

COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH:

what's it all about

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During the academic years 1983 through 1985, all English conversation classes were made up of students whose speaking and hearing comprehension abilities ranged from the basic level to the low intermediate level. Because of the wide range of ability, good students as well as less abled students in the same classroom soon became bored - bored because the lesson was either too easy or too difficult to manage in an effective conversation practice session. Whenever a better abled student was paired with a less abled student, both became self-conscious and thus neither spoke in the practice session. As for the instructor, providing an effective lesson was difficult to maintain in such an environment. The instructor was providing the lesson either towards the less abled student or to the better abled student - or just to the middle ranked group of students. In any case, meaningful English conversation practice was a rarity.

Therefore, for the Academic Year 1986, a new policy was established. That is, on the first day of orientation period in April, all the English Department students took a listening comprehension test - both the first and second year students took the same test in the same room. Based on the result of this activity, albeit a little severe on the students, the students were classified into either the basic or the low intermediate level. Thus, like ability students were placed in the

same classroom. Each first year class had on the average of 32 students and each second year class had an average of 25 students. In addition to being placed in the specific group, during one week, the students received instructions from the same native English speaking instructor for two successive days, each day being a ninety minute class period.

After the listening comprehension placement test, each student received the English Speaking Ability Performance and Evaluation Guide. This Guide informed the students of the course objectives, attendance requirement, promotion / demotion within levels based on the student's control in fluency, grammar, vocabulary and listening comprehension abilities. Performance levels for each skill were clearly explained to the students. In addition to their participation in the conversation activities, the students were informed that motivation, attitude and effort would have great bearing on promotion / demotion factor during the semester as well as on the entire year's work. That is, if a student showed exceptional progress in the basic level, the student would be promoted to the upper level, but on the other hand, the student could be demoted to the basic level if she had difficulty in keeping up with the others in the spoken English activities. Although this is a spoken English class, all instructors assigned written homework. This homework assignment was evaluated alongside the student's speaking ability. Thus, the instructors had a better understanding of the student's overall English ability.

In mid-June a total of ten students were promoted from the basic to the higher level. All the instructors felt there should be some demotions, however, it was decided it would be best to wait until the first semester was over before any downward movement was

made. Thus, at this time, some classes had an additional three students. On the other hand, other classes had an ideal number of only 22 students. In the spoken English class, an ideal class would have 20 students which would permit the instructor to give more individual attention to the students. When the students realized a few of their classmates were being transferred, some students began to put forth more effort either to be promoted or to prevent from being demoted. In addition to greater effort put forth to speak in English a good part of the class time, absenteeism dropped noticeably. Thus, the end result was for a better integrated class effort on the part of each student.

As a result of the above, the instructors have observed that the students have more confidence in speaking in English to each other during class activities. They are not constantly on the alert not to make any mistakes while conversing with their partners and instructor - factor that is very important for the students to acquire in order to speak in English in a natural way.

Additionally, the instructors' efforts are now directed in improving the speaking and hearing comprehension abilities to a group of students with more or less the same ability. Thus, there is no need to teach to the middle group while ignoring the high or low ability students in the same classroom - every student is busy conversing with one another with very little inhibition.

In a varied ability level class, instructors have observed an interesting situation. That is, if a student is paired with another student whose ability is of a different level, both students do not experience a meaningful practice, i. e., each student becomes overly sensitive of the other's

English ability and thus there are greater moments of silence over the actual conversing time. Thus, boredom prevails during much of the class time.

There is another cause for boredom: It is the students' concept of what an English conversation class should be. Many of the university/college freshmen students in the English conversation classes have enrolled with little idea of what is expected of them. Their foremost interest is to have a conversation with the native English speaking instructor little realizing that a conversation requires participation on their part too. They believe their English conversation ability will automatically become their own simply by asking one obvious question and expecting the instructor to carry on a conversation all by himself thereafter.

Usually, the students' first formal introduction to the English language begins in their first year at the junior high school. Starting with the simple sentences and simple verb tense usages, the students go through the junior high school levels being hand-fed the English language as though it were a mechanical tool - the key to a puzzle that needs to be solved, not as a tool for communication. Most of the learning explanations from the teachers are done in the Japanese language. Here is a wonderful opportunity for the Japanese teacher to use the English language for a meaningful purpose.

In the senior high school English classes, the students must now be able to identify intricate verb tenses and be able to translate complex sentences into Japanese and at other times, be able to reverse the process. Much energy and time are spent in preparing the students to pass the all important and difficult university/college entrance

examinations. The students, during these six years of intense English language studies, have not had the experience or had very little experience of conversing in English with the teacher or even with their classmates for communicative purpose. Yet, the students have had much experience in direct translation exercises.

So, with this background in English proficiency, the university/college English conversation class is composed of every eager students and an equally eager native English speaking instructor with a modern English conversation textbook. But, sad to say though the eagerness to communicate is intense on both parties involved, there is instead an embarrassing silence.

On the first day of class in the new academic year, the majority of the students are sitting in the back rows of desks in a large classroom. They sit there in awe of the native English speaking instructor. They express their awe in a very respectable manner - sitting ramrod straight, tense and slightly forward. The class begins with an air of anticipated excitement.

The instructor begins the class period with the appropriate greeting followed by a brief comment or question about some happening that occurred at school, some domestic or international news that was broadcast on television, or a joke - and nary a comment or a look of comprehension on the part of the class except for a couple of students. Why? Was there a lack of communication, a lack of comprehension? No. It is the Japanese polite fiction not to laugh in front of the 'honorable' native English speaking instructor. One must show respect and that does not allow for any laughter - an atmosphere of a relaxed group of people. Now, the instructor asks a question and calls on a

student for a reply. The surprised student usually looks around for someone else with the same name to answer, or, looks at the instructor as if to say, "Are you talking to me?" In most instances in these English conversation classes, students believe "Silence is Golden."

However, a few brave students will ask some very obvious questions to the instructor but not enough to keep the conversation continuing for a meaningful conversation between the two. Sooner or later the instructor takes over the class period by carrying on a monologue. And in a very short time, the majority of the students have lost interest in what the instructor is saying. Soon, boredom settles over the classroom. Now, what causes this situation at the university/college level?

As we have seen, the instructor is often met with a classroom of students with varied English language ability and who are, in most instances, apparently indifferent, lack a desire to participate or sometimes even show a mild case of hostility to the instructor's method of teaching. The instructor was using techniques, procedures and classroom activities which would offer a chance for student/student interaction independent of the instructor as well as for the students to determine what they want to say. This is not what the students were used to when they were in high school. There, the students were accustomed to studying English through repetition, grammar manipulation and teacher control of all such activities. But, inasmuch as the university/college students come with a basic knowledge of the English language, it is the desire of the native English speaking instructor to apply communicative techniques in the classrooms. That is, the instructor wishes to provide the opportunity for the

students to use the English language for a purpose, to express their own attitudes, feelings, emotions, fears, etc., not what the instructor asked the students to repeat or translate what was read in the textbook. The emphasis is on skill using rather than skill getting. The activities used are to provide students with problems they are interested in solving and create a supportive non-threatening atmosphere situations in which they are likely to meet in real life outside the confines of the classroom or on campus.

Although many students feel the need and desire to be able to say something in English rather than just repeat patterns, they seem to reject this new method of learning at the university/college level. This may be due to the fact that they have lost their security of being led step-by-step by the teacher - listen and repeat, grammar manipulation and translation practices. Now, it is the case of the students who take the responsibility of deciding when and what to say as they practice communicative English with their paired partner, in a small group or even to start a meaningful conversation with the instructor. To make the transition from a listen and repeat practice to using the English language to express what the students want to express takes a gradual step-by-step learning procedure on the part of the students. On the average, it usually takes approximately two to three months to introduce and establish pair work as a routine in a productive manner. The plan below illustrates what might be involved. This, of course, may vary from class to class.

A Two to Three Months' Plan for Introducing Students To and Them in the Use of Pair and Group Work.¹

WEEK	AIM	MEANS
1.	To extend responsibility for initiating short responses to the students.	Teacher - controlled open and adjacent pair work on question and answer exercises.
2.	Consolidation plus introduction of dialogue exchange in pairs.	Dialogue reading. Student takes one part. Move from teacher reading A and students B through open and adjacent pairs to whole class work in closed pairs.
3.	Consolidation plus introduction of students to the habit of choosing the content of communication in oral work.	Longer read dialogues followed by the introduction of cued dialogues.
4.	Consolidation plus introduction of the idea of working together in English.	Introduce discourse chains to prompt recall of known dialogues; get students to work on comprehension exercises in English.
5.	To introduce the idea of guided role play, as well as simple problem solving.	Introduce role cards on the basis of familiar material; a short period in closed pairs; work on problems of grammar.
6.	Consolidation plus introduction of information gap exercises.	Longer guided role plays; practice in moving quickly into pair work exercises; information gap in which half the class sees the picture; instructor controls questions and answers.

7. Consolidation and extension. Information gap similar to (6) but done in closed pairs; jigsaw reading.
8. Consolidation and extension. Introduce free roleplay activities in pairs, then threes and fours; small group essay preparation for the final stage of guided composition lesson.
9. Consolidation and extension. Group preparation of ideas and structure for essay.

Keeping the above plan in mind, it is interesting to note that twin brothers Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus have conducted a study and found that there are five steps a learner advances from beginner to expert. The student learns to recognize the facts and rules and applies the rules to various situations or context in which they occur. When learners are trying very hard in a cooperative learning group, the rules are practiced and the students practice the rules naturally in the overall task. Repeated practice allows the accumulation of experience.

As the students gain experience in real situations, performance improves to an acceptable level. This experience encourages the students to consider more facts and rules and thus encourages a wider area of using these rules. By practical experience and in factual situations, the students begin to note the similarities between the new situation and the old, and the students begin to recognize and deal with new facts. Thus, as experience accumulates, the students begin to apply the knowledge to reality.

During Stage 3, through pair or small group practice, the students begin to recognize more and more rules and facts and situational elements. Slowly the students begin to choose a plan to organize the situation and concentrate only on the most important elements. Now, through experience, the students start to simplify and improve their performance and gradually have competence and confidence. In the first two stages, the students relied on certain facts and specific rules to perform a situation, whereas the intermediate students learn rules and procedures. As the students gain confidence through experience, they study the situation and chose a plan to accomplish the new problem. The plan may or may not follow the rules and facts learned in the earlier stages. Whether the students are able to successfully accomplish the new task or not, the situation and the outcome are clearly recalled. This is a very important fact for future experience.

The next step in learning is proficiency. In all the previous stages, rules were applied, goals and plans were consciously selected in a rational manner. But proficiency is doing the task in a new way - rapidly and fluidly. Action is not dependent on deliberate reasoning, as in the earlier stages. The proficient students remember previous, similar situations and have memories that help accomplish the new task successfully. Of course, the proficient students still think analytically, but there are situations when they seem to have an intuition to understand the situation and perform effortlessly all because of the similarities to previous experiences.

The last stage of learning is expertise. The expert students often make decisions naturally without seemingly applying the rules and

facts. Again, experience produces a deep understanding of the situation and this leads to the apparent effortless performance of the advanced students. The skill of using English has become so much a part of them that they are no longer aware of how they are using English.

In the meantime, as the students are taking the responsibility of practicing through pair or group work, the instructor's role has gradually moved from being the instructor/conductor to that of a facilitator. His function becomes less dominant than before, but no less important. For example:

- If students find themselves unable to cope with the proper English language for a given situation, facilitator can offer advice or provide the necessary language. He is available as a source of guidance and help. His presence as a facilitator, rather than as the instructor, may provide an important psychological support.

- While students are performing, the facilitator can monitor their strengths and weaknesses. Even though he may not intervene at the time, he can make note of the weaknesses as signs of learning needs which can be taken up as classwork at a later time through more controlled, pre-communicative activities. Thus, the facilitator is a constant link between pre-communicative and communicative activities.

- There may be occasions when the students are using their mother tongue. The facilitator should encourage students to use the English language for communicative purposes, but at the same time should note why the students reverted to their mother tongue. At some later time, the problem should be taken up during classwork time.

- The facilitator should always remember that students are people and that their different personalities, feelings and interests should be taken

into account.

As the students practice in the new communicative method, they start to realize that the language is best learned by using it to communicate in the social contexts in which they find themselves in their daily activities. When in these situations, the students usually do not think about the form of the language but rather to communicate for a given purpose. Thus, the students have more opportunities to practice with one another and not care too much about making mistakes. However, any errors that may cause misunderstanding can be brought to the students' attention at the end of the session by listing not more than six major errors on the blackboard. These can then be corrected by calling on students at random and asking them why these can lead to misunderstanding and how the mistakes can be corrected.

In the attempt to train the students to the new method of learning English, instructors must keep in mind that concentrated performance usually occurs within the first 20 to 35 minutes of the task with at least half of the loss occurring within the first 15 minutes. Additionally, studies conducted by Joel S. Warm indicate people's performances differ depending on the task assigned and the complexity of the task. Therefore, when introducing and practicing new situations and new English skill usages, instructors should be aware of the time limit for any given activity. Foremost to keep in mind is to provide tasks that are attainable through clear instructions and demonstrations, creating opportunities for pleasure while performing the communicative problems and avoiding stress on the part of the students.

One of the ways of avoiding too much stress on the part of the students while they are speaking in English is to create a situation

that requires cooperation amongst the students. This means group participation in a project in which the outcome results from some common effort. The goal is shared since each student's success is linked with the success of another member of his group. This also means that ideas and material are shared, labor is sometimes divided and everyone in the group is rewarded for the successful completion of the task. The Strip Story is an example of this exercise.

First, each student in the group draws a strip of paper on which is typed one sentence. It is his task to comprehend and/or memorize what is said on his strip. For instance, if there were five members in the group, there would be five strips, or a total of five different sentences. The students are given a set time to understand and/or memorize what is on his strip of paper. Then these strips are returned to the instructor. Now, the students must work together under a time limit, in English, to arrange the five sentences into the original story form. Inasmuch as the students must work together within a given time, there is no time for deep thinking or silent thinking. Thus, there is no opportunity for boredom to set in or should there be a deadly silence in the classroom. In this activity, each member of the group had to depend on and cooperate with each other in order to present the their story to the entire class.

Thus, success often depends on sharing resources efficiently. This is impossible when students have to work against each other as when preparing for an examination. Cooperation takes advantage of the combined abilities of each member of the group as well as the "Plus Alpha" whereby the group becomes more than the sum of its parts. Competition generally does not promote excellence, especially in an

English conversation class, because trying to do well and trying to outdo the others are simply two different things. Many studies have shown we all do best at the tasks we enjoy performing. Motivation is an internal thing whereas grades which are given in a competitive activity is external. However, working together cooperatively is the basis of teamwork. And, a meaningful conversation is definitely a cooperative effort of two or more participants.

The Japanese students are continuously reinforced for high test marks. They go to private tutoring schools that prepare the students for the university/college entrance examinations. Such preparation is, of course, necessary, but in addition to this type of training, the students should be trained with emphasis on creative thinking and coming up with good ideas in language learning practice. This is a different skill to be taught and learned. Students should be trained to try to improve their English skill performance through creative thinking rather than emphasis on the English proficiency test scores. Academically smart people are easy to find, however, people with creative minds are rare and they have a very precious ability. What really counts in the adult world, whether as a person of leisure or a working person, is to have imagination. Why is this so? A creative/imaginative person will rely on his experiences to help him cope advantageously with new situations. He will see previous problems in different ways or take a new problem and see how some of the old experiences can be used in the new situation.

Though it may be quite a task to accomplish, through the practice of English skill usage in maintaining a meaningful English conversation, we can help the students enter the adult world with creative minds

to do the ordinary daily activities with zest.

NOTE :

1. OPEN PAIRS - Instructor-nominated pair work involving two students from different parts of the class.

ADJACENT PAIRS - Instructor-nominated pair work involving two students sitting next to each other.

CLOSED PAIRS - All students work in pairs at the same time. The instructor monitors the activity.

DISCOURSE CHAINS - Students are given an outline of a dialogue in functional terms e.g. greet, apologize, etc. They have to find the words to express the function and build up a dialogue using the clues.

JIGSAW READING - Students are given a text which has been cut up in some way (e.g. at the end of each sentence) and have to reconstruct it. (Strip Story)

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