

Communicative Activities for Large Classes: Implementing communicative activities in oral communication classes for non-English majors in Japanese universities

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Abstract

This article reports on an attempt to include communicative activities in oral communication classes for first year non-English major university students. It briefly examines why communicative activities are particularly important in university oral communication classes in Japan and outlines some of the more successful activities the author has used. It also addresses some of the pitfalls that may be encountered when trying to implement a communicative activity and ways to overcome these difficulties.

Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) became popular in the 1970s as a response to the backlash against the audio-lingual method that had been widely used in EFL classrooms. The features of CLT were summarised by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) and included,

Meaning is paramount.

Dialogs, if used, center around communicative functions and are not normally memorized.

Language learning is learning to communicate.

Effective communication is sought.

Communicative competence is the desired goal.

When students reach the first year of university in Japan, they have generally had six years of English education. The predominant teaching method used in Japanese secondary schools is the grammar-translation method and few students have had teachers who use CLT methods. The above features are therefore absent in most secondary school English classes. Instead there is a focus on accuracy and structure; language learning is the learning of sets of rules; dialogs, if used, are simply memorised; there is virtually no communication in English in the class; and the desired goal is to pass exams. The result is many students who cannot hold even a simple conversation in English. To counteract the predominance of the grammar-translation method used in secondary schools, CLT methods can be used successfully at college level, and can have

a positive impact on both students' ability to hold conversations in English, and their attitude towards English. This author has used CLT methods with students who had a relatively low English level although the university itself is a relatively high level (national) university. The students were majoring in science, biology and law, and most of them were not interested in English. CLT methods were successful in increasing ability to hold conversations, increasing motivation levels and improving attitudes towards English.

Communicative activities

Nunan (1991) lists five basic characteristics of CLT:

- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on the language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

These, combined with the above features of CLT outlined by Finocchiaro and Brumfit, can give teachers guidelines on which to base activities. The following are some of the CLT activities that this author has used successfully with non-English major students. After a description of each activity there is a brief outline of how the activity relates to CLT. Richards (2006) distinguishes between meaningful and communicative activities, the main difference being that in a meaningful activity the language produced by the students is predictable even though it has meaning. It could be argued that some of the activities described below are meaningful rather than communicative. The crossword activity for example gives students a list of words and has the students define or explain the words. This could be considered fairly predictable. However, in practice, the language produced by the students is not predictable. In describing the word "elephant" for example, students may say, "It's a big gray animal with a long nose" or they may say "We can ride this animal if we go to Thailand." or they may say, "It's the animal we studied in biology class this morning," or something else entirely. For this reason - the variety, and therefore unpredictability, of the language produced by the students - the activities below can all be considered communicative according to Richards' criteria.

Half Crosswords

Students are put into groups of four. The four is further divided into two pairs. Each pair

receives a half completed crossword. The two halves make up a complete crossword. There are no written clues. The two pairs take turns explaining their words, and listening to the other pair's explanations, thereby completing the crossword.

This activity places importance on effective communication as students must somehow explain to their partner-pair what the word is without using Japanese or the word itself. It is also helping to increase communicative competence as it practises the strategy of talking around words when the specific English word is unknown.

Jigsaw Reading

Students are in pairs to start with but later will form groups of four and then different groups of four, so the teacher needs to mentally or graphically divide the students into groups of eight. Each pair is given a piece of English to read. Each pair of the group of eight has a different passage, so there are a total of four different passages. The pair reads their passage together, checks any unknown words and tries to remember the main points (not memorise the passage). Each pair then turns their paper face down and tries to recall in English with their partner the main points. They are allowed to check their paper once more before all the papers are collected by the teacher. The pairs are put into groups of four. Each pair tells their new partner-pair about what they read. If some groups finish quickly they should try to recall their partner-pair's information. The pairs then form a new group of four with a new partner-pair. The new group of four now knows a total of four pieces of information. Each pair tells their new partner-pair their own information plus the information of their previous partner-pair. The logistics are tricky but worth the time taken to set up the activity.

This activity places importance on meaning as each pair must convey the main meaning of the passage they read. Authentic texts can be used as the passages to be read, or can be slightly adapted according to the level of the class. Effective communication is sought as the students try to explain the information that they have read.

Moving partners

Start the activity in pairs. Students are given a target time, e.g. 3 minutes in which to talk about the given topic. They must continue talking until the 3 minutes is over. Assign students as A or B within pairs. Ask all the A students to stand and move one place so everyone has a new partner. Increase the time to 4 minutes and repeat the activity. Continue this four or five times or

even more, each time increasing by one minute or increasing every other time by one minute. Higher levels can have longer times, and for all levels, as the weeks go by, the starting time can gradually increase.

This activity assumes that learning will take place by interacting in the target language. As the students talk about the topic for increasing lengths of time and interact with different people, they will get fresh ideas for questions they can ask and will pick up new vocabulary from their different partners. Students' own personal experiences are important elements as the students are often talking about themselves or talking about the topic with relevance to themselves. They are exchanging real information and are usually genuinely interested in what their partner is telling them.

Role Plays

Practise functional situation such as ordering in a restaurant, booking a hotel room, and visiting a doctor by using role plays. In pairs, assign roles and allow some time to think about what they will need to say. A couple of minutes is sufficient. This should be thinking time not writing time. Have them act out the role play, changing roles when finished. The teacher should monitor carefully, noting where problems have occurred and where new language is needed by the students. Write this up on the board and point it out to the students. Change partners and practise again. Repeat once more if time allows.

This activity allows students to draw on their personal experience of these situations in their own country. It focuses on meaning and effective communication as the students must just achieve their goal without focusing on accuracy. There is a dialogue but it is not memorised and the function is the focus. The students can see how this would be useful outside the classroom, both when visiting another country, and maybe even more so within Japan as many of our students have part-time jobs in cafes, restaurants and shops, and may occasionally have to serve non-Japanese speakers.

Avoiding pitfalls

There are various pitfalls that can ruin a lesson using communicative activities. It is important for teachers to anticipate these problems, and to plan their lessons so that these pitfalls can be avoided. Below are some common pitfalls and simple ways to avoid them.

The tendency to use the native language

The main pitfall of trying to use communicative activities in monolingual classrooms is that the students will often revert to their native language, especially at the point when they become genuinely interested in what they are talking about. The best way to get around this is to have a “No Japanese “ rule which is used from the first day and which is strictly (but kindly) enforced. If the teacher thinks some parts of the lesson absolutely need to be in the native language then these should be the special parts and the “No Japanese” should be the default setting.

The tendency to show their friend any information they have

This can be a problem when doing an activity like jigsaw reading or half crosswords if the students work individually. They may want to show their friend to compare their passages and this defeats the purpose of the activity. This can be overcome by having pairs rather than individuals as the starting unit. Having a pair as the starting unit has several advantages. They can help each other understand the original vocabulary or information, meaning that this part of the lesson also becomes communicative, instead of having students individually checking their dictionaries. They won't show their information or half crossword to anyone else as it becomes their secret property. They can practise (in jigsaw reading) retelling the information with their partner before having to retell it for real to a new partner-pair.

The tendency to not talk

In the Moving Partners activity when students have to talk for a given amount of time, some students may simply stop speaking after one minute and think that is adequate. Others open up their dictionary as soon as they don't know a word and have their head in their dictionary for the next minute or more. Others may have problems continuing the conversation due to a lack of conversation skills even in their native language. Some students may have a fear of making a mistake which leaves them tongue-tied. Five rules are needed here. These are No Silence, No Dictionaries, Ask Follow-up Questions, Give Long Answers and Mistakes are Okay. The first two rules are self-explanatory. Teachers may want dictionaries used at some points but during the actual speaking activity (not the preparation) this rule should be strictly enforced. Follow-up questions and long answers will need practising before these rules can be introduced. Follow-up questions can be introduced easily with a Have you ever...? activity. After students get a “yes” answer from their partner they must ask three follow-up questions. Long answers can be introduced easily in a Do you like . . . ? activity. Students can't answer with a simple yes or no, but must add to their answer, for example, Do you like dogs? Yes, I used to have a dog when I

was a child but now I don't have one because my landlord doesn't allow dogs, and I don't have time to take care of a dog. Once these two techniques have been practiced in class, the rules can be added to the other class rules. The Mistakes are Okay rule helps students to understand that when communicating in English, it is acceptable to not speak perfect English and to make some mistakes.

The tendency to become cliquy

Young adults are likely to become cliquy and to not want to speak to certain members of the class. This can be overcome to some extent by having partner-changing or seat-changing arrangements as a regular part of the class right from the first lesson. The more partners they have in the first couple of lessons the better the class atmosphere will be throughout the course. Students often comment that they could make a lot of friends in English class because of having to speak with lots of different people on a regular basis. Changing partners regularly also means that students can practice talking on the same topic several times without it becoming boring. Between partners the students can be given the opportunity to ask questions of the teacher or check their dictionaries for unknown words. They can of course ask questions to the teacher during their conversation as well if necessary.

Class Participation Grades

In classes of up to about 40 students it is possible to give class participation scores to all students for every lesson. These scores are added up at the end of the course and form one component of the course grade. Doing this will make students see the importance of speaking English in class for their grade and will give the rules mentioned above some "bite", i.e. if they break the rules their class participation score will suffer. This author had the class participation scores add up to a possible total of 50 and formed 50% of the overall grade - the remaining 50% coming from a speaking exam. To make time for giving these grades, for the final 20 minutes of class, the students can write a dialogue or a short passage about the lesson topic. This helps to consolidate what they have learned, forms a basis for revision for the speaking test, and gives the teacher enough time to call the students one by one, and give them their score. Scores out of five work well. If a student has followed all the class rules, they get five, and so on. It is relatively easy to see who the best students are in terms of making an effort to follow all the rules, who the average ones are and who are the ones who aren't really trying and they are given scores accordingly. If they don't get five, they are told how they can improve their score e.g. give longer answers, don't use Japanese, etc. Generosity with scores is more motivating for the

students. Basing class scores on effort rather than ability is also more motivating. The weaker students see that as long as they try hard they can get a high score and this will keep them motivated throughout the course. Ability can be taken into account in the exam by having a criterion such as “ability to talk easily about the topic” to ensure that the most able students are getting the grades they deserve. It would be unfair, this author believes, to base the speaking tests grades on accuracy after spending class time focusing on communication rather than accuracy. Making “ability to talk easily about the topic” will allow the more able students to get a higher grade, while still keeping the focus on communication and fluency.

Student feedback

An argument used sometimes against using CLT methods is that students don't like it, or students expect the teacher to stand at the front and teach them in a traditional way. Students may expect the teacher to stand at the front and teach them. They may also expect to be bored and expect to not learn anything, and to find the lesson pointless and of no value to them. This doesn't mean teachers have to meet these expectations. This author has had extremely positive feedback from the students about the class rules, the class scoring system and the types of activities. Many students mentioned that they looked forward to the lesson and that they were glad to be “forced” to speak English. Some students said they were shy but that they were glad that everyone had to speak English and that this made them less shy. A very rewarding moment for this author occurred when, in about the tenth lesson of the 15 lesson course, a new, rather difficult activity was being attempted for the first time. The students had been told the activity was quite difficult but not to worry and to do their best. The teacher said “Gambatte” - Japanese for “Do your best” or “Good luck”, having not used Japanese at all previously except occasionally on a one-to-one basis. About five of the students immediately shouted out, “No Japanese”.

Conclusion

Communicative activities can be used successfully with Japanese university students who may have had negative experiences of English, and who may not like English. Although there are many pitfalls to introducing communicative activities, these can be overcome through establishing class rules which are enforced by a class participation scoring system. This scoring system also serves to increase motivation even among weaker students.

References

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Biographical Statement

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