Two stories to share about the discussion, "Using extended oral fluency practice in class"

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In reaction to the conference theme, "Sharing our Stories," this writer left JALT2005 with two stories worthy to share. One involves the discussion format utilized for the first time at this conference. The other concerns the positive reactions and feedback from the participants of the discussion towards using extended oral fluency practice in the language classroom. The former provides insights into the new format for future JALT presenters who may be considering using it, while the latter should be insightful for any ESL/EFL teacher.

　この著者は"ストーリーを共有する"という２００５年度のJALTのテーマにおいて、2つの価値のある提言をした。一つ目は、ここではじめて使われた"会話練習のひな型"であり、二つ目は言語教室で流暢に会話練習するのに必要なのは、参加者の積極てきな反応と、それに対応する的確なフィードバックであるということです。　これらによって、今後JALTのプレゼンターたちがその"会話練習のひな型"を使うとき、そこから新たな"型"を生み出すきっかけにもなるでしょう。また、あらゆるESL/EFLの教師たちにも同じく作用するはずです。

Story number one

During the past 15 years, I have given presentations over various themes at JALT conferences in forums, poster sessions, and workshops. For the past several years, however, most contained a thinly veiled "promotional" focus for a textbook series since this assured that the conference fees would be covered by the publisher. Unfortunately, though, there existed a nagging anxiety that participants would walk out once they sensed the commercial bend. The new discussion format, however, eased this feeling since it allowed time for a short "promotional" demonstration by the facilitator, while leaving the focus of the presentation on the participants and their discussion. In other words, the short "sales" pitch could be covered, by way of example, during the introduction of the topic, while the main part of the presentation would consist of the participants providing their opinions and insights about the topic itself. Simply, this appeared to be the perfect format to use at a teachers' conference since teachers, for the most part, love to talk.

The discussion format was described on the JALT website as follows:

> These will not be formal presentations, but sessions to discuss topics and to share ideas. The discussion facilitator(s) will begin with a brief (10-15 minute) introduction to a particular topic before opening the floor to discussion, guided by pre-set questions. . . . Other questions or discussion points may be posed by the participants after the discussion of the pre-set questions has ended.

The extended oral fluency discussion followed this pattern. Portions of the abstract submitted to the vetting committee are reproduced below:

> The facilitator will begin the discussion by introducing, as an example, an extended oral fluency exercise that he incorporated in a conversation textbook series . . . the floor will be opened to discussion concerning the use of extended oral fluency practice . . . the discussion will be guided by the following: What are the benefits in using extended fluency practice in class? How to get students to discuss for extended periods in class? Are there any drawbacks to extended oral fluency practice?

As stated, the presentation began by introducing the topic with a demonstration of an extended oral fluency exercise. The participants were provided with a copy of the exercise (see Appendix). To keep the demonstration short, a volunteer readily helped to model it rather than having the participants break into pairs and do the exercise as would be done in a classroom.

Once the demonstration and the brief discussion concerning the benefits and pitfalls of the conversation template exercise were finished, the participants looked at the first question that was listed in the abstract printed in the conference handbook: What are the benefits in using extended fluency practice in class? This moment would make or break the presentation since its success rested on how willing the participants were to have a discussion. However, once they paired off and started eliciting opinions, they were more than willing to speak with each other.

By the time it appeared that the interest in the pair work was beginning to wane, the participants were asked if anyone wanted to share what was discussed in their pair activity. Luckily, one teacher rose to the occasion and raised his hand. Then in the talkative fashion of teachers, others shared their insights as well.

A self-conscious anxiety stuck while reading the second question since it was strangely worded: How to get students to discuss for extended periods in class? It was quickly rephrased as, "What are some good ways or techniques to get students to discuss for extended periods in class?" Off they went eagerly discussing that question as well. Once what they discussed in pairs was shared with the group, a large number of good suggestions were provided by the participants.

The last question asked the participants to consider any drawbacks to extended oral fluency practice. Perhaps, since most of the time was devoted to the first two questions, very little remained to spend on this one. Before the end, it was hoped that one more question could be asked: Why do so few textbooks incorporate extended oral fluency exercises?

Unfortunately, there was not enough time for the presenter and participants to discuss this question.

Reflections

Positive aspects:

- An excellent format for brainstorming a pedagogical issue with your peers.

- An excellent way to demonstrate a teaching technique and get feedback on it.

- If the participants are eager to listen and share their viewpoints, it is a great way to learn how others approach their teaching environment.

- A focused environment in which individuals with a common interest can share their stories.

- The sixty-minute slot allows enough time for the discussion.

Suggestions for improvement:

- Prepare an overhead slide or handout that contains the discussion questions and other pertinent information (your name and email address). Participants were expected to have the conference handbook readily available, so could read the discussion questions from it. However, it appeared that several participants did not, so the questions had to be quickly written on the blackboard.

- Make enough copies. Copies of the exercise used for the demonstration ran out too quickly. The participants without copies did not have anything to carry from the discussion.

- Carefully, budget your time. Overall time was carefully watched, but the group had to rush through the last question, so there was no time for extra questions posed by the participants.

- Hand out and/or exchange name cards. Before it started, mine was given to people who arrived early, but late arrivals did not receive any. In hindsight, the last five minutes should have been saved for exchanging cards or contact information.

- Record the discussion. This discussion was not so there is no permanent record of the excellent insights and suggestions made by the participants.

After the presentation, one of the participants said it was one of the most informative presentations he had experienced in many years. He said that it can be a little disappointing to enter a room and face a PowerPoint presentation from which the presenter reads verbatim. Overall, it may be nice to receive a handout at the beginning that contains reduced reproductions of the complete presentation, but what reason is there to stay if everything is in the handout? In a discussion, however, the presenter is just a facilitator who gets the ball rolling. The vast majority of what happens is up to the people who participate, it is not handed to them. Simply, the connection made between the participants can result in a truly memorable presentation. That was definitely true at this one.

Story number two

It is hoped that most English teachers trained in

communicative-based pedagogy strive to create a classroom environment in which the students are given ample opportunity to speak the target language. In support of this approach, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) recently stated it wants to promote a course of English study that instructs students how to "carry on a dialogue and to exchange views . . . speak extensively" (MEXT, 2003). Having "walked the walk and talked the talk" of the communicative approach, resulted in my writing a textbook series that contains ample extended oral fluency practice. Unfortunately, the sales figures have yet to verify that the specific techniques employed are widely embraced by teachers. Therefore, the new discussion format provided a way to find out how other teachers felt about extended oral fluency practice, how they went about doing it, and what they thought about a technique utilized in my books.

Specifically, the type of extended oral fluency exercise utilized for the demonstration portion of the discussion was a conversation template. John Hopkinson (2002) wrote, "a template is nothing more than a sentence with gaps the students fill in, such as: When I _____, I used to _____, but now I ____." Having used the technique years before reading his article, I found, as he had, that a template, "maximizes speaking practice time, can run for some time, and appears to be highly enjoyable" (Hopkinson, 2002). Simply, it was found that templates are suitable for the multi-level classroom environment encountered in Japanese high schools and universities. They help to activate discussion about students' own lives, interests, and opinions; and allow more speaking time for the students than most other

techniques. In addition, they provide a structure around which, according to Haymes (2005), "learners will be able to incorporate some recently studied language items into production." This is an important distinction of oral fluency exercises when compared with free talking. Overall, templates allow more fluent students to expand on their answers; whereas, they provide structure for less fluent speakers.

The participant who helped demonstrate the template was familiar with the textbook series from which it was taken and so did a great job showing how a template conversation can be flexible to the questions being asked. As the demonstration finished, it was pointed out that through using the template, "students have sustained conversations with several speaking partners" (Biegel, 2003, p.vi). To ensure that they talk with several partners, they are separated into "A" and "B" groups. "A" and "B" students face one another. When the conversation ends, "A" students move to a new "B" student partner.

Changing partners is especially useful for the less proficient students, as Helgesen (2003) noted, since it allows them to improve their understanding by recycling the task. Also, they can learn how to do the task better by negotiating meaning with various partners. During the discussion about how to get students talking for extended periods, most teachers agreed that one of the best methods was to have the students move around and discuss with several partners. Several mentioned techniques they used to do this in an efficient way. One teacher mentioned he used a pack of cards and distributed those to the students. It sounded quite interesting, but unfortunately, he brought it up just when

it was time to go on to the next question. As a result, the process was not adequately explored.

Of course the main pitfall of a conversation template is that it is rather unnatural since the order of questions is determined by the template. As earlier stated, though, the students are able to deviate from the template and expand their discussion if they like. The template does allow a lot of flexibility. The blanks on it do not represent the length of an utterance; they only exist to show students where they need to supply information. For more advanced students, they can expand their answers and comments as much as they like. They can even ask follow-up questions. For the less proficient students, it provides enough structure to keep them in the conversation. In addition, as Jones (2003) stated, it is a personalized activity built around a framework of questions that ask about their opinions rather than unreal information. Finally, and perhaps mostly importantly, it provides the students with ample practice to speak in English for an extended period of time.

During the discussion about the benefits of extended fluency practice, one participant said that it allowed students to do what they want to do the most. Overall, that is what most of the teachers attending the presentation appeared to believe, and it is also what most of my students answer to a question written in a short need analysis exercise usually assigned at the beginning of the term. In addition, it is what MEXT appears to want as well; namely, "to accustom and familiarize students with speaking in English and to enable them to speak about their thoughts" (MEXT, 2003). Interestingly, though, Burden (2005) found that talking to partners in English ranked fourth out of twenty activities

in enjoyment and twelfth in usefulness (p.7). The 198 individuals who participated in his study were first-year university students in compulsory conversation classes. It is unclear, however, as to the quality and quantity of the speaking activities they were rating. Even so, Burden agrees "the students need to be initially drawn to the activity and stimulated to persevere, meaning that activities need to be seen to be personally relevant" (p.8).

One participant in the discussion said that the students usually wanted to talk about themselves, not about some artificial characters in a textbook. Another said it appeared best to use materials that motivated the students, topics the students had interest in and knew something about, or were prepared to talk about. If that occurred, then they were more than willing to talk. One participant mentioned a couple of his students once told him they had gotten so wrapped up speaking in class that they kept talking all the way to the station before realizing they were speaking in English. In the study by Burden, "the teacher talking about British culture" (Burden 2005, p.7) ranked second in usefulness and first in enjoyment. This may reflect that the material used had more relevance to the background of the instructor than the students; hence, this may help explain why talking with partners did not rank higher in his study.

Overall, though, the message was repeated: students want to talk about themselves and things that affect them in their lives. One teacher said her students were willing to learn something new, some content material if it was something that they needed and they were provided with some basic foundation to build upon. Global issues and other forms of content were mentioned by participants. The students

in the Burden study highly ranked, in both enjoyment and usefulness, content about British culture.

The question about drawbacks to extended oral fluency practice did not elicit much. The only comment that can be recalled is oral fluency practice may make the time in the class drag a little for the teacher who is slightly sidelined and out of the spotlight. Of course, teachers are free to take part themselves; especially, if there is an uneven number of students. In addition, while the students are discussing, the teacher is free to roam around the classroom and help individual students who may be having difficulty.

Conclusion

In closing, the discussion format worked very well for the presentation. It created an adequate venue in which to discuss the importance of extended oral fluency practice in the classroom, to share the ways they help to facilitate such practice, and to analyze whether conversation templates are a viable way to activate such practice. Simply, this new style of presentation led to the creation of a worthwhile experience for both the facilitator and the participants. Teachers like to talk, so what better format can there be at a teachers' conference than a discussion?

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Appendix

Conversation

A. Practice this conversation with at least four partners.

Student A

_____. (Greet B.)

Oh, _____. So, how would you like to see your life change in the next two or three years?

Why do you say that?

_____ because _____. Tell me what utopia would be for you?

I'd like _____ because _____.

It's my opinion that _____. What do you think, and what influences have you had?

I'd like to see _____ because _____. What would you like to see changed?

What don't you want to see changed?

I don't want _____ because _____.

I think _____ because _____. What do you think?

Do you think the world will be a better or worse place in fifty years?

Student B

_____. (Return greeting.)

Well, _____.

_____. What about you? How would you like to see your life change?

My utopia would be _____ because _____. Do you agree? What would utopia be for you?

Do you think your image of the future has been influenced by mass media? If so, what influences have you had?

Well, I've been influenced by _____ because _____. What would you like to see changed in the more distant future?

From my point of view, I think _____ because _____.

I don't want _____ because _____. How about you?

What do you think would happen if people started to make human clones?

I believe, _____ because _____.

It's my opinion that it will be _____ because _____. How about you?