

Promoting Learner-to-Learner Interaction in the EFL Classroom

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Teaching Contexts

- Location: Japan
- Level: Senior high school (10th grade)
- Class size: 25
- Class meetings: 50 minutes, four times a week
- Course Title: English Logic and Expression I
- Textbook: *MAINSTREAM I (English Logic and Expression)*

Problem

The third year in junior high school is one of the busiest phases of a Japanese student's life. Students have to abruptly transition from a relaxed student life to a more deliberate and intentional one. In my first year of teaching in senior high school, I had first year students who were as nervous as me on the first day of classes. As a teacher, I think that the first year in senior high school is a fundamental period where teachers have to be intentional in laying the foundation of second language education, so students progress consistently and see their own improvement clearly.

One of the main problems that occurred in the first few months of teaching my students is how much students worried about perfecting their grammar during speaking activities. With a script, students are confident when speaking, but they could not communicate effectively as they were distracted by focusing on reading what they wrote. To be effective speakers of English, we have to be effective listeners too. Even using communication strategies was not as effective because students did not understand how and when to use them.

In a survey, I asked students' opinions about our English class and the difficulties they had encountered during the first semester. About 40% of them mentioned their struggle in addressing communication breakdowns during the speaking test. In the first semester, their initial response to communication breakdown was to go back to speaking Japanese or stop talking in the speaking test. Students' comments in their survey mainly focused on wanting to improve their speaking ability, such as "I want to continue the conversation without stopping" or "I want to keep the conversation going but I don't know how."



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Solutions

After learning about students' difficulties in speaking, I thought of designing my lesson plan in a way where students will feel more comfortable speaking in English with other learners. Professor Kazuyoshi Sato, my MA TESOL advisor at Nagoya University of Foreign Language Studies, observed my class and suggested that I prepare students for a speaking test with timed conversations and use of communication strategies in a non-scripted small talk activity.

Here are the activities I used in class as solutions:

- Communication strategy practice (using conversation openers, conversation closers, shadowing, rejoinders, follow-up questions)
- Small talk activities (students do speaking activities related to the topic from the beginning of the unit until the speaking test)
- Non-Scripted Timed Conversations (Time increasing)
- Performance test (speaking)

The teaching materials and steps are below.

Teaching Openers and Closers (Beginning of the first semester: Unit 1)

Basic communication strategies were taught in a step-by-step way aiming for repetition and to familiarize students with how to use the strategies in their speaking activities.

1. *Level 1.* Students start with greeting each other using openers such as “Hello/Hi/Hey” and “How are you? /How is it going?”, and then end their conversations with “Nice talking with you” and a response from their partner with “You, too.”
2. *Level 2.* In a different pair, students do the same flow as the previous conversation but add information about why students have to cut the conversation short. At this point, students can use reasons such as, “I have to go now/My bus is here/It’s lunch time/My friend is waiting.” To give agency to students, they are encouraged to use an original reason for why they have to cut short the conversation.
3. *Level 3.* For the third time and with a different partner, students are encouraged to use the same flow of conversation, including an original reason and use basic rejoinders such as, “Really? /I see.”

Teaching Rejoinders (Middle of the first semester: Unit 2)

1. Although rejoinders made students' conversations seem more natural, some students still had difficulty knowing when and how to use these strategies.
2. In the first part of the worksheet, review different types of rejoinders (see Figure 2) with the students. Since some of these rejoinders have already been taught in junior high school, ask the students which of these strategies they have already used or actually know how to use.
3. In the second part, encourage students to do a simple conversation about their favorite city or what they did during the summer.
4. Ask students to write their responses first in the worksheet and write a reaction they think would be an appropriate response to the statement.

5. In No.1, students will do a simple conversation about their favorite activity corresponding with a rejoinder.
6. In No.2, encourage students to do the conversation with a rejoinder, adding the opener and closer learned in the previous lesson.
7. Students go through three different conversations with three different partners, starting their conversation with an opener, using a rejoinder and then finishing their conversation with a closer.

Increased Timed Conversation (Beginning of the second semester: Unit 3)

Making follow-up questions is quite difficult for second language learners incorporating communication strategies into their conversations. I followed the advice of my MA TESOL advisor, Dr. Sato, to introduce follow-up questions later in the 2nd semester.

1. Ask two students to read aloud good and bad examples of how to use follow-up questions in conversation.
2. After that, students talk in pairs about if they noticed differences between the two conversations. If they have found any, they have to explain to their partner why they think the other conversation is a better flow than the other.
3. Some students will notice that the follow-up questions marked in the “O” conversation box are more integrated with the topic than the one in the “X” conversation box. Praise the students if they were able to spot the difference.
4. At the practice part of the worksheet (see Figure 3), students will write their answers that correspond to the questions from practice 1-3.
5. Students are encouraged to use WH/H questions such as: what, who, why, where, when, which and how.
6. Later on, they do the conversations with an opener, rejoinder, questions and a closer.
7. As the conversation strategies increase, increase the time for the students to talk.

From the first semester, the timed conversations increased from 1 minute to 2.5 minutes to give students an avenue to make their follow-up questions.

To create more speaking opportunities for the students, I included small talk activities as a warm-up in each class. Gradually, I increased the talking time from one minute to one and a half minutes, and then to two minutes as vocabulary and communication strategies increased.

At first, students were commenting on how impossible it was to do a script-free small talk activity. In the first level of timed conversation, students were allowed to use their notes when talking with a partner. They were also encouraged to use communication strategies during their talk. In the second level, students had to put away their notes and use the script conversation written on the board. In the third level, the script was erased and students had to talk with their partner while also adding the non-verbal aspects of communication like voice inflection, gesture and eye contact.

After implementing this change in the second semester, students were able to talk longer: from 1 minute 30 seconds in the first semester to 2 minutes and 30 seconds in the third semester. In the third term survey, the number of students who said that they could talk with 5 students or more increased by 16%. Students also observed how much their listening skills had improved,

with comments such as “I was able to understand what my partner is saying without using Japanese,” “I was able to express in English the words I only know in Japanese,” and “I tried to talk in English without using Japanese.”

Figure 1

Teaching Basic Communication Strategies

LE1 Unit 1: Three Things about Me

04

Conversation Strategies

【1】 What are Conversation Strategies??

・・・英会話を進めていくためのテクニックのようなものです。大きく分けて、次のようなものがあります。

- **Openers** : 会話を始めるための表現のことを指します。
- **Closers** : 会話を終えるための表現のことを指します。

【2】 Conversation strategies ~ Examples ~

● **Openers**

A: Hello/Hi/Hey, _____. How are you? /How ya doing?
 B: I'm _____. How about you? /And you?

● **Closers**

(Why do you have to stop talking?):なぜ会話をやめなければいけないのかの理由
 I have to go now. / My bus is here. / It's lunch time.
 / My friend is waiting. / _____.

自分のオリジナル

A: (自分の理由). Nice talking with you.
 B: You, too.

Let's Practice!

A: Opener

B: Opener

A: What are your plans this weekend?

B: Let me see... _____.

A: Really? I see...

B: How about you?

A: Well..._____.

B: Oh Ok.

A: Closer

B: Closer

Class () No () Name _____



Figure 2

Teaching Rejoinders

Logic Expression I
Unit 1: Three Things About Me

No.07

Conversation Strategy 2: Rejoinders

You can say these words to react to what your partner says. These phrases / sentences will make your conversation more natural.

showing happiness	showing sadness	showing interest	showing surprise
That's great! Terrific! Wonderful! Fantastic!	That's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that. Oh, no.	I see. That's nice. Oh, yeah? Oh really?	You're kidding! I can't believe it! Oh, really! No way!

Example:

A: I play badminton almost everyday.

B: **Oh, really!**

Let's practice with your partner.

First, fill in the () below. Then, tell each sentence to your partner and your partner reacts using a conversation strategy.



- A: My favorite activity is ().
B: _____
- A: In summer, I enjoy ().
B: _____
- A: I (played/did/practiced) ()when I was in junior high school.
B: _____
- A: In my free time, I ().
B: _____
- A: I am excited when I ().
B: _____



Class: ____ No: ____ Name: _____

Figure 3

Teaching follow-up questions in the 2nd term (Using Increased Timed Conversation)

Unit 3: My Favorite Celebrity

Conversation Strategies

No. 04

Follow-up Questions

Follow-up questions は、会話を広げるときに役立ちます。**Follow-up questions** は、前の質問や会話の内容に関連してなくてはなりません。**Follow-up questions** は **5W's or H questions** を使うと作りやすいよ

Check out the examples below.



A: What sport do you like?
 B: I like baseball.
 A: I see. What animal do you like?
 B: I like dogs.
 A: Nice. What food do you like?
 B: I like pizza.
 A: Really? What music do you listen to?
 B: I listen to classic music.



A: What sport do you like?
 B: I like baseball.
 A: Nice. Who is your favorite baseball player?
 B: I like Yu Darvish.
 A: Really? Why do you like him?
 B: That's because he's cool and attractive.
 A: Wow. I want to see him too.

Practice

Practice 1

A: What will you do this weekend?

B: I will go out with my friends.

A: _____?

Practice 3

A: Who is your favorite athlete?

B: I like Shohei Ohtani.

A: _____?

Practice 2

A: What is your hobby?

B: I like reading books.

A: _____?

Practice 4

A: Who is your favorite celebrity?

B: I like Suga from BTS.

A: _____?



Class () No () Name _____

A - all completed and correct B - completed but some mistakes C - some effort D - X

Conclusion

Why is there a need for frequent exposure with other learners in the practice of a second language? As mentioned by Nation (2001), "...a learner needs to have meaningful encounters with a new word before it becomes firmly established in memory. The estimates range as high as 16 times in some studies" (p. 62). I have found that repetition and regular small talk activities helped build up the students' capacity to talk longer in English. Moreover, implementing conversation strategies (CSs) made the conversations seem natural. However, educators have to keep in mind that using communication strategies does not guarantee that students understand what CSs are for. Primarily, students discover the usage of these strategies when they are being used by other learners in the conversation. Therefore, students need frequent encounters with these CSs in conversations in order to understand the entirety of its usage.

Communication breakdown can happen in any language. We can only get better at addressing communication breakdown when we are constantly using the language. I have found that with constant and repeated practice, students were able to comfortably converse with other classmates in English. At first, students worried about their speaking accuracy, but after having more opportunities to talk with other learners and understanding that miscommunication can happen at any time, students focused more on getting their meaning across in their conversations. Because of this, students talked more without worrying about making mistakes and helped other students to clarify if there was a misunderstanding.

References

Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the author

Paula Key Bobadilla is an MA TESOL candidate at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. She holds a Bachelor's in International Studies from Miriam College (Philippines). She is currently teaching English at a private high school in Aichi prefecture. Her research interests are second language acquisition, cooperative learning and intercultural communication.