the voters, politicians, the country's politics and the livelihoods of the people are improved by informed voters. The point was highly nuanced and took the group several minutes to understand Student A's main idea.

### **Conclusions, limitations, and directions for further research**

When it comes to getting students to speak English in university EFL classrooms, incentive to engage in the speaking task is paramount. I have attempted to illustrate that, compared to settings in

which there is an incentive to memorize a set dialogue, more English and a higher level of engagement will come when the requirement to recite certain language patterns is removed. The built-in incentives in a more Audiolingual oral testing setting, with drills and required language structures, pressure the learners to place value on what they can memorize and recite smoothly. After a disappointing textbook-based test performance, "I couldn't remember" was common refrain. On the other hand, in the discussion-based test format, there was little sense of regret among students that anything was "missed" or "left out." Most students follow the basic rules of making a dialogue in which statements and counter statements are linked logically. Struggling to successfully negotiate meaning and convey ideas leaves the learners with a higher sense of accomplishment and positive attitude toward their ability to communicate in English.

While the results I have presented may seem encouraging, in order to expand the versatility and ease of implementation of this discussion-based classroom approach, a number of issues need to be addressed in further detail. In particular:

1. *Add specificity to grading system.* I have tentatively provided criteria for a holistic grade: fluency, knowledge and use of topic content, and strength of opinion. I do not attach point values to these criteria or to grades. Letter grades are given instead. One attractive feature of language-form-based lessons is that it is easier to attach point values to language structures. For oral testing, holistic grades may suffice, however, it is necessary—and fair—to outline to students exactly what constitutes a certain grade, even if point values are not used or specified.
2. *Further examine CLT background literature with respect to the Japanese university context.* I cannot propose that a strong version of CLT, and the activities I have used to implement it, would be universally appropriate to all English classrooms in Japan. In fact, the strong version of CLT has been criticized for being a situation where students are flung into a conversation "as a prelude to any instruction: all subsequent teaching is based on whether they sink or swim (Harmer, 1982, p.164-165)." Others have argued that CLT may not be appropriate to the Japanese educational context (Li, 1998; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004; Tanaka, 2009; cited in Kavanagh, 2012). Further development and wider implementation of the method I have outlined above should take these criticisms into a more detailed account.
3. *Solicit student response to discussion-based lesson format.* Semi-structured small-group discussions are in most cases a radical departure from the pre-university English language learning environment that students are used to. They are used to a very teacher-centered—often teacher-dominated—classroom, where accuracy on written tests is everything and fluency is never even taken into account. From what I have witnessed in my own classes, departure from the textbook and memorized scripts was a welcome one. However, some students may not feel this way. For example, they may feel overwhelmed by the immediate need to communicate with classmates in a foreign language, despite the teacher's best efforts to allay their fears. In any event, here I have recorded anecdotally what I have heard my students tell me. A more formal and anonymous survey of students' attitudes toward the classroom activities and the tests would be more revealing.

Finally, I wish to highlight the fact that lower-proficiency students may not necessarily be turned off to a strong version of CLT. From what I have observed, most students will swim, if given the right incentive to do so—and not only because they will “sink” if they don’t. Rather, I believe that students feel more satisfied, and are thus potentially more motivated towards their English studies, if the classroom speaking tasks propel students toward personal and creative language production, rather than compel the rote re-production of scripts. Particularly in the Japanese university EFL context, where getting students to speak English in the English classroom is an unending challenge, development of this method deserves further attention.

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