

Analysis of the Basic Spoken English Course at the University of Electro-Communications

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Abstract

Dual objectives of this paper are contained herein. The first is to familiarize its audience to the Basic Spoken English night course, a course offered by the Department of Human Communication at the University of Electro-Communications. Readers should get a general sense of understanding relevant to five main activities of this course, and see the significance of them pertinent to second language acquisition. The second function is that of reflection by the authors on the motives and intentions behind the activities, and critical analysis of these undertakings in a concerted effort to make improvements to future courses.

Key words: basic, English competence, intrinsic motivation, intention, encouragement, confidence, fear, anxiety, autonomous learning, socio-cultural issues, critical thinking skills, by-product

Introduction

When the word *basic* is first considered, perhaps it is found synonymous with such words as *simple*, *easy*, and *uncomplicated*. However, it could be strongly argued that learning and using English in an academic context as means to enhance critical thinking skills, from the perspective of many first year Japanese university students, are neither simple matters, nor the development and use of learning activities, assignments, and projects by teachers are uncomplicated tasks. Therefore, the meaning of *basic* being advocated here is more akin to such concepts as *primary*, *foundational*, and *essential*. Primary, being used in this context meaning both main and first, refers to what is the recommended focus of the students as they embark on learning English in a university academic setting. It is this focus that is intended to establish a *foundational* base upon which the students will build and improve various skills *essential* in acquiring English competence¹.

The Basic Spoken English night course, which is currently offered by the Department of Human

Communication at the University of Electro-Communications (UEC) for the Spring Semester of 2007, consisted of fifteen 90-minute classes on Wednesday evenings from 17:50 to 19:20. There were two English instructors who were responsible for the class and four teaching assistants (TAs). These TAs, UEC graduate students in their mid to late twenties, comprised of three men from Bangladesh, Oman, and Sri Lanka, and one woman from China. All were arbitrarily considered by the instructors in communicative terms, both competent and fluent in the English language. For three of them, it was their first time to work in the position of teaching assistant.

Twenty-nine first-year university students, 17 men and 12 women, attended the class. Since this class is in the first semester of the first year of university life for the students, the only English skills requirement was to have had the standard six years of English education that are typical in junior high and senior high schools.

Five main activities of the Basic Spoken English night course will be considered in this paper:

1. The use of music in class

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2. Individual speeches
3. Group discussions
4. Poster presentations
5. Drama narratives

These activities will be discussed in general terms of:

- Description and Intentions – Describing the course and the methods used, and stating the original chief intents and goals. Apparent advantages and strengths of the activities will also be discussed.
- Problems and Risks - Both actual problems and potential problems and risks will be addressed.
- Suggestions for Future Classes – Insights will be shared for desired improvement of class approaches and methods.

These five activities were chosen to form a foundational base from which students could build and improve the four aspects of language – listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with an emphasis on oral output. They cover a wide spectrum, which compliment and contrast each other in many ways to develop and enhance other skills that are essential in university life as well as life beyond graduation. Some examples include building self-confidence, promoting autonomous learning, developing critical thinking skills, improving communication skills, and cultivating cooperation. These and other abilities will be addressed in more detail in subsequent parts of this paper.

The English skills which could be obtained from these activities include using English in situations that range from an academic to a practical real world context, from logical and organizational to emotional and abstract conditions, and from individual aspirations to group conformity and cooperation to achieve common goals.

Part 1: Music to Create a Relaxed and Conducive Learning Environment

Description and Intentions

Each class began with an instructor playing the guitar and singing a song written by an artist that is or was popular. Many of the songs were a reflection of important western socio-culture issues at the time of composition and therefore offered a snap shot of history and the critical issues they often addressed.

They often told stories of eclectic wisdom that related to such themes as war and peace, drugs, resistance to power and authority, love, and loss of youth innocence.

Prior to the instructor performance, the students were handed the lyrics of the song and a brief history and background information were given relevant to the artist and the song itself. Additionally, key words and phrases were pointed out in the lyrics to assist the students in understanding lexical, grammatical, and contextual meanings.

The original intent of this non-typical classroom endeavor was primarily two-fold. The first was to create student interest in western culture, as it was thought that sincere interest would translate into intrinsic motivation to learn and use English. The second was to build the students' courage and confidence to learn and use English.

The use of music was an attempt to create a relaxing atmosphere, one that would be conducive to learning. This is not a novel idea, however. Suggestopedia, a method for learning created by the Bulgarian psychologist, Georgi Lozanov, "capitalized on relaxed states of mind for maximum retention of material" (Brown 2001: 27). Additionally, Richards and Rodgers (2001) noted that the most conspicuous feature of Suggestopedia is that music was central to the method. Furthermore, they go on to say, "The musical background helps to induce a relaxed attitude which Lozanov refers to as concert pseudo-passiveness. This state is felt to be optimal for learning, in that anxieties and tension are relieved and power of concentration for new material is raised" (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 102). Lozanov himself claimed, "There is no sector of public life where suggestology would not be useful" (Lozanov 1978: 2). "Memorization in learning by the suggestopedic method seems to be accelerated 25 times over that in learning by conventional methods" (Lozanov 1978:27). Although these were audacious claims that later received reproach from a leading linguist (Scovel 1979), it was still acknowledged that "there are techniques and procedures in Suggestopedy that may prove useful in a foreign language classroom" (Scovel 1979: 265).

Germane to building student confidence, the teacher having the courage to stand in front of 29 students and simultaneously play a musical instrument and sing, and often making mistakes during the performances, demonstrated and communicated a sense of

encouragement that it was important to overcome the fears associated with learning a foreign language and making mistakes. What was also attempted here was to bridge the gap between the identities of 'teacher' and 'student', or what Richards (2006) refers to as '*default identity*' in classroom identities, which is an expansion of the three aspects of identity relevant to the analysis of classroom interaction originally proposed by Zimmerman (1998): *discourse identity*, *situated identity*, and *transportable identity*. By making the teacher identity 'transportable', roles were in a sense reversed and the students could see themselves through the eyes of the teacher, who was nervous and anxious about making mistakes; however, these apparent obstacles were overcome for the greater cause of learning and improving one's skill. In other words, the instructor put himself in the shoes of the students and acted as an example from which to follow in overcoming inhibitions due to shyness, nervousness, or anxiety.

Problems and Risks

Notwithstanding the educational aspirations of such use of music in the classroom, there are inherent flaws, and problems, both actual and potential, that need to be considered. The first actual issue that surfaced was the lack of understanding of some of the lyrics. There were students who still could not understand the meanings behind some of the words and phrases in the songs. Additionally, some of the issues raised by the songs were so unfamiliar to the point that it was difficult to imagine them even in their own mother tongue.

Music is generally considered in a popular culture context. And with all popular culture, there are those who have interest and those that do not. By introducing music in an educational context, risks are run in the area of student interests. Simply, some of the music may not be of a genre that is interesting to the students, thus, the purpose of the use of music may backfire in some situations.

Suggestions for Future Classes

It has been generally agreed by both authors that the use of music be continued with some modifications and improvements in approaches and methods. To deal with potential socio-cultural gaps, the songs and themes they imply could be explained from a Japanese

perspective as well as a western one. This may prove to be helpful, especially to those who are completely unfamiliar with some aspects of western culture.

One observation that was made during the course of the semester was that during this activity, many or most of the students were attentively reading along with the lyrics. It is surmised that perhaps they were interested in how written words were phonetically produced. Thus, activities involving the pronunciation practice may add to their confidence in learning and using English.

Part 2: Short Individual Speeches to Overcome Fears

Description and Intentions

A popular quote by renowned actor, Jerry Seinfeld, states, "According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two." Although it is unclear exactly what studies to which he is referring, it is clear that the fear of speaking in public is real and is often very difficult to overcome. However, it is an important skill, and perhaps in many cases a necessary one in life after leaving the confines of school.

Immediately following the music session of the class, time was spent with five to six individual speeches (two to three TAs and three to four students). The TAs would give their speeches first, followed by the students. In the prior week, it was decided which students would give their speech so that they would have time to prepare. These approximate one-minute orations were free talks, which means that the speech could be about any topic the speakers felt relevant to their personal situation. In their 'Taxonomy of language-teaching techniques', Crookes and Chaudron (1991: 52-54) classify such activity as 'A propos' and that these general real-life topics are typically authentic and genuine. As can be expected, there were a wide range of topics that were discussed.

An impetus behind implementing this activity was similar to the music session relating to building confidence. It was hoped that the music would create a relaxed atmosphere and the students were encouraged to have confidence to say something meaningful in English. Additionally, having the TAs speak first was intended to provide a model after

which the students could emulate in their speeches. Another goal was to encourage students to become autonomous learners. This was the reasoning behind having the speech based on any topic to the students' liking. It was thought that giving the students the freedom to choose what they were going to talk about would foster a sense of responsibility and intrinsic motivation.

Problems and Risks

Many students did in fact give their speeches enthusiastically, and many speeches proved to be entertaining, informative, and in some cases deep in meaning and thought. However, it seemed that some of the students were never really able to overcome their shyness and fear, and perhaps viewed the activity as highly undesirable. For some, it was the first time they ever had to stand in front of people and speak, even in their mother tongue. Add this pressure with the fact that it was the first semester of the first year in university life, and it can be understandable that some of the students may have experienced a very high level of stress and anxiety.

Suggestions for Future Classes

At the beginning of the semester, some time should be spent on how to give a speech. This may include things such as body language, voice projection, and content structure and organization. This is also important for the first main project, the poster presentation, which will be discussed in more detail later. Additionally, some time could be spent dealing specifically to phonetics and stress in spoken English.

Part 3: Small Group Discussions to Provide Interactive Opportunities

Description and Intentions

At the beginning of the semester, the class was divided into six groups each containing five to six students, and they would stay in that same group for the first half of the semester. Either a TA or an instructor was assigned to a group, and was in charge of keeping track of attendance, giving assessments in students' performances, facilitating discussions, etc. The group discussions followed the individual speeches and made up the core of the classroom activities. Approximately a half to two thirds of the class was devoted to this.

There were three different types of group foci: discussion on a specific topic, preparation and practice for the poster presentation, and preparation and practice for the group drama. The latter two will be discussed in more detail in Part 4 and Part 5, respectively. Examples of some of the specific topics of discussion included introductions and interests, ordering in restaurants, and describing symptoms of illness. The teacher or TA role was that of a facilitator of discussion encouraging and eliciting student participation.

The main objective of the group discussions was to encourage students' oral output. This was attempted by creating a situation where there were more individual student speaking opportunities, more chances for students to interact with native or competent non-native English speakers, and more focused attention by teachers and TAs to individual language learning needs. It has been a long held belief that "students' oral output is instrumental in their acquisition of the new language" (Shoemaker and Shoemaker 1991: 7). Terrell (1982) believed that speaking a new language as well as listening to it was important for beginning learners for four specific reasons:

1. By speaking to others, learners will provoke their conversation partners to generate the input they need for acquisition to take place.
2. By attempting to keep up their end of the conversation with a more fluent partner, learners provide the data necessary for their partners to gauge the appropriate input level. This enables partners to make their input comprehensible to the learner.
3. Conversation permits learners to test hypotheses they have formulated about how the language is put together and to receive feedback on the success of their attempts.
4. Speaking with natives or fluent non-natives allows learners to match up their own output with that of others, thus helping them to form a realistic picture of their own developing communication skills. (Terrell 1982: 121-132)

Another important aspect of the group discussions was based on some of the theories posited by Charles A. Curran and his associates, who developed the method,

Community Language Learning (CLL), which puts the roles of the ‘teacher-student’ closer to a ‘counselor-client’ metaphor. This method can be considered part of language teaching practices known as ‘humanistic techniques’ (Moskowitz 1978). He explains that these techniques “blend what the student feels, thinks and knows with what he is learning in the target language. Rather than self-denial being the acceptable way of life, self-actualization and self-esteem are the ideals the exercises pursue. [The techniques] help build rapport, cohesiveness, and caring that far transcend what is already there...help students to be themselves, to accept themselves, and be proud of themselves... help foster a climate of caring and sharing in the foreign language class” (Moskowitz 1978: 2).

Problems and Risks

Even given a highly conducive environment to learn and use English, there still were cases where some students were unable to express their opinions in English. There are many reasons that could be attributed to this problem. It could have been the students’ lack of English competence, or the lack of teaching experience by the TAs, as it was a first time job for some of them. It could have been due to student shyness or anxiety, or maybe even a general lack of critical thinking skills. It is even plausible that a combination of some or all of the aforementioned and/or other causes not mentioned were behind some of the apparent breakdowns in communication.

Another problem or potential risk in doing group discussion is having a student with an exceptionally high or low level of competence, which could threaten the balance of communication the facilitator is trying to promote. For a couple of examples, a high level, and highly motivated student could potentially cause other students in the group to feel embarrassed and apprehensive to using English, or a low level, and highly motivated student may require more attention from the teacher and cause higher level students to become bored and disinterested in participating in discussions. These and other potential issues are something that the teachers should consider and be prepared to handle if and when they arise.

Suggestions for Future Classes

More time should be spent planning and structuring

the group discussions overall. Such structure in terms of specific topics, language targets, and activities was coming to fruition toward the end of the semester and these lessons can be carried over to future classes to ensure a strong start to the students’ language learning experience in a university setting.

Additionally, there should be more communication between the TAs and the instructors before the course to better prepare them in handling and managing group discussions. Often, it is the first language teaching experience for some of the TAs, so perhaps some time to do some short training workshops would help them to be better prepared for their important roles in the language classroom.

Part 4: Poster Presentation as a Means to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills

Description and Intentions

The first major project of the semester was the poster presentation. Five to six class sessions were devoted to this significant assignment. In those classes, lectures were given on a step by step process of creating an effective presentation followed by group discussions as mentioned in Part 3. The presentations were an individual undertaking and each student would make a presentation to the people in his/her group. The topics were limited to the following six issues, and two students in the same group could not work on the same theme:

- Guns in the US
- Suicide in Japan
- Personal Health in Japan
- Decreasing Birthrate and Population in Japan
- The NEET Problem in Japan
- The Smoking Trend in Japan

As can be noticed, all of the above with the exception of ‘Guns in the US’ are socio-cultural issues facing Japan today. However, guns, which are a socio-cultural phenomenon in the US relates indirectly to Japan’s ban on gun possession, and the problems that face Americans relevant to gun control raises critical issues with Japan’s current stance.

There was much lecture time spent on how to do presentations, as there are many facets and skills necessary for a successful performance. These mainly focused in three main areas, the *story message*, the

physical message, and the *visual message*.

In the area of the story message, students were advised to first create a clear opinion on their topic, and then to focus on three main points that could directly or indirectly support their opinion. Once this was established, then they were in a position to do research and suggestions were given to them on some good websites to search for more information. The three main parts of a presentation of this type (the introduction, the body, and the conclusion) were discussed in detail with focus on the type of language that is used for each part. The *physical message* entails the body language of the speaker. Time was spent on explaining the importance of posture, eye contact, gestures, and voice inflection in giving good presentations. Advice on memorizing only parts of the presentation and the significance of practice was also given. Finally, guidance was provided relating to the *visual message*, which in this case was an actual poster that the students had to create. This included the position and size of pictures, charts, and graphs in relation to text information, and the use of colors for impact effects. It was pointed out that competence in these three main areas would put the students in a position to deliver a successful persuasive and thought provoking presentation. This whole process is illustrated in Figure 1.

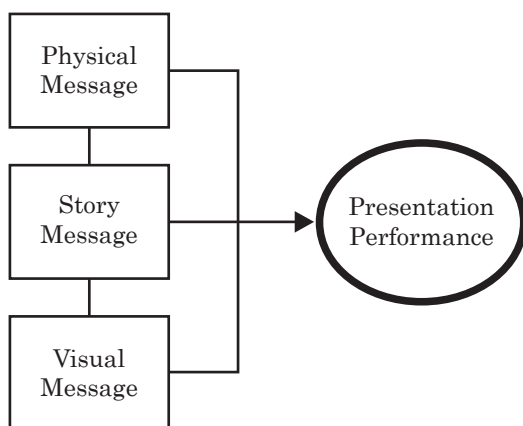


Figure 1: Poster Presentation Process

Another curricular objective in addition to English competence is the development and enhancement of critical thinking skills. This venture contributes to that aim as well as to the augmentation of several other important abilities including but certainly not limited to research, public speaking, and verbal persuasion.

Figure 2 shows how presentation topics and English are used as an educational means to the students' improvement in critical thinking skills and English competence.

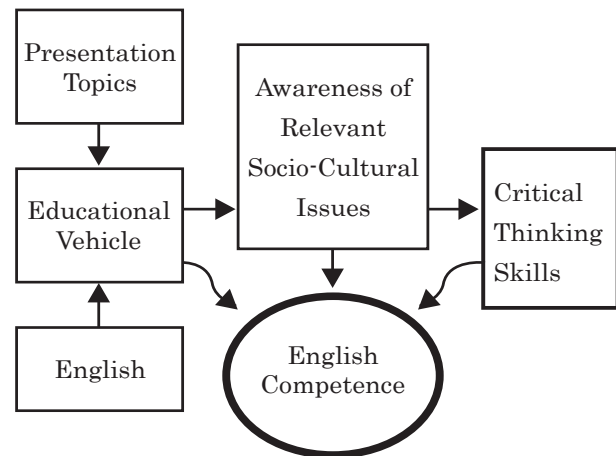


Figure 2: Critical Thinking Skills and English Competence

In the group activity portion of the classes devoted to this project, the instructors and TAs reviewed with the students what was first presented in the preceding lecture to ensure understanding. Additionally, they assisted the students in various aspects of the presentation that were difficult or problematic, proof read their speeches, practiced with their pronunciation of phonetically challenging words, facilitated critical thinking skills, and promoted autonomous learning by encouraging students to do their own research on their chosen topics. Some time was also spent working on the posters that the students were going to use in their presentations.

Problems and Risks

“Giving a speech or a presentation is a very sophisticated communicative activity – even for native speakers of English” (Harrington and LeBean 1996). Because of the multi-faceted skills that are required in poster presentations, some students may have felt overwhelmed and perhaps at times were discouraged almost to the point of giving up. Additionally, the same problems associated with the individual speeches in Part 3 were apparent. Some students were very apprehensive about public speaking, even in a small group of five to six. Furthermore, the amount of new vocabulary related to the presentation topics often appeared to have an inundating effect. Some of the

students may have felt an overload of new words, which could have led to the view that English is too high of a mountain to climb. Moreover, even in the age of technology today, there may still be some students who rarely use a computer, so there is the risk of a lack of efficiency in using from the internet.

Suggestions for Future Classes

Notwithstanding the potential problems and risks, all of the students were able to give coherent presentation and many if not most were superbly executed. Certainly, there must have been a true sense of accomplishment for some. Although a substantial amount of time was devoted to this crucial project, even more time should be spent to reduce the amount of 'shock and awe' felt by some of the students. Perhaps, to quickly start into the process from the first day of class will help ease the students into the cumbersome task of completing this critical thinking assignment.

Part 5: Drama Narrative Performance – Feeling the Language and Group Synergy

Description and Intentions

After the first major project, the poster presentation, the groups were broken up and new ones formed. Each of the new groups was to work together to perform a drama narrative. This was the last project and was to be done on the last day of the course. Each group could make up a story, or do one based on an existing drama. It should be from 7-10 minutes long and each group member should have at least 10 lines in the story. Costumes were encouraged, but it was advised that it should be done at minimal cost (i.e. paper masks and hat, etc.)

One of the objectives of doing the drama was to help students attach feelings with words that perhaps have always felt 'foreign' to them. By acting out the word while speaking it, it was hoped that students could internalize the word and feel more natural when using it. Wessels (1987) identifies six elements that have to present in order for something that is to be learned to be fully acquired and retained. Three of them – situation, problem, and solution, are part of what he refers to as 'surface reality' and the other three – background, emotions, and planning pertain to what he coins as 'underlying reality/foundation'. He argues

that "the direct experience that drama offers can encompass both realities" (Wessels 1987: 8). He further goes on to say, "The view of drama in the classroom as learning through direct experience (both our own and that of others) means that drama cannot be restricted only to certain areas of the language-teaching curriculum. At any moment in our teaching, we can be confronted with situations where words fail, and only action can help the learners to understand" (Wessels 1987: 8).

Another purpose of this group activity was to foster intra-group cooperation and coordination towards achieving some common goal. Critical thinking skills are often calling upon individuals to stand out and question issues facing society. Group work on the other hand often requires a sense of conformity and harmony. Thus, the drama was seen as an appropriate contrast to the poster presentation relevant to developing and enhancing skills on a wide spectrum that will assist the students function in and contribute to society in post-university life. Figure 3 attempts to convey this in elementary terms as it relates to these two activities.

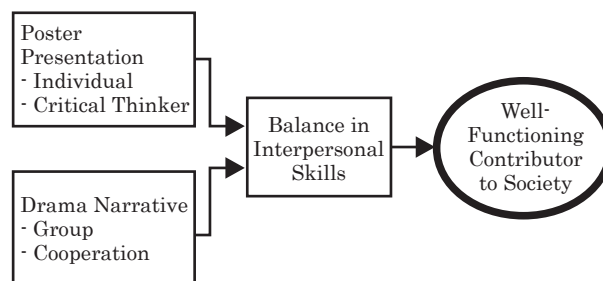


Figure 3: Balance between Individual and Group Processes

Problems and Risks

As with the poster presentation there did not seem to be enough time devoted to this project. Especially in the area of the drama scripts, the instructors and TAs did not have much time to proof read and advise the students on appropriate phonetic production, lexical choices, and grammar structure. Although it did not happen in this class, there is always the risk that one or more of the group members do not hold their end of contribution, which could jeopardize the original purpose of cooperation. The following succinctly summarizes such risks: "There will always be one or

two students who will not co-operate. Some will be genuinely shy, others will react to what they consider a waste of time, either by withdrawing or by over-participating, thus upsetting the work of the others” (Maley & Duff 1978: 16).

Suggestions for Future Classes

Perhaps introduction of both the poster presentation and the drama narrative should happen on first day of class so as to ease the students into ultimate expectations. Especially, more time should be spent on pronunciation practice of difficult words and basic grammar structure to ensure comprehensible verbal production during the performance. Additionally, intonation issues need to be addressed by teaching where stress should be when speaking a certain part of the drama.

Conclusion

Five main activities of the Basic Spoken English night course have been presented in an attempt familiarize readers to one of the English courses offered at UEC. Additionally, this paper was a reflection by the authors on the activities so that modifications and enhancement can be made for future classes. To that end, it was argued that the intentions underlying these activities warranted their implementation, and these objectives were based on and supported by various language teaching theories. It was also clear that problems and risks, both actual and potential exist, and attention to these predicaments is necessary to create preemptive measures for future classes. It can be agreed that all problems and risks cannot be entirely eliminated; however, future unexpected complications can be manageable given a mind set that is partly devoted to preventative maintenance, part of which was attempted by this paper.

It is also evident that by using English as a means to some other higher meaningful purpose, English competence was in many cases a natural side effect of doing the activities. The belief is held that if English competence is made the target at which to aim, it will be missed every time. It cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and does so as a by-product of dedication toward other goals. In the case of the Basic Spoken English night course, these were the successful completion of various activities.

Finally, it is very clear that there is still more to be

learned from this experience, and it is hoped by these authors that this paper is a step in the right direction in the broad sense of assisting in the growth of the students of the Basic Spoken English night course at the University of Electro- Communications.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 The use of 'competence' in this paper is based on the

general definition of aptness or adequacy, and does not refer to the notion of competence as an innate underlying basic language capacity posited by Noam Chomsky and the theories of Transformational Generative Grammar.