

# Enhancing speaking proficiency through critical thinking

Masayo Yada  
*Meiji High School*  
Yoko Wakui  
*Keisen University, Rissho University*  
Fumiko Yui  
*Hibarigaoka High School*

## Reference Data:

Yada, M., Wakui, Y., & Yui, F. (2005). Enhancing speaking proficiency through critical thinking. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This is a report on three different teaching situations, one university and two high schools. The writers believe that critical thinking is a very useful means to activate students to speak in English, by looking at ideas from different perspectives, deepening students' views and providing them with motivation and energy to introduce their ideas verbally. The writers have also adopted three approaches: cooperative learning to enhance group work and lower the students' affective filter, content-based instruction to find topics that motivate students to talk and self-assessment to have students reflect on themselves and inspire them to learn more. The writers kept records and distributed questionnaires to explore students' progress, preferences, motivation, or attitudes toward their goals. As a result, students became aware of their own progress and realized the importance of working together and sharing ideas. At the end of the course, most of the students gained confidence in speaking English.

これは高校・大学の3つの授業の実践報告である。レベル、性質、目的などは異なるが、スピーキングに力を入れたい、という共通の信念を持って授業を行ってきた。クリティカルシンキングの考え方をベースに、各種理論に基づいてスピーキングに力を入れたシラバスや活動を設定、定期的に多方面からその検証を行い、まとめた。

This is a report about three different teaching contexts focusing on activities for improving speaking proficiency. By consulting theories and approaches, asking our students about their preferences and needs, and also assuming our experiences and beliefs, we have analyzed our lessons to find out more effective and realistic approaches that enhance the development of speaking proficiency.

In many teaching contexts, from junior high school to university level, many English teachers are required to teach a great quantity of subject matter with limited time and materials. Many of them realize that they should enhance the speaking ability of their students, but in fact it is quite hard to do so with their limited freedom of choice. In the past decade, the Ministry of Education and Science has been trying to put more emphasis on oral communication and many textbooks have been published focusing on communicative language learning. However, many teachers still believe that speaking is still optional. Why do they believe this? Is there any solution that would enhance teachers to take a new step? In this paper, by focusing on four elements of our own lessons, we analyzed their effectiveness and students' perception, to discover more realistic approaches for teaching speaking.

The theories and approaches we have adopted varied, however, here, four of them are going to be discussed in diverse teaching contexts. Firstly, we consulted the idea of critical thinking, which would stimulate students to explore and talk more in English. Secondly, the theory of cooperative learning was of great help for organizing group work that lowered the students' affective filter (Krashen, 1985). Thirdly, based on our belief that topic choice is very crucial to speaking activities, we followed the approach of content-based language teaching and learning. Lastly, we made use of the technique of self-assessment and reflection so that we could motivate the students to learn more actively and positively.

### Teaching contexts

We all work at different schools and teach different types of lessons, however, the underlying beliefs are the same; more emphasis should be put on speaking activities. Here are the details of our teaching contexts.

#### *(1) A public high school in Kanagawa.*

Forty first-year-students were enrolled in this class, and they were well disciplined and motivated to learn English. We met three hours a week (150 minutes in total), and we were supposed to study a subject called "English I" which was aimed at learning general English including four skills and grammar. Besides this primary goal, we had set two more goals, communicating actively with teachers and classmates using simple phrases in English and building up confidence in expressing themselves in class.

#### *(2) A private high school in Tokyo.*

This is a boy's school attached to a large university. The class was an elective one called "Oral Communication C" which focused on discussion and debate activities. There were 20 third-year-students. We met twice a week (100 minutes in total), and the students were highly motivated. The goals of this class were: to be able to make speeches, to be able to give proper reactions while talking with each other, and to be able to introduce their own opinions with specific reasons and examples in good order.

#### *(3) A private university in Tokyo.*

This was an elective class focusing on TOEIC where 18 to 23 year-old undergraduate and graduate students of all departments were enrolled. Their main interest was to get higher scores, but they also felt the necessity of oral practice to strengthen their English ability. We met twice a week (180 minutes in total), and about 10 students attended the class regularly. The goals of this class were: gaining confidence to use English by exchanging information and opinions, expressing their reflections critically, and cooperating with classmates in preparing for a presentation.

### Critical thinking

"Critical thinking is the process that involves abstract operations"(O'Keefe, 1999) and a "disciplined manner of thought used to assess the validity of something such as statements, news, stories, arguments and research" (Day, 2003). It is important to learn that there is no one correct answer, so that students are not afraid of making mistakes. Critical thinking gave our students an opportunity to think aloud, be motivated

and conduct discussions from various perspectives. As a result of this, they could stimulate each other and communicate well.

They were absorbed in discussing their thoughts and ideas, because they selected their own favorite topics. They were motivated because “they open up their hidden possibility” (O’Keefe, 1999) and learned better, because they took the initiative (Gardner, 1993; Williams, 2001).

### Cooperative learning

A cooperative learning group is defined as a small mixed-ability group in which the members aim to achieve the same goal together (Kagan, 1994). To make group work successful, the teacher needs to assign specific roles in the group in order to encourage individual accountability (Cambell, 2000). Students learn different ideas from their peers and establish positive interdependence.

Cooperative learning provides students with strategies for negotiation and critical thinking (Stahl, 1995). The students learn how to work with their peers and solve problems using their communication skills (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1995). Cooperative learning enables the students to accomplish higher proficiency in language because those social skills are essential in interaction, as well as basic abilities, such as accuracy and fluency.

We assigned each student a specific role in a group in accordance with cooperative learning theory, and found that the students speak more English to each other in groups. They had confidence in speaking because they knew what to say and when to say it. They got involved in the activities more, acknowledging their own responsibility.

Based on this experience, we would like to propose three points for introducing cooperative learning to a high school English language classroom. First of all, groups should be formed, not by their friendship but by using a random method, similar to a lottery, so that the students could easily accept their individual accountability. Secondly, the teacher should create roles that have equal responsibility. The Chairperson will take more responsibility than the others, so we divided their roles into two parts, the Reader and the Moderator. The Reader reads out the list of the questions, and the Moderator asks them in a simple form, such as “What do you think about question number one?” Thirdly, it is important to give the students equal opportunities for learning. We assigned the students different roles to play each time. We often changed the members of the groups so that the students could learn various perspectives from other students. In fact, mixing up the groups encouraged them to speak more critically, not emotionally.

### Topic choice

According to the main claims of content-based language teaching, when we choose topics for classes, teachers need to select topics from a wide variety of fields based on the needs and interests of the students (Snow, Brinton and Wesche, 1989). Moreover, it would be ideal if the topics provide real situations for students (Folse, 1996). Also Stoller and Grabe (1997) acknowledged that teachers need to anticipate student interests, look for engaging content materials that can lead to a strong culminating task, and outline opportunities for coherent sequencing.

One of the issues of teaching speaking classes or oral communication is that most textbooks deal with topics that neither attract nor motivate students to talk. Topics such as hobbies, families, or club activities look good for speaking activities, but these topics do not always stimulate students to speak out, especially with older teenagers. Basically, in any language, the purpose of talking is to get some new information, solve some problems, or simply have fun, but to the students who already know each other and exchange information about their school lives, these topics are not exciting at all. Although their level of English is not the same as their L1, they should be provided with topics that suit their interests. By exchanging ideas on certain topics, students wish to discover something new, or in other words, to learn (Barnes, 1992).

So we provided the students with about 20 topics and rough summaries from the textbooks (Day & Yamanaka 1997; 1999; 2003), and had them vote freely. Most of the topics were very controversial and some were very tough not only for teenagers but also for adults (see Appendix 1). The process of voting was very enjoyable. For one reason, the students consulted their background knowledge and anticipated what they could say during the forthcoming discussions. Also it was a good chance to compare their preferences on social issues with their peers. It can be said that they were thinking aloud very critically. Another advantage of having them vote is that we can make use of their motivation. And once they agreed to try a certain topic, they felt the responsibility to “hang on” even if the topic was too difficult to talk about.

## Reflection & self-assessment

“Reflection is crucial because urging student input and reflection on their language learning experiences encourages them to take more responsibility for their learning” (Leki, 1991). Reflection allowed the students to think that they were not supposed to be passive and wait for somebody to teach them, but expected to be active in their own learning, because they were responsible for it.

“It is important for students to be involved in assessment in a student-centered class” (Dickenson, 1987). The students submitted self-assessment sheets three times a year to evaluate their speaking ability. The aim of the assessment was for students to know what they could do and what they were expected to do next. They could determine their goal by doing this. On the average, the students made improvements in terms of self-assessment.

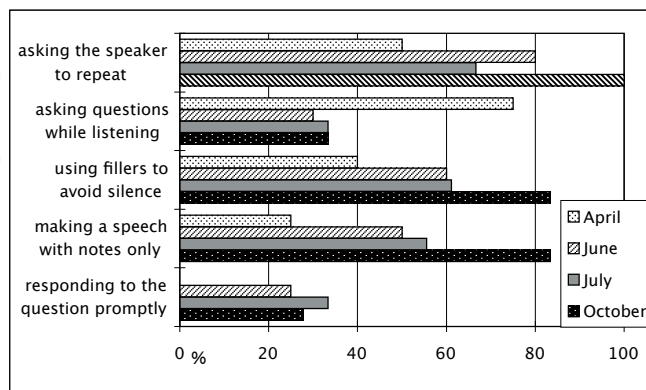
At the end of every class, students submitted *reflection notes*, in which they wrote their thoughts on various things including the whole class. The reflection notes were submitted with their names, because reflection involves students in taking responsibility, which might develop better learning (Benson, 2001; Leki, 1991). We discovered students’ inner voice, which could be beneficial in education.

Self-assessment fosters learning, promotes awareness and enhances “goal-orientation” (Oscarson, 1989). Evaluation is a significant objective in education, and training learners to evaluate is useful (Dickinson, 1987). The students indeed became aware of what learners should do and what their own goals were. Self-assessment generated self-awareness as a learner and improved skills in learning techniques (Nunan, 1988, p. 116). They had to think deeply to evaluate

themselves and began to realize what they should do to achieve their goals.

We asked the students of two different teaching contexts to assess themselves regularly. Then we analyzed the results in two different ways.

At the private high school class, we focused on each skill of speaking proficiency. Students' perception of their own proficiency was collected through questionnaires (Appendix 2) and the results were compared every two months (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Self-assessment of private high school students**

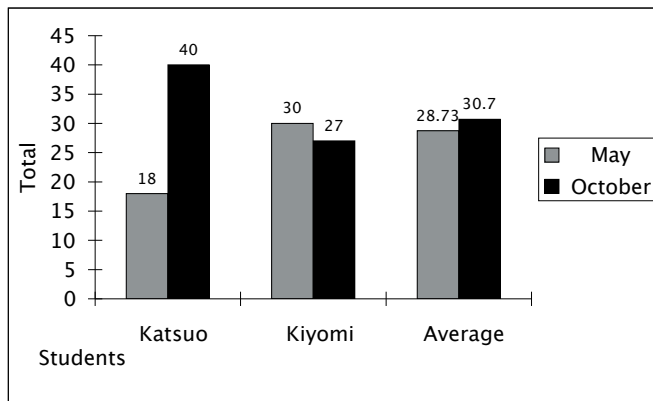
One of the purposes of the self-assessment is to examine the suitability of the syllabus and activities. Starting with “ice breaking” activities, we moved on to more challenging activities such as group discussion and in some cases debate.

We mainly focused on the difficulties and the order of the tasks to see if the syllabus was appropriate for the students to follow and learn effectively.

Also, it was a good chance for the students to check their progress and set up some higher goals to pursue by themselves. For example, as for the result about “asking questions while listening”, more than 70% of the class said, “I can do this” at the very beginning of the year. But once they started practicing speeches and asking questions, they realized the difficulty of doing two things at the same time, in English. Then in June, the number dropped drastically. So we focused more activities on listening to main points, asking questions, or giving responses until students became comfortable with doing these things. Self-assessment was indeed very useful to check the syllabus and activities to provide more practical lessons for the students.

As for the university class, since the number of the students was limited and the backgrounds of the students varied, we focused on the changes of individual students by adding up each item on the questionnaire (Appendix 3). The average result showed a positive trend, even if it was not a drastic change (Figure 2). We conducted research qualitatively and there were some interesting changes in each of the students. For example, Katsuo, one of the best students, in terms of self-assessment, wrote in May that he could hardly hear anything. In June, he noticed that it was necessary for him to take more time for dictation. He began to think critically what he should do. In addition, he claimed in September that he would never give up. In October, he wrote in his reflection notes that he had decided to pick up a wide range of vocabulary from the textbook and the

newspaper. Thus, he was passive and did not know what to do at first, but after five months, he seemed to have found a concrete way and started to control his learning habits autonomously.



**Figure 2. Self-assessment of private university students**

The common reaction of the two teaching contexts is that by ticking the self-assessment lists (questionnaires); the students came to realize what they were lacking and what they needed to do to improve their proficiency. We were surprised at this unexpected reaction from the students. We were happy to learn that by repeating this assessment or reflection, the students were becoming autonomous learners and motivated to learn more.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we deal with critical thinking not as the main teaching technique, but an underlying guidance to facilitate speaking. For instance, in the process of choosing topics, we provided the students with chances to consider their background knowledge on each topic to find out the best one, which means to think critically. While they were comparing their ideas in small groups, they tried to have multiple views based on their roles. Even when they were reflecting and assessing themselves, the students looked at themselves fairly critically. Indirectly we used the ideas of critical thinking to activate and motivate our students to talk. Fortunately, the students gradually understood the idea and got used to looking at certain things from various points of view. According to the students' raw comments and reflection notes, they realized the excitement of learning different perspectives in the end. They were also surprised to know their classmates' unknown character or serious thoughts. Overall, the students have acquired the tips on critical thinking and recognized that it is fun to talk in English. We believe that they have built confidence in speaking out in English, and we are very happy with the outcome.

Even though the idea of critical thinking is becoming popular among English teachers in Japan, there is no proper Japanese translation for this word yet. When we mention it in Japanese, we have to say 'critical thinking' in *katakana* with some explanation since the word 'critical' has only a negative meaning in the Japanese language. We realized that critical thinking is very effective for enhancing speaking proficiency, but at the same time it is tough for both students

and teachers in the Japanese teaching contexts to apply it. Through the experiences with students, we deeply realized that it requires teachers' insight and relevant steps for the students to develop critical thinking.

### References

- Barnes, D. (1992). *From communication to curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Brinton, D.M., Snow, M.A., & Wesche, M.B. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction*. New York: Newbury House Publishers.
- Campbell, D. E. (2000). *Choosing democracy: A practical guide to multicultural education (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Day, R. D., & Yamanaka, J. (1997). *Impact issues*. New York: Longman.
- Day, R. D., & Yamanaka, J. (1999). *Impact topics*. New York: Longman.
- Day, R. D., & Yamanaka, J. (2003). *Impact values*. New York: Longman.
- Day, R. D. (2003, November). *Teaching critical thinking and discussion*. Paper presented at the 29<sup>th</sup> JALT International Conference, Shizuoka, Japan.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Folse, K. S. (1996). *Discussion starters*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Freeman, D. (1992). Collaboration: Constructing shared understandings in a second language classroom. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching*. (pp. 56-80). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kagan, S. (1994). *Cooperative learning*. San Clemente, California: Kagan Publishing.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: issues and implications*. Harlow: Longman.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., and Holubec, E. J. (1995). Learning together in the language arts classroom: Practical applications. In R. J. Stahl (Ed.), *Cooperative Learning in Language Arts: A handbook for teachers*. (pp. 49-70). Parsippany, NJ: Dale Seymour Publications.
- Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24(3), 203-218.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centred curriculum; A study in second language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Keefe, V. (1999). *Developing critical thinking: The speaking/listening connection*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Oscarson, M. (1989). Self-assessment of language proficiency: Rationale and applications. *Language Testing*, 6, 1-13.

- Stahl, R. J. (1995). Cooperative learning: A language arts context and an overview. In R.J. Stahl (Ed.), *Cooperative learning in language arts: A handbook for teachers*. (pp. 1-16). Parsippany, NJ: Dale Seymour Publications.
- Stroller, F. & Grabe, W. (1997). A six T's approach to content-based instruction. In M. Snow & D. M. Brinton (Eds.), *The content-based classroom: Perspectives on integrating language and content*. (pp. 78-94). New York: Longman.
- Williams, J. (2001). The effectiveness of spontaneous attention to form. *System*, 29, 325-340.



## Appendix 1

Topics to discuss

#	title	discussion questions
1	Fashion & personality	*Is it wrong to judge people by their appearance or fashion? *How much can we tell from people's fashion?
2	English education in Japan	*What is the best way to teach/learn English? *What do your English teachers have to change? *Should the government change some system?
3	Career choice	*What is the biggest element to choose your job? *Does fortune / money always make you happy?
4	Who pays?	*Why men often pay for the date? *Are there any roles for men and women at dates? *What is your ideal date?
5	Housework	*Is housework women's job? *What kind of family would you like to create? *Would you do housework as a husband?
6	Friendship and love	*What is friendship? *Can we have best friend of opposite sex? *How can you compromise to your friends?
7	I hate school!	*What is the meaning of go going to university? *How much is education career important?
8	Pets	*Do pets have right the same as human being? *Are pets always happy with human being? *Cats or dogs?
9	Pet Peeve	*What behavior in public bothers you or doesn't bother you? *Do parents have to teach their children to be polite? * Does using a cell phone in a classroom bother you?
10	Cloning	*Is it safe to clone crops or vegetables? *Is it acceptable to clone animals? *Is cloning humans allowed?
11	Friendship	*How do you define the best friend? *Is it easy to make the best friend? * What if your best friend was taking drugs?
12	Welfare and volunteering	*Should volunteering be obligatory in high schools? *Do we need to give homeless people money? *How would you look after your elderly parents?

## Appendix 2 (questionnaire for a private high school class)

		Yes, I can.	No, I can't.
1	クラスメイトの話す英語を理解する I can understand classmates' English		
2	相手の英語の話を聞きながら、相づちを打つ I can give reactions while listening		
3	相手の英語の話を聞きながら、時々英語で質問をする I can ask some questions while listening		
4	相手の話を聞きながら、自分の意見や感想を述べる I can give comments while listening		
5	相手の話がわからなかったとき、聞き返すことができる I can ask the speaker to repeat when I don't get		
6	英語を聞きながら、主な内容だけ拾ってメモを取る I can take notes while listening		
7	取ったメモに基づいて、話の内容を英語で話す I can reproduce the story based on my notes		
8	間違えるのを恐れずに言いたいことを英語でどンドン話す I can speak actively without worrying about making mistakes		
9	3～4人のグループの中で英語で話をする I can talk freely in a small group of three or four		
10	グループで話したことを簡単にまとめ、クラス全体で発表する I can summarize the group discussion and present it to the whole class		
11	積極的に質問して、発言の少ない人も議論に巻き込む I can involve shy classmates into discussion by asking questions		
12	英語での言い方がわからないとき、別のやさしい表現で言いかえる I can rephrase difficult words into plain expressions		
13	とっさに自分の意見を聞かれたときに、対応する I can respond to the question promptly		
14	自分の主張に理由や例を添えて話す I can give my opinions with proper reasons and examples		
15	メモをもとに英語でスピーチをする I can make a speech based on notes		
16	準備なしにアドリブで英語でスピーチをする I can make a speech without any preparation		
17	新聞やwebなどの資料に基づき、要点を英語で引用する I can quote summary of newspaper articles		
18	言葉につまったとき、well, uh...など、沈黙にならずごまかすことができる I can use fillers to avoid silence		
19	順序立ててわかりやすく主張を伝える I can convey my own claim in good order		
20	対立する相手の意見に基づいて、質問したり突っ込んだりする I can ask questions according to the speakers' claim		
21	意見の対立する相手の主張を想定し、質問をあらかじめ考えておく I can prepare questions in advance by guessing the opponents' claim		
22	意見の対立する相手からの質問を想定し、対応策をあらかじめ練っておく I can prepare to counter attack in advance by guessing the opponents' claim		
23	場面に応じて、ユーモアを交えた主張を言う I can make a speech with some jokes according to the situations		
24	トピックに基づいて、議題や論題を提案する I can propose discussion questions or propositions according to topics		
25	自分の主張に基づいて、考えや物事を自分なりに定義づける I can define a word based on my own claim		

## Appendix 3 (questionnaire for a private university class)

Circle the numbers that match your opinion.

当てはまると思う番号に丸を付けましょう。

		a little (少し)					a lot (かなり)
1	You can catch what your teacher says. 先生の英語が聞き取れる。	1	2	3	4	5	
2	You can catch what your classmates say. クラスの友達の英語が聞き取れる。	1	2	3	4	5	
3	You can give responses that make a conversation smoothly. 英語であいづちを打てる。	1	2	3	4	5	
4	You can ask questions in English. 英語で質問が出来る。	1	2	3	4	5	
5	You can ask your partner to speak slowly or repeat what he/she says. 聞き取れない時ゆっくり話してもらうか、再び言ってもらよう頼める。	1	2	3	4	5	
6	You can confirm what you do not understand. 意味が理解出来ない時、聞き返せる。	1	2	3	4	5	
7	You can react, agree or disagree to your partner's opinion. 感想や、賛成、反対の意思を英語で表現出来る。	1	2	3	4	5	
8	You can express your ideas without worrying about mistakes. 考えていることを、間違いを恐れずにどんどん話せる。	1	2	3	4	5	
9	You can find another way to express instead of an appropriate word. 適切な英語の言葉が思いつかない時、別の言い方で言い換えられる。	1	2	3	4	5	
10	You can speak with your friends actively in English in class. 教室で率先して友達と英語で話せる。	1	2	3	4	5	
11	You can make opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. 教室以外で、英語を話すチャンスを作れる。	1	2	3	4	5	
12	You can prepare for discussion in advance. 前もってディスカッションの準備が出来る。	1	2	3	4	5	