



**Japanese student perceptions of the use of recording devices within
an English as a foreign language program**

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Abstract

This study examines Japanese college students' perceptions and expectations of their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program. It notes that, for students, communication is the most important aspect of any language program. In particular, the vast majority of students want to be able to communicate orally. One of the major problems in EFL situations, however, is that there are insufficient opportunities to use language in communicative events that are meaningful to students. How to increase these has been a concern for many EFL practitioners.

One way of teaching, developing and promoting oral communication is the systematic use of recording devices to record students' oral communicative events. This approach was developed and refined over the last three years with ideas and input coming from numerous teachers and authors. The present study examines Japanese students' views on this procedure.

Questionnaires, interviews and a guided discussion were used to determine how students perceived the systematic use of recording devices in their EFL program.

Surveyed students want a higher oral communication component in their EFL program and they are very open to procedures such as the systematic use of tape recorders. Although there are some students who find the current procedure taxing, there is general agreement that it is beneficial for their oral communicative ability. From this information a recommendation is made that the procedure be trialed on a larger scale and that more research on the effects of using the procedure be carried out.

この研究の狙いは2つでした。まず学生にとって理想的な英語 (EFL) のプログラムは何であるか？そしてテープレコーダーを利用することによるオーラルコミュニケーションはより良くなると思われているか？この2つについて研究しました。英語を勉強する場合、学生にとって理想的なEFLプログラムにおいてオーラルコミュニケーション関連科目は基本とすべきだろうと考えられます。オーラルコミュニケーションだけが大切であると思う学生達はいませんでした。総合的に勉強しなければならないが勉強の基本にオーラルコミュニケーションがあるべきと考えられます。

テープレコーダーの利用によるオーラルコミュニケーションを上達するために効果的な勉強方法であり、会話の試験に良い影響が起こり、良い勉強の仕方であるとの結果が見られます。

Introduction

In Japan over the past few decades the importance of oral communicative ability in a second language has become more apparent. Whereas in the past traditional grammar was the main area of focus in English language programs, the Japanese government has recently stated that "with the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, [as the learning of English] has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2002). As this and other studies show, Japanese students also want to have communication as the goal of their foreign language program, in particular the oral production skills and related cultural aspects

thereof.

If oral communication is to be a major goal of language learning, any teaching of language should obviously include methods that involve it. The tools available to the teacher and student of reading, writing and listening comprehension are numerous. However, teachers of oral communication have fewer physical tools at their disposal because of the nature of the spoken word. If not recorded, it disappears and only memory can be used to analyze, assess, and offer feedback. I have felt that students would be better served, and teachers would be better empowered to do their jobs, with the use of a tape recorder, a simple tool that gives the instructor the power to increase the volume of English communication taking place. Recorded language also allows the instructor to give more concise and complete feedback and to administer better oral tests.

Literature review

Structural linguistic theory and behavioral approaches to language acquisition, often the backbone of past EFL programs in Japan, are making way for more communicative approaches to language learning with Richards and Rogers (2001,) noting that there is a “need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures” (p153). In introducing communicative aspects of language, Hymes (1972) notes the ability to communicate in context is essential, whilst Bachman (1991) states the importance of "situational authenticity" among others be addressed when discussing the teaching and assessing of oral communication.

“The general principles of Communicative Language Teaching are today widely accepted around the world” (Richards and Rogers, 2001, p151). The problem lies in applying these principles inside and outside the classroom. Knight (2001) points out that although CLT is considered the most popular approach to teaching a second language, it

is rather an “umbrella term which covers a wide range of classroom practices” (p. 155). At its core, though, is an outcome where the “learner can communicate successfully in the target language in real situations, rather than have a conscious understanding of the rules governing that language” (Knight 2001, p. 155). It is this outcome that I seek for my students.

Though not specifically defined, the roles of students and teachers in a CLT approach are active ones. The student “is expected to interact actively both with other learners and the material” (Knight, 2001, p. 158). Ellis (1994) outlines a number of areas where this form of interaction has become the focus of research. Swain (1985), for example, (cited in Ellis, 1994) claims “production will aid acquisition *only when the learner is pushed*” (p. 282). Ellis notes that Swain goes on to state that for this type of output hypothesis to be effective it requires a considerable amount of feedback “both direct and indirect” (p. 282). This feedback takes the form of correction (the direct form) and clarification requests and confirmation requests (two forms of indirect feedback). Ellis notes that there is no hard evidence to show that the output hypothesis alone will improve second language acquisition (SLA). However, he does state (p. 288) that “in all likelihood” it is one of a number of factors that is essential in learning a second language.

Learner participation and the debate of quantity versus quality, these being other factors that influence SLA, are outlined in Ellis (1994, pp. 592-602). According to a number of studies outlined in these pages, mere volume of participation in class does not correlate to better performance. However quality participation, particularly that in which the students had control of what was being said and how it was being said, produced better performance results. Ellis (1994) claims that:

The research suggests that learners will benefit from interacting in small group work (pair work included). They will have more

opportunity to speak, to negotiate meaning and content, and to construct discourse collaboratively. (p. 601)

An important aspect of learning English in Japan that has been commented on in the literature and often by the participants of this survey is that there are too few opportunities to use the target language. Increased application of the material learnt in the classroom by using recording devices and attempts to “make the material my own” (student comment), that is, real and well-directed comprehensible output, is, according to Ellis (1994), one of a number of means that more than likely assists in L2 acquisition.

In the field of assessment of oral English, Lambert (2003) points out that increasingly accreditation organizations in Japan are requiring records of students’ university performance. For this reason he has begun recording students’ oral communication tests in his classes. Students were positive in their appraisal of the fact that an oral test was given for oral communication class work, indicating that positive backwash was attained. For a test to be considered successful, positive backwash is one of several criteria that need to be attained. Hughes (1989) calls ‘backwash’ the effect of the test on students’ learning and teachers’ teaching. Positive backwash is achieved if after taking the test students feel that it was an appropriate test for the subject matter being taught. This increases the face validity of the test: if one wants to test oral proficiency, it follows that an oral component should be included.

As many students see assessment as the end point of their study, unless it is reflective of the actual methods used in teaching, students will rightly feel that their work in class has no real meaning, and therefore motivation to do it will decrease. To overcome these problems, Yoshida (2001) proposed a system of oral portfolios. Methods of assessment of oral communication are limited if it is a traditional one-teacher-many-student classroom. The oral interview or a combination of listening and grammar exercises has been the procedure of choice for the majority of conversation teachers. However using

these methods does not always give a true understanding of the student's proficiency. One method of attaining "a sample that properly represents (students') ability" (Hughes, 1989, p. 104) is to have students consistently interacting with their peers, this being assessed methodically over a period of time. By doing so, it is possible to show individual students their achievement over that time.

Valdez and O'Malley (1992), Tierney, Carter, & Desai (1991) and Graves (1983) among others have also outlined the benefits of portfolios in various second language education settings. It follows then that an oral portfolio would be an obvious necessity for authentically assessing oral communication, and the use of recording devices would be the tool that could make this possible.

As noted above, the output hypothesis as outlined by Swain (in Ellis 1994) states that when students are pushed in the right direction to produce language, acquisition has a higher chance of taking place. This coupled with appropriate direct and indirect feedback, along with sound input using the CLT approach, and the ability to increase the amount of quality output seem to be an optimum goal for EFL contexts. One teacher in a traditional EFL classroom setting is simply not able to do all of this. Recording devices assist the instructor to achieve this goal.

Overview of the study

Three and a half years ago I began using recording devices as outlined in Hagley (2002), at Otaru Junior College, an institution in Hokkaido, Japan where I teach. Three areas are covered in the procedure: in-class taping, out-of-class taping and testing. In-class recording is done at some point in the class in a controlled environment. Students review the recording for homework and rerecord until they and the instructor are satisfied with the results. The second area is out-of-class taping. Each week a pair of students must hand in one tape recording of their daily conversations. These are of no

fixed topic, merely free conversation in English that the students must have on a daily basis. Feedback from the teacher is given in written and oral form. The final step is a test where a major component is an orally produced communicative event (for example, a role play or free conversation). Segments of these recordings are transferred periodically to a separate portfolio tape. I have been making observations and having informal feedback sessions with the students involved over the last three and a half years. In addition, I have asked other educators to canvass opinions from students at Otaru Junior College in order to gain a small amount of triangulation.

For this particular study in addition to my own observations of the procedure outlined above, a questionnaire survey (Appendix) and a guided discussion were developed in order to attain more detailed feedback on student perceptions of the program.

The sample of participants comprised 30 first year Japanese college students (twenty six female, four male). All students were English majors between the ages of 18 and 20. Twenty-eight replies were received.

The focus group discussion was made up of six females (A, B, C, D, E, and F) who are or were English major students. They were randomly chosen from a group of 10 that replied they would be willing to participate. The group of 10 came from a group of 80 present and past students that I asked to participate. I approached past students via telephone. Present students were asked after class. Four in the focus group, A, B, E, and F, had participated in the procedure outlined above; two were still doing so (A and B) and two had graduated (E and F). Two students (C and D) had not used recording devices as an integral part of any EFL courses, but had been exposed to some oral communication testing using the procedure outlined above. Students A and B were 18, C and D 19, E was 20 and F was 21. All were or had been English majors.

Results and Discussion

The replies to the questions on the survey and the feedback received from the focused discussion suggest that the participants in both the survey and discussion are generally positive toward communicating orally and want to do more of it. The procedure is ideal for these purposes. Comments made by students C and A in the guided discussion give strong evidence of this. Student C, who had not participated in the procedure, from the outset of the discussion expressed her disappointment at not being able to communicate orally in almost any of the English classes she had taken. “The only class that is useful is Discussion class because you have to talk” was a comment she made in response to her favorite class. Yet when questioned about homework her ideal was some form of written work that was an ongoing process: “a diary in English is good because you have to write something everyday or maybe an essay every week because you have to think about it and put words to your thoughts.” When student A, who had used recorders in her college English class, was asked the same question as student C, she said “oral communication is my favorite class because I know that I can try and use all the other English material I have for a purpose.” Regarding homework she commented “I suppose I didn’t really think of it as homework but it is... the recording ... *is* homework. It’s not just homework though, because for me it’s real communicating.” After hearing this, students C and D showed real enthusiasm to discover what the system was. When they did, both were disappointed that they had not had the opportunity to participate in the procedure.

The necessity for learners to apply themselves using the written form in studying an L2 is of obvious importance – this is not being denied. However students in an EFL situation without a voice recording procedure such as the one outlined are less able to apply themselves to the oral form. In this sense the role of the learner as outlined by Knight (2001) and Richards and Rodgers (2001) as someone who interacts with the material and other learners is employed not only in the classroom but outside it too.

The importance of feedback for motivation and for pedagogical reasons is seen in students' replies on the questionnaire. Twelve students emphasized the importance of receiving good feedback. In addition, during the guided discussion student E stated explicitly that "it was motivating knowing that you (the teacher) were going to listen to it [the tape]" with both student A and student F stating that they tried to use the corrections and any feedback, in their efforts to improve.

The fact that the recording procedure incorporates the benefits of a portfolio is also not lost on students. Student B during the discussion stated that "I've started to think 'how can I say this now?' 'How did I say it before?' Now I can check. It's really useful." Some students in the survey expressed similar sentiments. In personal correspondence with Yoshida (2001) he stated that another major benefit of having the recordings is that students are able to concentrate on their spoken material and forget about shyness which can be a major problem for some Japanese.

Summary and Conclusions

This study has looked at two areas - students' perceptions of their EFL program, and whether students are open to the use of recording devices to increase the amount and quality of oral communication in that program. The perception that oral communication is an essential part of language study can be seen given that 100% of the respondents indicated that they thought skills related to oral communication were the most important aspects of learning English. The ability to use the language that has been learnt in communicative events was considered important with 89% of participants showing a positive attitude toward the extensive use of oral communication in class, an integral part of the teaching style being used and also incorporating application of the recording devices. In other areas of the ideal program, particularly assessment, students also see the importance of incorporating oral communication, but also the difficulty therein as is evidenced by 59% of replies stating that communicative aspects of language were the

most difficult to assess. This is not to say that students think oral communication is the only skill required in second language acquisition. To the contrary, 17 of 28 responses stated that all skills needed to be addressed in any EFL program.

In relation to the procedure using recording devices, the large majority of students had a positive feeling regarding their use, with 83% or 20 of 24 replies saying the use of recording devices had had a positive effect on their speaking ability and 86% or 19 of 22 replies saying it had had a positive effect on their oral assessment. Sixty-eight percent or 15 of 22 replies stated clearly that they liked using the procedure as part of their EFL program, with even the majority (71%) of those that didn't like the procedure stating that they understood that it was beneficial to attaining oral communication ability. It was noted that the procedure has drawbacks (too difficult to meet up with tape partners being the major one stated), but overall it is respected and liked.

It is not contended that this procedure is the only one necessary for ensuring that students in an EFL program are able to increase their oral communication output. However, the overall positive feedback in both the survey and the guided discussion regarding the increased volume of communicative output suggests that that the goal is achieved and that this is generally considered a positive thing. Other qualitative research done to date on the recording of students' conversation onto recording devices has only yielded impressionistic results regarding improvement. However positive these may be, only a substantial qualitative longitudinal research project will determine whether the procedure outlined is beneficial or not. Before this happens it would be advantageous for other instructors to trial the procedure and refine it further before putting it to the rigors of quantitative research.

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Appendix

1. *How have your feelings toward English changed over the last semester? If they have changed why have they?*
2. *What English skill do you think is most important? Why?*
3. *What English skill do you think isn't so important? Why?*
4. *Which English skill is easiest to learn? Why?*
5. *Which English skill is easiest to teach? Why?*
6. *Which English skill is easiest for the teacher to assess? Why?*
7. *Which English skill is hardest to learn? Why?*
8. *Which English skill is hardest to teach? Why?*
9. *Which English skill is hardest for the teacher to assess? Why?*
10. *Please describe your feelings toward the English conversation class.*
11. *What are the most important attributes of a good English conversation teacher?*
12. *What are the most important attributes of a good English conversation class?*
13. *How has the use of a tape recorder in class and outside class to record conversations changed your feeling to English conversation classes?*
14. *How has the use of a tape recorder in class and outside class to record conversations changed your feeling to English conversation tests?*
15. *Did you prefer the teacher listen to the tapes OR other students listen? Why?*
16. *Please outline what you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using a tape recorder in and outside class for recording conversations.*

17. *Did you like using tape recorders? Why/Why not?*