Pathways to communication: Linking classrooms in the ELP

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Reference data:

Robertson, M., & Gershon, B. (2006). Pathways to communication: Linking classrooms in the ELP. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) ***JALT2005 Conference Proceedings***. Tokyo: JALT.

This article describes three extended projects integrated into the prescribed curriculum of an English language program to provide Japanese students with opportunities to share their learning and participate in meaningful conversations with students from another class. The cross-classroom collaboration benefited teachers as well as students as more time was available for reflection and discussion of our teaching strategies, and less time was spent on preparation and evaluation.

ここで紹介するのは規定のELPのカリキュラムに取り入れられる３種類の長期プロジェクトです。このプロジェクトでは学生が授業での取り組みを他のクラスの学生と相互に発表・評価し、意見交換などを通して真のコミュニケーションを実践していきます。

クラス間のコラボレーションは、学生だけでなく教師にとっても有益なものでした。教授法についてより多くの時間をかけて検討でき、また準備や評価は従来より短時間で済んだからです。

Encouraging students to use the target language in authentic communicative situations is a perennial challenge for ESL teachers in monolingual classrooms. Not only do most textbooks stress controlled practice with little opportunity for students to engage in spontaneous, unrehearsed conversation, but students naturally resort to L1 to complete collaborative tasks and projects that could provide rich opportunities to solidify and extend their command of English. This is especially true of students whose desire to learn English has been undermined by years of test-driven study, and whose most fervent wish is to complete their English Language requirement with as little pain and commitment as possible.

How can ESL/EFL teachers foster meaningful and authentic English communication under such conditions? Furthermore, how can teachers in English Language Programs (ELP) with prescribed curricula incorporate projects that create an authentic context for communication into an already full agenda? What about the preparation time involved? We found that projects shared between students in adjacent classrooms encouraged real-life communication, increased student motivation, and saved a great deal of planning and preparation time. Cross-classroom projects originated from and supported required program units and activities, so their inclusion was more a matter of redefining methods of instruction rather than the addition of extra activities.

A collaborative approach to learning was introduced, featuring a sustained focus upon a generative topic, student participation in planning, preparing, and evaluation of tasks, and the sharing of results in an authentic context. As facilitators, we supported students' efforts and ensured program goals were met. Our own collaboration did not require much time. Planning took place between classes or during our 10-minute bus ride to the train. The students generated and prepared most of the materials for the projects. This gave us time to confer with students, monitor their progress, and work individually with those who needed more support.

In this paper, we will briefly introduce the principles that underlie our practice. We will then describe three cross-classroom exchange projects completed during a single term. A calendar illustrating the integration of these projects into the required curriculum follows the description.

Elements of our practice

The following principles guide our approach to language teaching:

- The synthesis of content study and language learning
- A sustained focus upon one generative topic or question
- Individual and group work with relevant outcomes
- Emphasis upon the learning process rather than upon end product
- Collaborative learning
- Student involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluation of tasks
- The teacher as guide and facilitator
- Sharing of results in an authentically communicative context

The first four principles are derived from Content-based Instruction (CBI), or, more directly, from a variant of CBI that Murphy & Stoller (2001) have termed "Sustained Content Language Teaching" (SCLT). The hallmark of SCLT is a duel focus upon language and content. Language and content are complimentary functions that facilitate linguistic competence and enhance motivation. Rather than memorizing isolated language fragments, students experience language in an authentic context as they work together to explore a meaningful topic or question over the course of an entire term. As students gather and synthesize information, evaluate sources, share their findings, and

reflect upon outcomes, they acquire relevant vocabulary, encounter complex linguistic structures, gain insights into social and pragmatic conventions of language, develop critical thinking skills, and improve their ability to convey information and ideas to others in the target language (See Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Murphy & Stoller, 2001; Pally, 2000).

Grabe & Stoller (1997) note that the diversity of application and the complex processes of language learning have made CBI difficult to evaluate. However, studies of representative CBI and SCLT programs indicate that SCLT results in

- Greater student satisfaction with their learning
- Deeper engagement with content and a better understanding of learning processes
- Less anxiety and greater willingness to speak
- Increased motivation
- Language facility and content knowledge equal to, or better than, students in traditional language programs. (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Pally, 2000)

The perceived advantages of SCLT over traditional methods of language teaching can be summarized as follows:

- SCLT removes the artificial division between language and content.
- SCLT supports contextualized learning.
- SCLT enhances motivation and activates students' interest in learning.
- SCLT builds critical thinking skills.
- SCLT provides an authentic context for language learning.
- SCLT lends itself to strategy instruction.
- SCLT brings language teaching more in line with other academic disciplines. (Anderson, 1985; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Pally, 2000; Snow, Met & Genesee 1989; Snow & Brinton, 1997)

Support for SCLT practices comes from a wide range of academic disciplines, among them cognitive psychology, educational psychology, linguistics, second language acquisition, social learning theory, language pedagogy, reading pedagogy, literature, genre studies, and rhetoric and composition. A discussion of this cross-disciplinary perspective is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Grabe & Stoller (1997) and Pally (2000) provide an excellent summary and a detailed analysis of the theoretical basis and research in support of CBI and SCLT. Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of *flow*, or a *state of optimal experience*, offers insights into how SCLT enhances motivation through the successful completion of challenging tasks, and Bloom's (1971) taxonomy is useful in understanding how students develop critical thinking skills through SCLT classroom practices.

The next three principles that guide our practice are concerned with collaborative learning. Here we must make a distinction between collaborative and cooperative types of learning. According to Johnson and Johnson (1989), cooperation is a form of collaboration in which people work together to reach shared goals (p.2). However, the

focus is usually upon the completion of a task, with little attention given to group process and social skills or to the dialogue and interactions that characterize collaborative endeavors. Collaboration, on the other hand, involves social relationships, interactive discourse, and consensus among members. Panitz (1996) goes so far as to characterize collaborative learning as a "personal philosophy, not just a classroom technique" (para. 3).

> In all situations where people come together in groups, it [collaborative learning] suggests a way of dealing with people which highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the groups (sic) actions. The underlying premise of collaborative learning is based upon consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other group members. CL practitioners apply this philosophy in the classroom, at committee meetings, with community groups, within their families and generally as a way of living with and dealing with other people. (Panitz. 1996, para. 3)

In "What is a Thinking Curriculum?" Fennimore and Tinzmann (1990) describe how cooperative learning supports student-centered classrooms, and how learner development is enhanced through critical thinking and cooperative learning. The goal of thinking curricula, according to Fennimore and Tinzman, is to produce knowledgeable, self-determined, strategic, and empathetic learners (para.1).

> Knowledgeable learners acquire a substantial and organized body of knowledge which they can use fluently to make sense of the world, solve problems, and make decisions. They can also evaluate the limitations of their knowledge and their perspectives on the world. Self-determined learners feel capable and continually strive to acquire and use the tools they need to learn. Strategic learners have a repertoire of thinking and learning strategies that they use with skill and purpose to think about and control their own learning and guide their learning of new content. Finally, empathetic learners are able to view themselves and the world from perspectives other than their own, including perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds. A major goal of restructuring in general and thinking curricula in particular is to develop these qualities in all students. (Fennimore & Tinzman, 1990, para.1.)

When learners collaborate, the sum is always greater than its parts: ideas are generated from the ongoing discourse and sharing of discoveries. Different perspectives lead to greater understanding, and students are challenged to develop increasingly complex thinking skills and language skills through their engagement with content materials and with one another (Anderson, 1995; Gokhale, 1995; Pally, 2000; Nation, 2001; Vygotsky 1926/1986). As Tinzmann observes:

> Indeed, it is through dialogue and interaction that curriculum objectives come alive. Collaborative learning affords students enormous advantages not available from more traditional instruction

> because a group- whether it be the whole class or a learning group within the class- can accomplish meaningful learning and solve problems better than any individual can alone. (Tinzmann et al. 1990, para.2)

Thus, collaborative learning offers a rich opportunity for students and teachers to go beyond acquiring factual knowledge to develop a deeper understanding of concepts and processes for dealing with the world (Fennimore & Tinzmann, 1990).

Tinzmann et al. (1990) recognize four characteristics of collaborative classrooms: shared knowledge among teachers and students, shared authority among teachers and students, teachers as mediators and facilitators, and heterogeneous groupings of students. This last characteristic is of particular interest and importance for teachers at Japanese universities, as Japanese students exhibit a wide range of ability and competence in L2, despite having similar educational backgrounds. Rather than streaming students into homogeneous levels, Tinzmann et al recommend capitalizing upon diversity:

> The perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds of all students are important for enriching learning in the classroom. As learning beyond the classroom increasingly requires understanding diverse perspectives, it is essential to provide students opportunities to do this in multiple contexts in schools. In collaborative classrooms where students are engaged in a thinking curriculum, everyone learns from everyone else, and no student is deprived of this opportunity for making contributions and appreciating the contributions of others.
>
> Thus, a critical characteristic of collaborative classrooms is that students are not segregated according to supposed ability, achievement, interests, or any other characteristic. Segregation seriously weakens collaboration and impoverishes the classroom by depriving all students of opportunities to learn from and with each other. (Tinzmann, Heterogeneous groupings, para 1& 2)

Collaborative learning requires both teachers and students to assume new roles and take on new responsibilities. Students must become more responsible for their own learning and teachers must create a rich environment for learning that allows students to link new information to past experiences and to experiences outside the classroom. Attention must be given to group process and social skills as well as to language learning strategies and content information (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Panitz, 1996; Tinzmann et al, 1990).

Our final guiding principle—sharing results in an authentic communicative context- is the most difficult to realize. Widdowson (1990) argues that the classroom is an artificial environment and introducing authentic English materials is not enough to create an authentic context. Learners, by definition, are outsiders and do not use the target language to accomplish communication tasks in the ways in which an authentic discourse community might (Widdowson, 1998, p.711). However, the incorporation of SCLT practices and collaborative learning strategies does produce a discourse community of sorts. When students share their thinking

processes, follow conventions of English discourse, and share the results of their research with others who have a real purpose in acquiring this knowledge, then they comprise a community of learners whose application of English is self-directed and fills a legitimate need. This may not fully satisfy Widdowson's criteria for an authentic discourse community, but it is perhaps as close an approximation as can be hoped for in the artificial environs of the classroom.

The structure of the ELP

Obirin University Junior College has a well-developed, long-standing English language program consisting of first-year required courses and second-year electives. First-year classes meet in the afternoon for 90 minutes twice each week in the same wing of the Tandai building. Students are streamed into 6 levels based on written tests and oral interviews. Each level has a required textbook, and the curriculum calls for four mandatory projects: a book review, a movie review, STEP test practice, and, in the spring semester, a song performance. During the second term, an extended project replaces the song performance. The dates for the mandatory activities are set in advance, and the curriculum is quite full. However, teachers may structure the other components of the course to meet the needs of their students, and they may implement the teaching and assessment methods that they prefer. Final course grades are distributed between program requirement activities (40%) and teacher assessment measures (60%).

The collaboration

The teaching situation facilitated collaboration, as teachers shared a common room and all classes were held on the same days at the same times. During lunch hour, we often shared stories and made adjustments to the curriculum to support the changing needs of our student population. The linking of classes evolved over a two-year period, as we shared our attempts to create an authentic context for communication among fairly low-level and not very motivated students.

As we endeavored to give our classes a consistent and sustained focus, we decided to experiment with classroom project exchanges. The idea grew from our observation that, as students formed closer ties and developed stronger social groups within the classroom, they were more likely to fall back into Japanese when working on tasks and projects. (We have no research to support this idea, but students sometimes complained that speaking English to peers was "unnatural," and that they felt more embarrassed to speak in front of people they knew socially.) Perhaps providing occasions for students to exchange information with students from another class would prove more provocative, less familiar, and thus more conducive to spontaneous and authentic communication.

We also thought that students would benefit from extended research into a substantive topic because of the greater range of linguistic features encountered and also because of the increased motivation students experience when they share ideas about meaningful topics. We wanted to incorporate projects that allow for a deeper engagement with subject matter, encourage reflection, and raise students' awareness of learning processes.

Theme park competition

The first project was based on a chapter in the textbook on the topic of theme parks. After the students had been introduced to the topic by the textbook, groups were assigned to research issues of design, safety, facilities, location, transportation, entertainment, expense, and so forth on the Internet. At least one source had to be in English. Also, students were to interview friends about their reasons for visiting theme parks and about their favorite activities. After students shared their research with their group members, the class came up with a list of criteria that a successful theme park would meet. Then we teachers announced a fictitious competition to build the best theme park. Teams were to design a theme park and create an attractive poster showing the features and facilities at the park. The poster would be entered into the competition. This part of the project took about four classes, or two weeks.

The next phase of the project involved teams trying to sell their theme park idea to the other class, whose teams of judges would choose the winning theme park. Team members had to familiarize themselves with the criteria for a successful park and be able to explain how their park met those criteria. They also had to come up with unique features and selling points that could win the competition in their class. As teams were to judge the theme parks designed by the other class, they had to think about questions to ask members of the other class in order to choose a winner.

The poster presentations were spread over two class periods so that each class would have at least 45 minutes to present their posters to the other class. The presenting class hung their posters on the wall, and the teams gathered around their poster. Groups of judges from the adjacent class went from poster to poster, asking questions and gathering information about the parks. Teams informally described the selling points of their park and answered questions. Students were not allowed to use notes or read from papers. All conversation was extemporaneous.

Judges returned to their own classroom and conferred. Each judging team cast a vote for one park and explained their reasons to the class. Then the whole class voted by secret ballot for the winning theme park, writing the most important reasons for their choice. One park was selected from each class, and a representative from the judges presented an award to the winning team.

Olympic quiz bowl

Our second project was a quiz bowl, which took about six classes to complete. The Olympic Games were being held in Athens, and students expressed interest in following the event. Teams were assigned to research six areas of interest proposed by the two competing classes. Topics were: history of the Olympics; women in the Olympics; Japan and the Olympics; sightseeing in Athens; opening ceremonies; and the Para-Olympics, or Special Olympics. Each team prepared a poster and a 15-minute presentation in which they informed their classmates about their topic. Presenters were not to read, but each team member was allowed to have one small note card with key words, names, and numbers, to facilitate memory. Class members took notes and asked questions.

After each team had taught the class about their topic, teams composed questions about their topic for the quiz

bowl. Each question was awarded a point value of 10, 20, 30, or 40 points by the team, according to difficulty of content, type of question, and the complexity of the answer. Questions were written on cards and put into envelopes labeled with topic and point value. Teams prepared two identical sets of envelopes so that each class would have the same questions to answer.

On quiz bowl day, contests were held in both classrooms. Classrooms were decorated with students' posters. Half of the teams from each class went to the other classroom with their questions, making a home group of teams and a visiting group of teams in each class. Visiting teams played first. Each visiting team, in turn, chose a topic and point value. Home teams chose a question from the appropriate envelope. The visiting team had one minute to answer the question. If they could not answer correctly, another visiting team could volunteer an answer.

Although the categories for both classes were the same, presenters in different classes did not necessarily provide the same information. However, if teams had done their research well and had questioned the presenters closely, most of the important information would be known to at least some of the team members in each class. After 30 minutes, the visiting teams totaled up their points by team and by class, and then they asked the home team their questions. After the games, points were totaled and awards were presented to the winning team from each class and to the teacher and students from the winning classroom.

Survey project

The third classroom exchange was a survey project. Students formed teams, chose an appropriate topic, and created survey questions. One class period was devoted to an exchange in which students from one class administered their survey to the other class. Students then prepared a 10-minute presentation in which they shared the findings of their survey, explained the reasons for their choice of topic, and discussed the societal or environmental implications of their results. Students had to use a variety of critical- thinking skills to research their topics, formulate questions, and create a context for the survey results.

Evaluation

The Program assigned 30% of the grade distribution to the book review, the movie review, and the STEP test. All teachers were asked to assign a 10% *TDG* or *teacher discretion* grade, which we used to reward class contributions, group-work skills, and improvement. In our sections, the three projects comprised the remaining 60% of the students' course grade.

Grades for the projects were based primarily on the various tasks leading to the final product. Students compiled their project work in a folder that was evaluated holistically. Some tasks, such as summaries of Internet articles, were assigned individual grades, whereas other tasks, such as presentations, received a group grade. Certainly not all work in the process was graded. Self-evaluations, peer-evaluations, and group self-evaluations were included in the grading process. Students were involved in deciding the

criteria for some grades, such as the criteria for evaluating presentations. Teacher assessment and peer-evaluations were sometimes combined to arrive at the final grade.

Reflection

The projects provided students with an opportunity to direct their own learning, conduct research, build critical thinking skills, acquire content knowledge, collaborate on tasks with meaningful outcomes, and engage in meaningful discourse in an authentic communicative context. Although some students used Japanese in the classroom, and some consulted Japanese language sources, most students performed as much of their work as they possibly could in English. During the preparatory phase, teams frequently had to discuss their progress and explain their ideas to the whole class in English. Thus, they soon began to see that group work was best conducted in English as a rehearsal for whole class discussions and presentations.

As students collaborated on group tasks and shared complex information, they were exposed to a far wider range of vocabulary and linguistic forms than they ever would have encountered or used in merely following the textbook (Snow, Met, and Genesee, 1989). The in-depth exploration of a single topic provided the students with numerous opportunities to reinforce their learning of both content and language. The recurrence of vocabulary items and grammatical structures in an authentic context assisted memory and heightened student awareness of the pragmatic features of English. Even within streamed classes, language acquisition progresses in different ways and at a different pace for each student. The focus upon content rather than upon discrete language items accommodated these individual differences. Student attainment was possible on many different fronts, and each individual student could make a significant contribution to the class.

Despite the competitive nature of the contests, the very serious discussions and rigorous preparatory work that went into the final products raised these events from the level of entertaining games. The contests were a reward for hard work and provided a form of feedback as to how well each team had prepared. The students researched topics that had meaning for them, acquired content knowledge that enhanced their understanding of real world situations, and, by being asked to share their knowledge in the manner in which learners in other academic and professional situations do, formed an authentic student discourse community.

Our director was quite supportive of collaboration and innovative teaching strategies, so we were free to use evaluation tools that fit our methodology. Had our program had a heavily weighted exit test or final exam for all sections, the evaluation process would not have been as accurate, appropriate, or as comprehensive. However, the progress we observed in our students made us confident that they could do at least as well, if not better, on an objective test as students in other sections of the program. In addition, they acquired learning skills, research skills, content knowledge, pragmatic competence, fluency, and self-confidence that no standardized test is designed to measure.

The collaboration necessary to facilitate cross-classroom exchanges benefited the teachers as well as the students. Less time was spent planning for classes and preparing materials, and more time was available to share concerns, discuss our

observations, and reflect upon our teaching. We gained fresh perspectives into the minds and behavior of our students as we saw them through the other's eyes. Our teaching became more balanced, and we developed new teaching strategies to implement the projects we designed.

Conclusion

We were fortunate to have a measure of flexibility in designing our course content and our evaluation process. However, cross-classroom exchanges can also be incorporated into ELP programs with formal exit exams and tightly-structured weekly syllabi. Program goals and objectives can be met in ways that are not readily apparent from looking at a linear course outline. By thinking beyond the prescribed features of the course curriculum, teachers can introduce innovative methods of instruction that give greater depth to program requirements. Collaboration can provide the inspiration for such innovation and the mechanism by which innovation achieves its intended goal.

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Appendix 1. Semester schedule for Oral English, Obirin University Tandai

1st semester 2004

Oral I **Level 2 (Martha), 2+ (Britt)**

	Tuesday		Friday	
April	13	Welcome	16	
	20		23	Izu trip
	27		30	
May	4	No class	7	
	11		14	Theme park
	18		21	
	25	Book review	28	
June	1		4	
	8	Olympic Quiz	11	
	15		18	
	22		25	Movie review
	29		2	
July	6		9	Survey
	13		16	
	20	Song		

Grades:		
	Theme Park	20%
	Olympic Quiz	20%
	Survey	20%
	Book review	10%
	Movie review	10%
	STEP	10%
	TDG	10%