Conversation Recording: Practice Derived from Theory and Context

Dale Ward
Graeme Todd

Overview

This paper describes the background, philosophy and procedure of a class activity in which students produce paper records of group conversations. This raises learners' awareness of how "active" they were as speakers as they have a visual record of how many times they spoke, the number of questions they asked and how often they used their native language. Many students find knowing their conversation is being recorded to be a motivating factor. This paper also describes how the activity conforms to current Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology and - broadly speaking - fits into a postmodern educational philosophy.

Background

Japan's landmark national curriculum *The Course of Study* (1989) was a milestone on the way toward Japanese universities placing a greater emphasis on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology. Reflecting the demands of the new educational climate, Kansai University's Institute of Foreign Language Education and Research was established in April 2000. In its main English language course - known as the Communication 1 program - instructors are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching ten classes per week across the various faculties at the university.

The overall goal of the course is to develop communication skills in English, and by the end of the program students are expected to be able to "hold a five to ten minute conversation in English about their daily lives using natural English discourse patterns" (Institute of Foreign Language Education and Research, Teacher's Handbook, 2006, p. 14). Class admission is limited to first-year students, with on average 25-30 students per class. Students taking the Communication 1

course range from false beginners to low-intermediate with differing levels of interest and motivation for studying English.

Philosophy

Given these conditions, instructors are faced with the task of deciding how to implement a communicative English course which can best serve the needs of these multi-level classes. The connection between teaching philosophy and teaching procedure thus becomes a central one here, since as language instructors we must have a clear view on how various aspects of teaching methodology, research and pedagogical theories relate to classroom practice (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

There is a crucial difference between "a philosophy of language teaching at the level of theory and principles and the procedures which can be derived from them" (Hadley, 2001, p.91). If we accept this fundamental differentiation, important questions arise: How is a pedagogical approach to be realized in a teaching method? What effect does it have on the specific roles of teacher and learner? What teaching materials and teaching styles are appropriate to specific teaching contexts?

With Communicative Language Teaching based on the philosophy that learners create meaning rather than concentrate on grammatical accuracy or native-like pronunciation, our own communicative method is characterized by interactive pair and group work "in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for communicating" (Larsen-Freeman, p.130), negotiation and cooperation among learners, emphasis on fluency over accuracy, and confidence building. Interaction, "an integrated intellectual, and linguistic, social and cultural practice" (New Basics Project, 2001, p.7), is the central philosophy, and communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), rather than linguistic accuracy, the cornerstone of this approach.

As we are dealing with students of mixed abilities, by grouping/pairing them with more motivated peers, we hope to create conditions in which learners can have their interest in English "revitalized" (Blight, 2002), and where the lower learners may also benefit from positive role models among their peers. Recognizing "the growing importance of small groups, networking and partnerships" (Unesco, 1996), we also wish each class to operate "as a significant learning community" (New Basics Project, 2001, p.1), which will, as far as possible, remain open and

accessible to all learners.

The communicative tasks which we set contain few example phrases or language models since, after six years of High-school English the vast majority of our students have a passive knowledge of basic functional language and possess "a certain uniformity in their needs" (Kurzweil et al, p. 33). Although this egalitarianism has meant that most Japanese university students generally cluster "around the mean in English ability" (Nevara, 2003), it has also meant that individual students progressing at different speeds have become marginalized. There is therefore almost no formal language input during the course, save a smattering of key phrases and the instructor's oral instructions during class activities. Our course book is almost entirely composed of activities arising from the same teaching philosophy - one which we feel affects most if not all stakeholders in a positive way.

Wishing to avoid 'pitching' our materials at students clustered in the middle, or stranded at opposite ends of the scale, our methodology necessarily has to appeal to learners with a variety of abilities. We therefore need to find a way of keeping students with different levels and/or relatively low motivation on task (i.e. maintaining a conversation in English) by activating what English they already possess. We aim to encourage output in its 'purest' form, unencumbered by language policing or unnecessary anxiety. This is something most students on the Communication 1 course are capable of, given the right environment and motivation.

Considering our classroom context, in terms of its use of self-reference, self-reflexiveness, language learning as social, cultural, emotional and subject to affective and social filters, our methodology takes on a distinctly postmodern tone. There's no overarching modernist "one size fits all" theme which attempts to place learning into "a straitjacket of uniform provision or standardized curricula" (Finch, 2004). Rather, education in the postmodern focuses on the local and unique, "marked both by a general decentering and a…loosening of boundaries" (Finch, 2004). Methodology is thus derived from context: Who are our students? What are their specific language needs? How can we realize their diverse goals through our approach?

Other significant contextual factors include the reality that many Japanese students consider their university days as a social event rather than an academic experience (Ellington, 2005). Thus we are reflecting the social aspect of university life in a different linguistic context. Within the confines of a weekly 90-minute class, our lessons should "involve topics of interest to learners in

that age group" (New Basics Project, 2001, p. 7), since generally the students themselves will be brainstorming and selecting those topics. This, we feel, locates teaching and learning "within contexts which (are) as authentic as possible" (Pratt, p. 45). As White stresses, knowledge is a product of "the activity, context and culture in which it is developed" (White, 2006, p.2). This means that learning "is situated in the context in which it is taught and⋯in the activity in which the learner is engaged" (White, 2006, p.2).

Procedure: Conversation Recording

Now that we have outlined our background philosophy, how does it work in practice? One method particularly effective in this context is Conversation Recording. Graeme Todd has designed this group-based speaking/discussion activity in which students think of topics of particular interest to them and then write their own discussion question for each topic.

The teacher explains that in this class students will participate in group conversations which will be recorded in their textbooks. Each time the student speaks, a mark should be made by his or her name on the record sheet.

0 = spoke a sentence or more in English
? = asked a question in English
! = made an English exclamation or spoke one or two words
J = spoke in Japanese

Thus by the end of each conversation a record will exist of which students were active in the conversation, and whether they asked questions, made short remarks, took longer turns, or spoke in Japanese. After the conversation, a typical conversation record will appear as follows:

Name: Je	Name: Ayumi
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0	**0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0**
? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?	**? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?**
! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !	**! ! ! ! ! !**
J	**J**

Conversation Recording: Practice Derived from Theory and Context（Ward, Todd）

Name: Atsuko	Name: Yoshika
0 0	**0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0**
? ? ?	**? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?**
! ! ! ! !	**! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !**
J J J J J J	**J J**

The teacher divides students into groups. Ideally there should be five students per group. Four students will be active participants in the conversation and the fifth students will be making the record. The students take turns at being the record keeper. The teacher stresses that the recording must be strict and accurate.

The conversations will be timed. About three minutes per conversation is fine, but the length can be varied according to the ability of the students.

Another useful technique is for each group to use a 'conversation ball'. The ball, or other suitable item, is placed on the table in the middle of the group. If a student wishes to speak, the ball must be picked up and held. When the person has finished speaking he or she replaces the ball in the center of the table. The ball should not be passed to another speaker since the onus should be on each person in the group to make a positive decision to speak by picking the ball up. This serves as a useful motivational technique, since when the ball is sitting on the table everyone is well aware that the conversation has come to a standstill.

When groups have been arranged, the teacher starts the first conversation by announcing a topic and starter question to the whole class.

For example:

"The topic is lunch. Where do you usually eat lunch and who with?"
"The topic is last night. What did you do last night?"

After the time is up, the teacher asks the students to look at the record and see how active they were in the conversation. The teacher repeats this process up to four times in order that every student is given the chance to record a conversation.

The teacher now asks the students to think of some conversation starter topics and starter questions and to write them in their workbooks. It is explained that "wh" starter questions are much more effective in starting conversations because they can't be answered with a simple yes or no.

Topic	Starter Question
Holidays	What are you planning to do this summer holiday?
Learning English	What are the most difficult aspects of learning English for you?

Groups now work independently using their own topics to start the conversations. Students are again encouraged to examine the record sheet after each conversation in order to view their own contribution.

To add variety, groups can be mixed in order to give the students a chance to work with different classmates. Alternatively, the time limit can be varied. For example, keep adding 30 seconds and challenge the students to keep the conversations going for longer. The teacher might also introduce some content (articles, pictures, video, music) to discuss, or use the method later in term during group discussions on various topics, or even as an analytical tool, for instance in testing or querying students as to why their conversations using the method were so much more effective and what processes influenced their ability.

Before and After

Before the method was fully introduced to our classes, some informal action research was carried out. Classes were organized into groups of four, then given a pep talk about trying their best, keeping the conversation going and only speaking English. One party of students was selected as an informal 'control' group. Students made up their own discussion questions, but the recording method itself was not yet introduced. When the discussion began, students tended to chat mainly in Japanese with a few half-hearted attempts, usually quickly abandoned, at English.

With the same class the instructor then introduced the conversation recording handouts, explained the technique and started the activity again. The difference was immediate and

remarkable: during the next five minutes the amount of Japanese spoken reduced dramatically and 95% of the conversation was suddenly conducted in English. Students had proved - both to their instructor and, more importantly, themselves - they could do it.

We have identified several reasons for the efficacy of this approach:

1. Students are acutely aware that there is a record of their speaking which can be checked. This bears some similarity to the psychology motivating the vast majority of students to do a decent job in free-writing activities: keeping a record of the activity creates a correspondingly greater motivation to perform. Since at the end of most classroom English conversations there is no physical evidence of what was or wasn't said, there is less motivation to speak. The conversation recording changes this set of conditions and satisfies our criteria of keeping learners with a range of abilities and motivation on task.

2. The technique incorporates a fun, mildly competitive game-like element into the conversation which reduces anxiety and satisfies our desire for activities to remain open and accessible to all learners. Students do not want a 'J' next to their name, and work to collect 'O's and '!'s to 'win' and to impress their teacher and friends.

3. Student awareness of what they're actually saying, and of how much or little language production is taking place is visibly heightened. In general, most students are not conscious of how little English, and how much Japanese, they really speak during most conversation activities.

4. In terms of monitoring, students' use of a record sheet makes it easy for the instructor to see what is - or isn't - going on in the classroom. Students are also made aware when nothing is happening because nothing is being recorded. Since part of the criteria mentioned above is to remove the focus from the instructor as the provider of language we are thereby encouraging students to take responsibility for their own English production.

5. Since students select and are able to control the topics discussed, we have satisfied our desire to locate teaching and learning in as authentic a context as possible. In addition, affective factors such as motivation and anxiety are reduced and students' involvement and self-confidence increase. This was of no great surprise to us since we firmly support Krashen's view (1982) that language acquisition can only occur when authentic comprehensible input is understood in a

relaxed and non-threatening classroom environment, and especially through the use of "small groups…and partnerships" (Unesco, 1996).

6. Since students of all abilities can perform this task, it meets our criterium as an integrated practice which encourages communicative competence. Further, it possesses its own 'internal logic', which almost compels students to use the target language in an enjoyable, stress-free environment.

Student response

End-of-term questionnaires completed by students suggest that they not only enjoyed these kinds of 'open' activities, but felt they had produced more English as a result, and were more likely to continue studying English in the future. The fact that our interpretation of the curriculum – which took place very much in the spirit of "situated learning" (White, 2006) - had engaged learners "in forms of pragmatic social action" (New Basics Project, 2001, p.5) was also reflected in a general perception among students that they had meaningfully interacted with peers, discussed real-world topics, and, in a "spirit of empathy" (Unesco, 1996), formed important new relationships with classmates to a degree unseen in their other courses. This bears out White's assertion that "social interaction is…a critical component of situated learning" (White, 2006, p.2). Not only that, the ability of the teacher to create a meaningful context and facilitate successful language learning conditions determines whether his method is successful or not (Richards & Rogers, p. 29).

There were, of course, a few learners who had problems adjusting to this new method of language learning. As Evans says, "Change creates confusion and conflict" (Evans, 2006, p. 32), but even students who seemed initially skeptical toward such "unaccustomed forms of action" (Unesco, 1996), had shown great enthusiasm for the methodology by the end of the course.

Conclusion

The conversation recording activity described above is but one example of a task which meets the criteria of the course and the context in which it is taught. It strives to ensure that a classroom practice is derived from an instructor's knowledge of teaching methodology, research and pedagogical theories. It also insists that teaching take its direction "from the learner's

knowledge, not the teacher's" (Pratt, 1998, p. 48), since a key aspect of the communicative method is that practitioners tune in to the needs of their learners through adopting "a flexible, functionally compatible and contextually sensitive approach" (Nunan, 2005). This method benefits all stakeholders: learners are offered lessons which are rooted in sound educational theory, teachers can feel confident they are practicing more effective pedagogy, and administrators can see - by virtue of positive student feedback - that teachers are implementing effective methodology.

References

Aspinall, R. (2005). Professionalism, Administration and Leadership in Education, *PALE NEWS*, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2005, Retrieved January 18th, 2006 from: http://www.debito.org/PALE/

Blight, R. (2002). Developmental reform stages in the Japanese national university curriculum: Curriculum Innovation, Testing and Evaluation: Proceedings of the 1st Annual JALT Pan-SIG Conference. May 11-12, 2002. Kyoto Institute of Technology, Kyoto, Japan.

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics, 1*(1), 1-47.

Ellington, L. (2005). Japanese Education, *Japan Digest*, September 2005. Retrieved January 18th, 2007 from: http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/digest5.html

Finch, A.E. (2004). Postmodernism in TEFL: An Overview: The future of task-based teaching. Retrieved September 15th, 2007 from: http://72.14.235.104/search?q=cache:Sk4G5KfpxgsJ:www.tblt.org/download/ finch_handout.doc+ (Adapted+from+Edwards+%26+Usher, +1994, +pp. +211-212) &hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3

Gee, J.P., Hull, G. & Lankshear, C. (1996). Alignments: education and the new capitalism. Chapter 3 in *The new work order: behind the language of the new capitalism,* Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, pp. 49-72.

Hadley, A.O. (2001). *Teaching Language in Context*. Heinle & Heinle, Boston.

Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Prime Minister's Office (n.d.) *Kozo kaikaku tokubetsukuiki suishin honbu*. [Center for Promoting Special Zones for Structural Reform.] Retrieved August 9th, 2007 from http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/kouzou2/ hourei/021211/021211kuiki.html

Kansai University (2006). Institute of Foreign Language Education and Research, Teacher's Handbook, April, 2006 – March 2007.

Krashen, S. (1982) Second Language Acquisition Theory. In *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*, Prentice Hall International.

Kurzweil, J., Hellman, C., Russ, R., Cowen, C., Calman, R., and Doodigian, J. (2002). Syllabus designed by consensus, *Kansai University Forum for Foreign Language education,* March 2002, Institute of Foreign Language and Research, Suita, Osaka, Japan.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nevara, J. (2003) Teaching English in Japan to Chinese Students, *Asian EFL Journal,* September, 2003. Retrieved June 18th, 2007 from:http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/sept_03_sub1.php

New Basics Project (2001). *New Basics: The Why What How and When of Rich Tasks*. Queensland

Department of Education. Retrieved January 23rd, 2007 from: http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/ newbasics/pdfs/richtasksbklet.pdf

Nunan, D. (2005). Important tasks of English education; Asia-wide and beyond, *Asian EFL Journal,* Volume 7, Issue 3, September 2005. Retrieved July 29th, 2007 from: http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/ September_05_dn.php

Pratt, D & Associates. ('1998). 'Alternative frames of understanding', ch. 3 in *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education,* Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar, Florida, pp. 33-53.

Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T.S. (2001). The nature of approaches and methods in language teaching. In *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Taguchi, N. & Naganuma, N. (2006). Transition from learning English to Learning in English: Students' Perceived Adjustment Difficulties in an English-Medium University in Japan. *Asian EFL Journal,* Volume 8. Issue 4, December 2006.

Unesco (1996). The report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st century (1996). Retrieved January 23rd, 2006 from: http://www.unesco.org/delors/

White, S. (2006). Student-teachers' experiences of situated learning within the primary school classroom. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*, 3(2), 1-11, November, 2006.