

Developing Communicative Competence - Generating Question-forms in L2 Oral Presentations in Speech and Communication Classes

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Introduction

This study considers whether generating question-forms in L2 oral presentations in an English Language Speech and Communication university course can be an effective way of developing communicative competence. Higher education institutions in Japan are increasingly promoting strategies for internationalisation and globalisation of their programmes. Japanese companies also expect university graduates to have sufficient practical communicative skills in English to meet expanding global business demands. Recent ranking systems such as The Times Higher Education (THE) Inaugural Japan University Rankings 2017¹ are designed to give more information to parents and prospective university students on which institutions will meet their needs for education with a global outlook.

¹ The Times Higher Education (THE) Japan University Rankings 2017 ranked 406 universities based on 11 individual performance metrics. The top 150 universities were ranked by the overall score and by performance in the four key areas of resources, engagement, outcomes and environment. This ranking is student-focused rather than based on research excellence and indicators of the teaching so differs from the THE World University Rankings.

Background

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan (MEXT) has introduced various policy changes and initiatives in recent years which aim to increase the number of English-medium instructed (EMI) courses in higher education institutions to promote the internationalisation and globalisation of Japanese university education.² The aim is to increase global human resources and diversity in higher education so that the country's global academic ranking is improved. The recent English education reform plans for English Language Learning (ELL) are also closely related to the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics. According to Emerging Strategy, a provider of market intelligence services on global emerging markets 'MEXT has already granted a total of 44 subsidy programs to universities to promote the development of practical English communication skills; the expected outcomes include higher TOEIC/TOEFL scores and more students studying overseas.'³

The British Council is collaborating with MEXT⁴, to achieve second language competence for Japanese students in a globalised world, and also promotes MEXT scholarships for British students to study at Japanese

² These initiatives by MEXT include the Global 30 Project (2009), the Reinventing Japan Project (2011), the Go-Global Japan Project (2012) and the Top Global University Programme or TGUP (2014)

³ Emerging Strategy: <http://www.emerging-strategy.com/jp/article/japan-creates-an-english-education-reform-plan-corresponding-to-the-2020-tokyo-olympics/>

⁴ MEXT signed an MOU with the British Council in 2013 for the teacher training of English language teachers in primary, junior and senior high-schools with the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics in mind. It also helped to fully revise the MEXT Team Teaching Handbook for schools, which was published in 2013.

universities. Moreover in March 2017 The Times Higher Education (THE) published the Inaugural Japan University Rankings 2017, which has drawn a lot of attention. According to the Times Higher Education the ranking is 'based on 11 individual performance metrics, which are designed to answer the questions that matter most to students and their families when making one of the most important decisions of their lives – who to trust with their education. These questions include: does the university have sufficient resources to teach me properly? Will I be taught to top global standards and given an opportunity to develop my abilities? Does my university produce graduates that the market wants? Will I meet people from other countries? Does the university have a good academic reputation?'

It is of interest that the THE Japan University Rankings is student-focused and that the performance metrics are designed to answer questions that are the most relevant to students and their families.

The current methodology in teaching English as a second language (ESL), such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), emphasises learning to communicate through interaction in the language being studied. Extensive research by Mackey et al (1999, 2007), has focused on the relationship between interaction and L2 development. These studies have shown the connection between interaction and the development of question formation by students in English in communicative tasks. Rothenstein and Santana (2011) also posit that formulating one's own questions is vital to any meaningful programme of study and is 'the single most essential skill for learning' that all students should be taught.⁵

⁵ Rothenstein and Santana have devised a system called the Question Formulation Technique which helps learners to produce their own questions, improve their questions, and strategise how to use them.

Communicative competence - an overview

Communicative Language Teaching emerged as an ESL methodology in the late twentieth century. Hymes (1972) referred to it as 'communicative competence' and Nunan (1991) defined five features of CLT as follows: i). An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. ii). The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation. iii). The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself. iv). An improvement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning. v). An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

CLT developed into T-BLT or Task-Based Language Teaching, involving learning experience based on a non-linguistic outcome. As Nunan (2003) notes, the focus is on being able to confidently order a meal in the target language rather than being able to form a perfect wh-question. Furthermore, Ellis (2015), writing on task-based course design, methodology and testing states as follows: 'It is clear to me that if learners are to develop the competence they need to use a second language easily and effectively in the kinds of situations they meet *outside* the classroom they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communicating *inside* it.'

There are also those who have been critical of the communicative approach, for instance Swan (2012) in his essays in the mid-1980s, but who now states that he was concerned that 'the new communicative focus on functions, notions and skills, valuable though it was, risked replacing rather than complementing a focus on language forms, and how to teach them.'

The Study

In this study the following questions are asked - can generating question-types in English be of use in developing communicative competence? Can it help university students to have confidence in interacting in English with native and non-native speakers of English? Can it help to foster the global and international outlook required in the work-place in Japan in 2017?

Questioning in itself is important in a variety of ways, it gives students a method to effectively communicate in a second language, it can give students a tool to comprehend texts or information being studied in detail, it can encourage a sense of enquiry through information gathering techniques which can be applied as a valuable skill in later professional life, for instance at a professional presentation or telephone conference, or at an academic conference, and it can stimulate independent thinking. The main aims of this study were to find out how university students use questions in English in response to oral presentations by other L2 speakers, to assess what question-types are commonly employed, to see whether any improvement is made when the same interactive task is repeated and to identify the main problems in L2 in this context.

The study involved two Speech and Communication classes in the Department of British and American Literature in the Faculty of Letters at Komazawa University, which is a private university. Speech and Communication I and Speech and Communication II are compulsory courses for all students in the department in the first year and second year respectively. In addition a small number of transfer students from junior colleges who are in the third year may attend this class. The year group is divided into four groups of approximately 40 students. The classes are taught in English by native teachers of English, mainly from the UK and the US and take place once a week for ninety minutes. As the course

title indicates the aim of the Speech and Communication courses is to encourage students to become confident in speaking and interacting in the L2 target of English in order to acquire communicative competence.

In July 2016 at the end of the first semester, 40 university students in the Speech and Communication I and 38 students in the Speech and Communication II classes were given the task of making oral presentations in English. Each group of 3-4 students made a presentation on a cultural topic related to British or American culture, the topic was chosen by each group. The oral presentations were for 10 minutes each, using a PowerPoint slide show made by the students, followed by approximately 3 minutes for reflection (to generate questions) and 5 minutes for questions and answers related to the presentation. The groups presented consecutively over a 3 week period, having prepared for the previous 3 weeks both in class and independently. The presentations had to include the following:

- a). Evidence of research and understanding through visual images and key words explained in easy-to-understand English.
- b). Evidence of original research through a survey devised and conducted by the students consisting of questions about their topic. This was aimed at the students' peer-group in the class. The results were shown by pie-charts, graphs or diagrams. The questions which had been asked were also included.
- c). A 5 minute Q & A (question and answer) session from the students listening to the presentation. The questions generated during this time were written down by the students on paper and print-outs of the slide-shows were submitted, and are used by the author as the basis for this study.

This was repeated 5 months later in December 2016, when the same students made presentations at the end of the second semester. The task was the same as previously outlined but the Speech and Communication II group could choose from either a British or American cultural topic or from another English-speaking country, as the students had chosen their seminar group for the following year by this time. In both of the Speech and Communication I and II groups the topic chosen had to be different to that presented in the first semester.

Findings

There has been a lot of research on question-types including the standard taxonomy by Bloom (1956) and categorization of questions into those checking information and genuinely seeking it by Nunan (1990). Pienemann and Johnson (1986) developed a model of the stages of question formation and more recent study by Mackey et al (1999, 2007), has sought to elicit questions through conversational interaction or task-based activity to develop question formation.

A. Both referential questions which genuinely seek information and display questions which seek to confirm information already known to the questioner, were naturally generated from the presentations. In preparing the student-surveys yes-no questions, that require a **yes-no** answer only were specifically eliminated by students so as to gather more information from the answers received. **Rhetorical** questions (which are display questions), do not require an answer as the questioner already knows it. Rhetorical questions are often used for structuring a presentation and were used by students in their PowerPoint presentations. This study focuses on the question-forms generated during the interactive question-and-answer

session after the presentations, as shown in Table 1 below.

Question-forms	Definition
Wh-questions	begin with the words which, what, when, why, where, who and how, and that indicate the kind of information wanted
Do-questions	begin with do/have
Choice questions	require a choice from several alternatives given
Tag questions	short questions which are attached to the end of a sentence and which encourage interaction
Indirect questions	use polite forms such as modal verbs, or reported forms

Table 1. Types of questions generated during the presentations

B. Table 2 shows the findings from the first set of presentations that took place in July 2016.

These questions were learner-to-learner, from the class audience to the student groups after presentations. Students were asked to listen carefully to each presentation and were given a short time to think about and write down some questions before being invited by the group to ask questions. Usually there was time for 3-5 questions after each presentation.

Question-forms	Wh	Do	Choice	Tag	Indirect
Speech and Communication I	172	29	16	8	-
Speech and Communication II	142	30	10	4	-

Table 2. Generated question-forms in each group (July 2016)

Both the Speech and Communication I and II groups mainly generated wh-questions, and questions starting with do or have. Choice questions were also generated as well as some tag-questions. But there was no use of indirect questions using polite or reported forms. The most popular question which was generated 6 times was 'Why did you choose this topic?'. More questions were generated by students in Speech and Communication I than by those in Speech and Communication II. The average length of the question was 6 words. The students could see the relevance of the task, were keen to interact and tried to develop the range of question-forms. However this was the first time to carry out such a task in front of the whole class and some students were initially inhibited about asking questions in front of their peer-group, even though they had practiced the Think-Pair Share (TPS)⁶ technique in previous classes.

i. Examples of questions generated in response to the Speech and Communication I presentations are as follows: 'What is the different between football and soccer?', 'Which sport is the most popular in England?', 'What is your favourite character in this tale?', 'Why was Peter Rabbit's father killed?', 'What is your favourite festival?', 'Which do you prefer, British festival or Japanese festival?', 'Have you watched the film you introduce?', 'Have you ever read these literature in English?', 'Which do British like pancake or scone and what is difference?', 'What kind of music do you like?', 'Which do you like book or movie?', 'Who is your favourite actor or actress?', 'How often do you eat pancakes?', 'Which English

⁶ Lyman (1981) devised the Think-Pair-Share (TPS) technique, which is a collaborative learning strategy which gives students time to consider a task on their own and then share it with a partner in the target second language. The reflective time that this gives to the student is of great benefit in communicative task-based language activity.

children's literature do you like?', 'Which British brand do you like best?'

ii. Examples of questions generated in response to the Speech and Communication II presentations are as follows: 'What kind of comedy do you like, alternative comedy, black comedy, musical comedy or character comedy?', 'What works of Shakespeare do you like?', 'Have you ever seen his works in a theatre?', 'Do you often watch BBC?', 'What TV programs do you like?', 'Which festivals do you want to join?','Around how many people will participate in that festival?', 'Do you like British fashion?', 'How many times the British drink tea during a day?', 'Which do you like more, British or French tea?', 'Which do you like better, drinking tea or coffee?', 'How many nursery rhymes can you sing?', 'Which nursery rhymes do you like the best?', 'If you have much time, what kind of National Heritage do you want to visit?', 'What do you think about how the Stonehenge was made?'

C. Table 3 below shows the findings from the second set of presentations that took place in December 2016, five months after the first set of presentations. The questions were also learner-to-learner, from the class audience to the student groups after each presentation and the format was as outlined above.

Question-forms	Wh	Do	Choice	Tag	Indirect
Speech and Communication I	185	13	14	15	1
Speech and Communication II	147	15	16	8	3

Table 3. Generated question-forms in each group (December 2016)

This time too both the Speech and Communication I and II groups mainly generated wh-questions, group I generated more in this category than previously, whereas group II generated about the same number as before. Both groups generated less questions beginning with do/have at the beginning of the question, which is of interest. Speech and Communication II generated more choice questions than previously and both groups generated more complex question-forms such as tag questions and indirect questions. The average word count of the questions was 7, but the maximum was 13. The students could see the relevance of the task, were more proactive than five months earlier and tried to develop both question length and the range of question-forms.

i. Examples of questions generated in response to the Speech and Communication I presentations are as follows: 'Which story written by Shakespeare have you read?', 'What's your favourite character in Peter Pan?', 'Which one is harder to write, comedy or tragedy?', 'Which British tv programmes do you like?', 'What do you usually eat at Christmas?', 'Which do you want to eat cakes or puddings on Christmas Day?', 'What's the difference between a commercial and an advertisement?', 'Which airline do you use if you go to London?', 'Which season do you want to go to London?', 'What does the red dragon on the flag of Wales mean?', 'In Britain do British students have to learn the second language?', 'What languages do the British students study in junior high school?', 'Which NHK animation did you watch when you were child?', 'What kind of world currency have you ever used?', 'Which currency is the most circulated do you think?'

ii. Examples of questions generated in response to the Speech and

Communication II presentations are as follows: 'What kind of American movie do you like?', 'Which is the most unpopular national park?', 'What do you want to do on Thanksgiving Day in the US?', 'Have you ever been to Melbourne?', 'What do you think about the difference between universities in Britain and those in Japan?', 'How many students are there in Oxford University?', 'What university is the most popular in the US?', 'Which university in the US do you want to go to?', 'What's the difference between Japanese and American junk food?', 'Which do you like better, Japanese commercials or American ones?', 'Would you like to spend the Christmas in the UK?', 'I'm going to be alone on Christmas. Could you give me some advice to spend pleasantly?', 'What should we do not to eat too much junk food?' 'You often said junk food is not healthy. But are you going not to eat junk food?'. Both Speech and Communication I and II groups were proactive in asking questions in response to the presentations made by their class-mates by the second set of presentations. The interactive nature of the task seemed to help the students to generate questions and to be more confident in trying more complex question-forms.

Conclusion

As stated above, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan aims to increase the number of English-medium instructed (EMI) courses in higher education institutions to promote the internationalisation and globalisation of Japanese university education. Both MEXT and companies in Japan expect university graduates to have sufficient practical skills in English to contribute as global citizens.

This study considered whether the generation of question-forms in L2 oral presentations in an English Language Speech and Communication university course can be effective as a way of developing communicative

competence. To make an L2 oral presentation in a group requires interaction and some sort of reflection and questioning at each stage of preparation which develops skills of enquiry and independent thinking. The repeated task of giving presentations in class in L2 after a five month period gave the participants the opportunity to practice the skills required and become accustomed to generating questions during the question and answer session. The findings have shown that some progress was made and students became more competent at generating a range of question-forms in interaction in the target language over a period of time.

There are also several issues that need consideration in this context. Providing such language learning environments where the student is able to formulate questions independently in L2 necessitates careful consideration. Firstly the Speech and Communication I and II groups involved in this study consist of both intermediate and upper intermediate level students, however there is a wide range in that band and there are also a smaller number of advanced and pre-intermediate students who require more specific challenge and support. Secondly the class time for this English-taught course is limited to 90 minutes per week, which might have a less effective outcome in competency in the target language.

This study, although based on a small group of 78 students, does show that referential questions can be generated if there is genuine interest in the topic and peer interaction in L2 is the norm in class activity. Providing real-life language learning environments is key to motivating students to develop confidence in practical English skills and to perceive its relevance to their future. In turn this will contribute to the education of Japanese university students in having a global outlook.

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