

Oral Communication and TPP

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The importance of English as the lingua franca has been recognized by the government and its acquisition has been encouraged by the government these past 70 years. Its predominance as the language primarily used in international relations, not only in Japan but in the rest of the world as well, underlies the importance of being able to effectively communicate in English. Yet, while a certain degree of success has been achieved in Japan in regards to reading and writing, when it comes to speaking the results are less impressive. The primary reason for this has been attributed to an over-emphasis on writing and grammar. The need for improved English speaking ability is recognized and being addressed, but the manner in which oral communication, or conversation, has been taught is noticeably ineffective.

Conversation in any language is spontaneous and extemporaneous. Being able to comprehend and respond in a natural and intelligent manner is something we all manage to acquire in our native languages as we grow up, generally by observing and emulating those around us. Thus, by the time we begin school, we are able to communicate orally without being able to read and write. The reading and writing skills, through study of grammar, come after we already are able to communicate effectively orally. As we progress through school we, if so inclined, are able to improve our overall communication skills, which then contribute to our success in the acquisition of knowledge in general.

In Japan the primary emphasis in teaching English as a second language is text oriented, which is to say emphasis is placed on memorizing grammatical rules and vocabulary. Most of the exercises are text-based and do not require either spontaneity or

extempore speech, but are instead repeated memorizations. While these perhaps do have some benefit and may contribute to comprehension in general, they are not especially conducive or effective for learning how to converse naturally and freely, that is to say, in spontaneous and extemporaneous fashion.

Conversation is similar to a volley in tennis or volley ball in that it is essential to “keep the ball moving.” “Dropping the ball” in a sporting event results in a loss of points and in conversation, unnatural pauses or other types of inadequacies which can lead to negative impressions can be an impediment to effective conversation, which in turn often leads to a lack of confidence in the speaker and a subsequent reluctance to converse for fear of being unable to do it well. It is the view of this writer, therefore, that greater emphasis in learning English as a second language should be placed on speaking rather than reading and writing. That is to say, we should learn a second language in the same way we learned our first language: by observation and emulation of spoken language before learning how to read and write it.

The teaching of traditional Japanese arts, such as budo, kado, sado, as well as sports, is done exactly in that way. The skills of the master, or teacher, are demonstrated to the students who then through extensive repetition attempt to emulate them. The conscious effort to reproduce those skills is an elementary stage and not yet of the level where the skills which can be spontaneously or extemporaneously performed in a natural manner. It is when such skills can be done unconsciously, as though they were one’s own skill, that the student is recognized as being adept. And just as in a martial art or sport or other skill learned in this manner, it is

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at this point where individual style becomes noticeable; the same is true for conversationalists.

The teaching of any subject when it is done for credit requires evaluation upon which a grade can be assessed. Too often in the case of oral communication, or conversation, such assessment is based on textbook drills or exercises, and when evaluation is based on speaking, too often the evaluation is more subjective rather than objective due to unconscious preferences of the teacher which can bias his evaluation. The difficulty is further compounded because very often students learning English appear less motivated and reluctant when required to speak. In many cases lessons become dominated by a few students who do try to make an effort to speak while most of the other students in the class are but passive observers. The teacher, in such cases, needs to have some sort of standard for evaluating all the students but too often that is text-based. The challenge for both the teacher and the students is to find a way for encouraging all the students in a class to motivate themselves to make a sustained effort and at the same time enable the teacher to evaluate their efforts as objectively as possible. Timed Paired Practice (TPP) is one method that has been able to achieve that.

TPP is a resource for teachers to teach oral communication. It is designed for students who have an elementary understanding of the language being studied. Until now it has been primarily used in the instruction of English conversation skills, however, it can be used for any language. The resource is a cloud-based program in which students registered in a class are randomly paired and required to extemporaneously and spontaneously use the language they are learning. Two students who have been randomly selected by the program come forward and converse without prompting. The teacher times the conversation from when it begins until an error occurs which neither of the pair had recognized or corrected. If one of the pair does recognize and correct the error, the conversation is allowed to continue. When the conversation has been stopped, the error is pointed out and immediately another pair

is randomly selected. Once all students present in the lesson have had two randomly paired conversations, they may then volunteer to converse with the teacher, again the conversations being timed, for the remainder of the lesson period.

During a lesson students are not allowed to take notes or have anything on their desks in front of them as they are expected to pay attention to the conversations being conducted. The purpose for not allowing notes is to wean students away from relying on prepared phrases and instead have them attempt to converse spontaneously and extemporaneously. As long as the conversations are conducted in a manner so that the entire class can observe, the class as a whole is generally attentive because they are gaining insights and ideas from each conversation that they can use when their own turns come.

As for the types of errors, these are generally anything which the native speaker finds unnatural, the most common errors being grammar, pronunciation, delivery, unnatural pauses, content, and speaking too softly.

Evaluation is based on three main areas: ability, effort, and attendance. Ability is measured by how long a student can speak before an error is made, effort is measured by the average number of conversations a student has per lesson, and attendance is self-explanatory. An algorithm calculates these factors in such a way that being late or absent will lower a grade while the more often and the longer one can speak will raise the grade. The volunteer stage following the random pairing stage has been very effective in getting students to motivate themselves. Those who make a greater effort by volunteering more often generally have higher grades.

All the data is recorded by the TPP program and updated at the end of a lesson. The individual data for each student is available and can be accessed on any PC or device. It shows the student's overall averages as well as with whom he spoke, how long he conversed, and the type of error for every conversation he has had. In this way the student can observe

his progress and see his grade based on his efforts and focus on areas needing effort, be it correction of a particularly noticeable error or particular conversation skill. By studying their data students can develop conversational strategies by recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of themselves and their peers. There is also a homework component which is designed to focus students' attention on their performances after a lesson by requiring them to look up the information about their first five conversations in a lesson and copy that data into a homework form correctly. This they must do within 48 hours after the end of a lesson at which time the TPP program automatically corrects their responses. If there is an error, one point is deducted from the grade. This has been effective in focusing students' attention on their performances and since its inclusion in the TPP program two years ago it has led to a drop in the number of students who fail as well as an overall increase in higher grade averages.

While TPP has proven itself to be an effective method for improving the oral communication skills of students and provides an empirical means of evaluation for the teacher, it is not for all teachers. Because the emphasis is on spontaneous and extemporaneous speech, the teacher needs to be able to conduct lessons dynamically without long pauses or lengthy explanations. Conducting as many conversations as possible is important and also something demanded by students because they are aware that the number of conversations they are able to have in a lesson will affect their grades.

In the Faculty of Global Media Studies the Oral Communication program consists of four levels, advancement to the next level being contingent on passing the current level. There are four different levels of TPP and one each is used in each of the four different OC courses. In Oral Communication I the method described above is used. TPP Level I has an algorithm that adjusts grades so that during the first 19 lessons extra points, diminishing with each lesson, are given so that grades are not disproportionate to the very short initial conversation times. Also, the TPP exercise is conducted in every

lesson, so during the course each student will have more than one hundred conversations. Students who pass OC I go on to OC II. In OC II, III, and IV lessons are of two alternating types: a Practice Lesson and a TPP Lesson. From OC II onwards conversation topics are set and practiced in order to enable students to develop more depth in their conversations and also learn how to talk about increasingly more challenging topics. In OC II the students will suggest 5 conversation topics in the Practice Lesson and after the teacher provides a brief explanation of the topics, the class then votes on the topic they want to use. Once so decided, the students use the remainder of the period to practice among themselves with the teacher circulating among them to answer questions and provide advice. The next lesson is a TPP Lesson, but unlike TPP Level 1, TPP Level 2 pairs students from the start to the finish of the lesson; there is no volunteer stage for conversations with the teacher. OC III and OC IV use TPP Levels 3 and 4 respectively and in these courses the teacher determines and sets the conversation topics. TPP Level 3 is similar to TPP Level 1 in that after two random pairings students again may volunteer to converse with the teacher. Another difference is that there are no initial "cushion points" as there are in TPP Level 1. TPP Level 4 is similar to TPP Level 2 in that students are randomly paired throughout a lesson.

The effectiveness of the GMS Oral Communication course has been reflected in the university's overseas exchange programs in that in recent years students selected for programs in English speaking countries have predominantly been from the GMS faculty and this has been attributed to their superior conversational skills. Furthermore, the number of GMS students participating in the faculty's Kaigai Enshu classes has steadily grown as well as the number of students who independently study for a year or more at a foreign university of their choice.

During the more than 40 years of this writer's teaching English conversation at the university level in Japanese universities, no other method has shown itself to be as effective as TPP or as popular

with the majority of students taking such lessons. In private conversations with all the GMS students I have had, all have attributed their English conversational ability and new-found confidence to the Oral Communication program and have also expressed a wish that there were more elective Oral Communication courses they could take during their third and fourth years. Currently the only conversation lessons available are the four semesters of required OC courses.

Unfortunately the current trend seems to be moving away from conversation-based courses in favor of text-based or “content” courses, once again reverting to an emphasis more on reading and writing than actual speaking. A January 5, 2014 article in *The Japan Times* online version pointed out the myriad problems and frustrations of the current state of English education in Japan facing teachers and parents of students alike.¹ One of these is the trend for universities to use for-profit dispatch companies to provide inexperienced and untrained English teachers and lessons of questionable content, as pointed out in this article by Prof. Charles Browne of Meiji Gakuin University. A growing number of universities have been turning to such companies to provide English conversation classes on their campuses, using available classrooms, not for academic credit, but for personal study or enjoyment, for which students are required to pay a fee. Basically it is an arrangement which allows a private language school to use a university’s facilities for its own gain, often providing little or no remuneration to the university for that service.

Another problem referred to is the “disconnect between learning English and its practical application.”² There is too much emphasis on test taking. “Nobuki Toyozumi, a Tokyo mother of two, points out that the most common tests that assess English abilities in Japan — the Eiken and TOEIC exams — are unrelated to English mastery, and how the

highest scores on these multiple-choice exams are equivalent to a low score on the TOEFL exam that measures English proficiency for higher U. S. university standards.”³ The TOEIC exam is useful to an extent in evaluating a student’s ability to comprehend English, notably what is written and spoken, but it is inadequate in evaluating speaking ability. In courses where English material is provided and discussed, students with higher TOEIC scores do measurably better than those with lower scores, so in that sense the TOEIC test is a useful method of gauging a student’s ability to do well in a content-based lecture course.

Conversation skills are learned and acquired much as is a martial art or sport through repeated effort. For that reason, the more opportunities there are for such lessons in which the spontaneous and extemporaneous aspects of conversation are taught, the better the chances of learners of English as a second language becoming good conversationalists. More courses offering practical application of speaking skills, particularly extemporaneous and impromptu conversation, are needed and should be increased rather than minimized or replaced with non-credit and ineffective substitutes.

¹ <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/01/05/issues/english-fluency-hopes-rest-on-an-education-overhaul/#.Viwv4vkrLIU>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.