

Developing an English Speaking Course for Low Proficiency Japanese University Students

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Introduction

With the advent of globalization, success in the Japanese workplace often requires a good command of spoken English. In order to better prepare students to enter the workforce, Japanese universities have increased the number of compulsory oral communication classes needed to graduate. Despite this increase, few students acquire high levels of speaking proficiency. Factors such as reduced forms, underdeveloped conversation strategies, poor pronunciation, and a lack of confidence and motivation impede the learners' ability to converse competently. In this paper, I shall address these issues for the purpose of improving Japanese university students' English conversational ability.

To help maximize the effectiveness of oral communication classes taught in Japanese universities, teachers need to begin with an underlying theory for the process of speaking. This theory will then shape the instructional principles of the oral communication course. Derived from the instructional principles is the course rationale. The course rationale factors in the roles of the participants and their needs and the course aims and objectives. After specifying the course rationale, course content can be addressed. The content includes the skill areas covered and to what degree, the method of organization, and the sequencing of subject matter. Finally, five sample speaking activities designed for Japanese university students and based on the underlying theory, instructional principles, and course rationale will be demonstrated. Using the framework above, I shall describe how I would teach an oral communication class at a Japanese university.

Theory of Speaking

Many in the ESL/EFL field view spoken language as a means to "negotiate and achieve meaning in social contexts and so cannot be divorced from those contexts" (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002, p. 211). We speak in order to carry out certain social actions and "attune our language and the meanings we wish to exchange to our specific purposes for speaking in that context" (p. 211). This perspective has taken second language teaching beyond the sentence level and the study of grammatical forms. Burns and Seidlhofer (2002) contend that "this more contextualized perspective

represents a shift from what has been a prevailing model of spoken language in second language teaching—one that is essentially sentence and form-based—to one that takes text and function as a starting point” (p. 211). Learning to speak requires an understanding of “how, why, and when to communicate and [also the development of] complex skills for producing and managing interaction” (p. 211).

Cognitive theory provides a strong theoretical foundation upon which to base an oral communication class and to develop a curriculum that enhances students’ speaking abilities. Instructional approaches based on cognitive theory “have in common an understanding that learners construct knowledge by making connections between their prior knowledge and new information, and analyze new learning activities to determine the most effective approach to achieve learning goals” (Jones & Idol, as cited in Chamot, Dale, O’Malley, & Spanos, 1992). Learners must, therefore, “select from incoming information what they wish to understand or remember, relate it to their prior knowledge, store the selected information in memory, and use various procedures for remembering it when needed” (O’Malley & Chamot, as cited in Chamot, 1995).

Cognitive learning theories recognize three kinds of memory in information processing (Chamot, 1995). According to Chamot (1995), the information is initially assessed through auditory and/or visual receptors and enters the short-term or immediate memory, the capacity of which is extremely limited. By selectively perceiving aspects of the information in short-term memory, we are able to place some of this information into our working memories for further processing. While in the working memory, the information “needs to be manipulated in some way if it is to survive long enough for storage in and retrieval from long-term memory” (p. 16).

There are two types of long-term memory available for information storage: declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. “Declarative knowledge, which includes concepts, vocabulary, and images, is stored as related propositions and schematic networks. Procedural knowledge, which includes both physical and cognitive skills and strategies, is stored as production systems consisting of linked condition and action sequences” (p. 16). Declarative and procedural knowledge are interdependent but distinct. For instance, the act of listening, a procedural skill, “can be used to acquire new declarative knowledge” (p. 16).

Procedural knowledge is important because it underlies cognitive skills, which need repeated practice to become automatized. Automatized cognitive skills do not need to be consciously focused on in working memory, allowing one to devote attention to new information. Gagne, Yekovich, and Yekovich (as cited in Chamot, 1995), claim that it is desirable for these cognitive skills to become automated, while strategies should remain consciously controlled in order “to maintain awareness of different learning conditions and select the strategies most appropriate for specific tasks” (p. 16).

Thus from the point of view of cognitive theory, second language acquisition and subsequently speaking is the “building up of knowledge systems [through repeated practice] that can eventually be called automatically for speaking and understanding” (Lightbown & Spada, as cited in Kiyamazarslan, 2004).

Instructional Principles

From cognitive theory, I derive the instructional principle of teaching learning strategies. As Kasper and Kellerman (as cited in Rost, 2002) state, any expertly performed behavior involves planning and the use of appropriate strategies. Teachers should, therefore, identify, model, and practice the strategies associated with expert performance in order to improve language acquisition (Rost, 2002). Rost (2002) outlines the following principles to support the teaching of learning strategies:

1. Consistent use of learning strategies helps students learn more efficiently.
2. Language use strategies can enable students to handle tasks that may be more difficult than their current processing might allow. This ‘stretch’ of capacity can be instructive to learners, and may motivate them to learn more.
3. Learning strategies that are associated with successful learners can be demonstrated and modeled for less successful learners. (p. 112)

ESL/EFL students who have been taught learning strategies improve their speaking abilities. According to Cohen (1996), a group of students that received strategies-based instructional treatment within a regular ten-week language course outperformed a control group that had only the regular ten-week language course. The treatment group surpassed the control group on certain speaking tasks and was judged to have a better vocabulary. Cohen’s (1996) findings suggest that

explicitly describing, discussing, and reinforcing strategies in the classroom—and thus raising them to the level of conscious awareness—can have a direct payoff on student outcomes. If instructors systematically introduce and reinforce strategies that can help students speak the target language more effectively, their students may well improve their performance on speaking tasks. (p. 16)

A second instructional principle, autonomy, is closely associated with learning strategies. Oxford (2002) divides learning strategies into four categories: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social. For my purposes, I am most concerned with affective strategies and how they are interrelated with autonomy. These strategies help to promote a positive learning attitude and to increase motivation (Oxford, 2002). Encouraging student autonomy is one way to create this positive mind-set and to boost the drive to study.

Ushioda (as cited in Cohen & Dornyei, 2002, p. 175) states that “Autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners.” Research by Noels, Clement, and Pelletier (as cited in Cohen & Dornyei, 2002) has shown that teachers who are

‘autonomy-supporting’ and not ‘controlling’ increase student motivation. By encouraging autonomy, teachers increase student motivation and promote positive learning attitudes, which will spur language acquisition.

At the heart of autonomy is the concept of control. Teachers should encourage their students “to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 297). Benson (as cited in Rost, 2002, p. 165) states that autonomy involves the following hypotheses:

1. Autonomy in learning is natural and available to all.
2. Autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning.
3. Autonomy is exhibited to different degrees by different individuals in different situations.
4. Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and preparations.
5. The ways in which we organize teaching and learning exercise an important influence on the development of autonomy among our learners.

Furthermore, with a limited amount of time to spend with the students during the semester, autonomy becomes very important. Should the students strive for improved language acquisition, then much of the work will need to be done outside of class. Promoting autonomy encourages students to take control of the learning process and to study on their own.

Course Rationale

After establishing the instructional principles, I can address the course rationale. There are typically 20-25 freshmen and sophomore students in 90 minute speaking classes at Japanese universities. The proficiency level of the majority of students I teach is very low. The students take English classes as requirements, so their motivation to study tends to be low as well. Within a class, teachers may have beginner level Chinese students with little or no prior English experience. At the other extreme, there may be returnees with very high levels of proficiency. Since most students have low to very low English proficiency, their confidence and self-esteem tend to suffer.

With an idea of the number, the degree of motivation, and the proficiency levels of the students, I can analyze their needs. “In general terms, needs analysis...refers to the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group” (Brown, 1995, p. 35). I will concentrate my needs analysis first in terms of learning processes and then of linguistic content.

“The learning process position leans toward needs specified from a situation needs perspective; these tend to be more subjectively analyzed needs in the affective domain, such as motivation and self-esteem” (Brown, 1995, p. 41). My needs analysis of the students reflects the importance of increasing their confidence and their

motivation. The emphasis, therefore, is on creating enjoyable classes in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, thus providing the best opportunity for language acquisition.

Following the assessment of their affective needs, I will address linguistic content needs. According to Brown (1995), "The linguistic content position tends to favor needs analyzed objectively from a language needs perspective and spelled out in linguistic terms, whether they be phonemes, morphemes, grammatical structures, case rules, utterances, functions, notions, discourse markers, or whatever" (p. 41). I shall organize the linguistic content needs around functions, such as greetings, talking about interests, etc. The functions chosen will determine the vocabulary and grammar most helpful for completing the communication task.

An additional element of the course rationale is the overall aim of the course. Many students, particularly freshmen, may not have had exposure to native speaking (non-Japanese) English teachers. As a result, the main purpose of the course is for the students to become comfortable with native speaking instructors. Teachers are encouraged to pay special attention to the affective needs of their students. Classes should be enjoyable, motivating, and at a level to challenge but not overwhelm the students. Consequently, a key goal for all my classes will be to have fun and to encourage the students to do their best. By keeping the class enjoyable, I hope to pique their interest in English and to instill a sense of confidence that will promote further study at the university or on their own.

Course Content

Next, I shall turn my attention to the course content. Even though it is described as an oral communication class, I will include other macroskills to varying degrees. The proficiency level of most students is low to very low; so, they will need a lot of comprehensible listening input in addition to opportunities to speak. I anticipate that 40% of the class will consist of speaking activities, 30% of listening activities, 20% of grammar and vocabulary study, and the remaining 10% will focus on reading.

As stated earlier, the method of organization will be a functional syllabus. However, I want to give the students some control over the functions we cover. Some of the functions will come from the interests of the students. The class will brainstorm lists of typical student activities and choose the most popular ones, which I will then turn into functions to support my syllabus. I anticipate functions such as inviting friends to an izakaya, dating, and talking about interests to be typical examples that students may choose. Also, after the first day of class, I expect the students to fill-out an index card with their picture and biographical information, a portion of which includes the students' interests, hobbies, and likes, for homework. This source may provide additional information that can be used to create functions.

The functions chosen and university academic guidelines will determine the

sequence of the course content. This oral communication course consists of only 12 classes per semester. The students are allowed to miss as many as four classes, or more in special cases, without fear of failing. As a result, many students choose to attend the bare minimum number of classes needed in order to pass. Each class will consist of one function which can be completed even if the students failed to attend prior classes or plan on skipping subsequent ones. I realize that this arrangement is less than ideal, but the sporadic attendance makes achieving overall course continuity very difficult. By giving the students freedom to choose some of the course content, I hope to have classes that interest and motivate them, and increase the likelihood that they will attend.

Speaking Activities

The following five activities are designed to improve speaking proficiency in monologues and in multi-participant discussions, and are tied in with particular functions, such as introducing, giving directions, complimenting or complaining, comparing travel experiences, and opening and closing conversations. Within each activity, I encourage student autonomy, activate schemata, and balance accuracy and fluency.

On the first day of class, before any teaching activity, I make an effort to build rapport, create a comfortable learning environment, and increase motivation to speak. Angelo (as cited in Fleming, 2003, p. 2) writes that

The monumental analytical summary of twenty years of higher education research done by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identified several variables affecting the quality and quantity of learning in college. The number one explanatory variable is the quality of and quantity of student academic effort. Number two is usually students' interactions with other students about their academic work.

I want to focus on the second variable, students' interactions with other students, and also how the teacher can influence these relationships. Students will feel more comfortable speaking in pairs or groups if they first know one another's names. On the first day of class, we set out to learn the names of everyone in the class by means of a name game. While standing in a circle, each one of us learns the names of the three people standing on our right. This routine is repeated for the students standing to the left. The whole process begins again, but with additional names to learn. Finally, various students and I state the names of the students around us until we all learn everyone's name. Learning the students' names is the first step in building rapport (Wankat & Oreovicz, 1998).

Teachers are powerful models within their classrooms. "The teacher listening to student's [sic] stories or examples in a sensitive way can be a model as can learning

their names” (Fleming, 2003, p.3). Being attentive is particularly important in low proficiency classrooms because students are unlikely to understand every word I say, so how I convey my message becomes much more critical. Fleming also states that, “Teachers who model respectful silence while their students are speaking are making a positive contribution. Interrupting would produce a negative view” (2003, p. 3). A further benefit of respectful silence is to encourage student output. Increased student output should improve language acquisition. Teachers should encourage and foster student to student interest as well in order to build rapport.

After learning the names of their classmates, the first technique, an introductory speech, becomes more effective. LeBeau and Harrington’s (2002) *Getting Ready for Speech: A Beginners Guide to Public Speaking* provides excellent step-by-step guidelines for an introductory speech. LeBeau and Harrington not only present the content needed for introductory speeches, but also focus the learners’ attention on gestures, voice quality, and eye contact. To activate schema, LeBeau and Harrington supply three examples of self-introduction speeches for the students to listen to. Next, the students are given language support so that they may better organize their speeches. Then, the students begin their speech in groups of four. During round one, the first student walks to the front and sets his/her posture and hands, and then, in a loud voice, greets the other group members. The second student repeats the process, and this round continues until all the members have spoken. At the conclusion of round one, students begin round two “the same as round one, but this time [they] greet the audience and give [their] name” (Lebeau & Harrington, 2002, p. 9). New information is added gradually for each round. This built-in repetition allows for ample fluency practice. The introduction is performed in small groups to reduce speaker anxiety. Allowing the students to give and receive introductory information in a low stress environment should help promote positive student relationships. Most students are particularly weak nonverbally; hence, the importance of gestures, eye contact, and voice quality should be reinforced in subsequent classes.

In oral communication classes, teachers should emphasize the value of comprehensible pronunciation. Evidence indicates that if a nonnative speaker’s pronunciation slips below a certain threshold, then they will have oral communication problems, regardless of their control of grammar or vocabulary (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). A common technique to improve pronunciation in beginning students is with minimal pairs. Teachers usually present minimal pairs in two columns, and then ask the students to circle the word or words that they hear. While this may be an effective way to draw the students’ attention to a particular phoneme, it is not very meaningful and likely boring. Instead, I recommend using Greenfield’s (1992) street map. To activate schema, students, in pairs, describe how to get to their favorite restaurant or izakaya from the nearest train station. Next, I present language needed for giving directions and model the sounds of the street

names. Using Greenfield's street map, students ask for and give directions to locations on the map. Students will need to be aware of the slight differences in the sounds of the street names in order to make their directions understood. I feel that the function of asking for and giving directions is meaningful for learners. This activity is also done in pairs, which will encourage autonomy.

A third technique to improve oral communication skills is by incorporating gambits into student discussions. For beginning students, turn-taking is especially difficult to manage. However, by teaching a few gambits related to what was said, turn-taking skills improve. A dialogue between beginners often consists of question and answer utterances, and sounds like an interview. To help them sound more natural, I teach and require memorization of gambits like "Wow! That's great!", "Really?", and "That's too bad." These gambits may be written down on cards to help lower proficiency learners. The students are then free to use the gambits in a discussion in which they compliment or complain about a time spent on vacation. Upon receiving listener feedback in the form of a gambit, the speaker is to continue with his or her description of the vacation. Often times, low proficiency students are not able to expand beyond a few words or phrases in response to the listener's reaction. What I want the students to understand is the necessity of giving more description and of resuming their turn after a gambit is uttered. This strategy also instills the importance of actively listening when engaged in English conversation. These discussions take place in pairs or small groups, which have affective benefits and can increase student motivation (Brown, 2001).

Nearly all high school students in Japan go on an overnight field trip during their senior year. This trip is the impetus for a third teaching technique: a discussion of the visit and a focus on reduced forms. Brown (2001, p. 253) believes that "reductions pose significant difficulties, especially for classroom learners who may have initially been exposed to the full forms of the English language." Reductions not only make speaking more difficult, but also create listening comprehension challenges. Norris (1995) feels that students need to be able to recognize reduced forms of words in order to improve bottom-up listening skills. When forming sentences, we don't stress all of the words; this leads to reductions in unstressed syllables. Decoding these reduced sounds is particularly important for "learners (e.g. Japanese) whose native languages normally place an equal amount of stress on each syllable" (Norris, 1995, p. 47). Therefore, raising students' awareness of reduced forms will improve both their speaking and listening abilities.

The lesson begins with a listening activity to activate schema. The students listen as I describe a field trip in America. On their worksheets, they check boxes to show whether or not the details of a typical American trip are the same as or different than a usual trip in Japan. Following the listening activity, I ask the students which two words are most important in the following question, "Where did you go?" Once

they have correctly identified where and go, I explain that important words (content words) are said louder and longer than grammar words (function words). I then write the question as “Where’dja go?” I believe this written example reinforces the way in which native speakers produce reduced forms in questions. We then chorally repeat reduced question forms, such as What’dja eat?, How long’dja stay?, When’dja go?, etc. Finally, pairs complete a survey based on their experiences while on the trip. As the students complete the survey, I’m less concerned with whether or not the students use reduced forms (I state that both full and reduced forms are OK.), but hope that their listening comprehension develops, and, as a result, their speaking ability. I also remind the students that they should use some of the gambits previously taught. At the conclusion of the lesson, most are able to quickly and accurately respond to a phonologically reduced question from me about their trips. As Wong (1987) sums up, “Students who are skillful listeners are likely to be skillful speakers; if not, they often quickly learn to be skillful speakers” (p. 18).

The vast majority of Japanese I have taught have enjoyed their high school trip. For freshmen and sophomores, memories of their trip should still be fresh. Because the surveys are completed in pairs and the topic likely engaging, students should feel motivated.

A final technique helps students to open and close conversations. According to McCarthy, Matthiessen, and Slade (2002, p. 72), “Conversation analysis shows that everyday talk is not as disorganized as it may seem, and this offers the possibility of systematic teaching of features, such as the language of openings and closings.” Using the conversation strategies developed by Aloiau (2004), small groups of students rank the conversation greetings and responses from most formal to most casual (see Appendix A). The students then decide which greetings and responses are most appropriate for the classroom. I encourage them to choose the more casual openings and responses because the casual tone best reflects the type of classroom atmosphere I hope to create. The next step involves choosing three small talk topics from the list or creating some or all of their own topics. The groups of students must reach a consensus choice regarding the three topics and then brainstorm possible questions suitable for each topic. I also encourage the students to write their questions using reduced forms. In the pre-closings and responses portion of the activity, each student chooses and memorizes one pre-closing gambit and its response. Finally, as in the first step, groups of students rank the closings and their responses from most formal to most casual.

After the introduction of the conversation strategies, the students, in equal numbers, form two circles, an inner and an outer. Each member of the inner circle is paired with a member from the outer circle. Upon hearing a signal to start, the learners open the conversation with a greeting and proceed into their small talk. After a few moments, I tell the students to change partners, at which time they

practice pre-closings and responses followed by closings and responses. Once the final closing is completed, the outer circle of students shifts one place to the left, and the process begins again. I try to have the students change partners just as the volume and interest in the small talk start to rise. I find that changing at this time keeps the level of classroom energy high.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cognitive theory provides a solid theoretical foundation upon which to create an effective oral communication course for Japanese university students. From cognitive theory, the instructional principles of teaching learning strategies and promoting autonomy are justified. These two principles form the core of the oral communication course and shape the course rationale. The course rationale describes the students, meets their affective and linguistic needs, and sets out overall course aims and objectives. The five classroom speaking activities, organized within a functional syllabus, promote the use of learning strategies, stress the importance of learner autonomy, and create a friendly classroom environment. During the initial class, teachers and students should first set out to learn each others' names, followed by student to student introductions in small groups. Learning everyone's name, introducing oneself, and working in small groups creates a positive classroom environment, promotes autonomy, and builds the rapport that facilitates learning. Pronunciation is often difficult for Japanese speakers of English and speaking courses need to devote time to teaching comprehensible pronunciation. When working in pairs or small groups, students will feel more at ease producing the sounds of individual phonemes and coping with phonological reductions. Pronunciation practice should be done within the context of a specific function in order to make the exercises more meaningful. Teaching and encouraging the memorization of high frequency gambits will improve turn-taking, increase output, and can be used during small group discussions throughout the course. Because everyday communication is not as disorganized as it seems, we should teach certain features of conversation. The final activity of opening and closing conversations allows for students to speak in pairs or small groups and offers opportunities to work on pronunciation, manage turn-taking, build fluency through repetition, increase accuracy through memorization of high frequency chunks, and employ speaking strategies. Oral communication courses that teach learning strategies, promote autonomy, balance fluency and accuracy, and create a positive classroom environment will improve Japanese university students' abilities to converse in English.

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Appendix A
Conversation Strategies

Openings

Greetings

Good morning, _____.

Hi, _____.

How have you been?

What's happening?

What's new?

How you doing?

Long time, no see.

Small Talk Topics

Family

Food

High school trip

Hobbies

Hometowns

Homework

Movies

Music

Part-time job

Pets

Seasons

University life

Travel

The weather

Weekends

Responses

Good morning, _____.

Hi, _____.

Pretty good.

Not much.

Nothing.

Not bad.

Yeah! How've you been?

Preclosings

Well, ...

this has been fun.

It was nice to see you.

nice to see you again.

great seeing you.

I've really got to go now.

Maybe we could get together

again sometime.

Closings

Until the next time.

Have a nice (day/weekend).

Talk to you later.

See you later.

Responses

Yes, I enjoyed our talk, too.

It was good to see you.

Nice to see you.

Same here.

OK. See you.

Sounds good.

Responses

Good-bye.

You too.

Bye. Take it easy.

So long. Take care.

—Abstract—

The paper describes how to develop an English speaking course for low proficiency Japanese university students. An underlying theory of speaking is first addressed. The paper then details the instructional principles that guide the course. From these principles, a course rationale is created. The rationale includes the description of the students, their perceived affective and linguistic needs and the course goals and objectives. Following the course rationale is the course content, which includes the skill areas covered, the method of syllabus organization and the sequence of the content. Finally, five sample teaching activities that promote speaking proficiency are explained. These activities are related to the theory, instructional principles and course rationale.

本論文は日本の初級レベルの大学生向けの英語のスピーキングの授業をどのように行うかについて述べる。初めにスピーキングの基盤となる理論について概観する。次にコースの指針となる教育理論の詳細について述べる。これらの理論によりコースの目的が決められる。これには対象とする学生、学生のニーズ、コースの最終目標および目的を含む。この目的に合わせて、教授対象とする技能、シラバスの作り方、授業の進め方を含むコースの内容が決まる。最後にスピーキングの理解力を向上させる五つの教育活動のサンプルを説明する。これらの活動は教育原理やコースの目的を含む理論に基づいている。