# Creating a Framework for Content-Rich Speaking

John Campbell-Larsen
Momoyama Gakuin University

**Reference Data:**

Campbell-Larsen, J. (2011). Creating a framework for content-rich speaking. In A. Stewart & N. Sonda (Eds.), *JALT 2011 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Conversation is one of the central skills of language, but many Japanese language students experience great difficulty in holding conversations in English. In many cases students give very short turns in conversation, with very little attempt to elaborate. A lack of vocabulary and grammar may seem to be the main reasons why conversation proves difficult, but this paper will suggest that previous classroom experiences and transference of discourse norms from Japanese may cause students to create content-poor utterances. The author will go on to detail how *relexicalization*, a mix of subjective and objective content, and use of smallwords such as "Well", "You know" and "I mean" can serve as a framework for students to create utterances that are more natural and meet the social, interactional demands of conversation.

会話は中心的言語技能の一つであるが、多くの日本人学生は、英語での会話に難解さを感じ、英語会話の中で短く、簡潔化された発話をしようとする。語彙や文法力の欠如が、英語会話の難点の主な理由であるようである。本稿では、教室での英語学習経験や日本語の談話法の転移により、英語会話の内容が乏しくなるという考えを論ずる。さらに、再語彙化（relexicalization）、事実と意見の混合、そして「Well」、「You know」、「I mean」などの短い慣用表現が、会話の社会的・相互作用的要求を満たす、自然な発話をする枠組みとなることを説明する。

This paper will propose that thinking of student speaking in terms of its interactive content rather than its just its form will serve as a good basis for developing naturalistic speaking skills in students. This stance is based on the observation, derived from videotaped student conversations, that many Japanese students engaging in spoken interaction resort to extremely brief, low-content utterances, which are here termed *content-poor*. These utterances typically contain a single statement of information or opinion, often in the form of an ungrammaticized sentence fragment, and do little beyond meeting the barest requirements of a response to a question. Data analysis of student speaking reveals that single word utterances, single sentence responses, anodyne and stock answers to phatic questions are very common phenomena, and these kinds of brief answers are often continued over an extended series of turns. Such brief utterances, combined with extended silences, can give the impression of an apparent unwillingness to communicate, evasiveness, disinterest or personal dislike.

Although many students explain these shortcomings away by referring to personal factors such as shyness or embarrassment, or lack of lexical-grammatical knowledge, in fact, a lack of understanding of the nature of interactive spoken discourse, transfers of first language (L1) norms, and previous experience of classroom language learning may be at the root of the

problem. If so, this gives a solid basis for teachers to address this ongoing difficulty and help students to engage in more expansive kinds of talk. This more expansive kind of speaking is here referred to by the term *content-rich.* This kind of speaking evades precise definition in that it has an emergent quality to it, is highly context dependent, and only visible across a number of turns. Content-rich speaking is speaking in which the student *avoids* content-poor utterances, circular though this definition may appear to be. Some of the elements of content-rich speaking, which will be discussed here, include relexicalization, speaking that contains a mix of subjective and objective statements, and use of discourse markers. This list is not to be thought of as exhaustive, or particularly fine-grained, but rather as illustrating some areas that are relatively accessible to students and readily applicable in classroom situations.

In order to arrive at an understanding of the kinds of speaking that may be termed content-rich, it is useful to first look at some content-poor speaking and try to account for why many students in Japan adopt this as a default speaking style.

## Mind the Gap: Noticing How Students Talk

Perhaps because of the prevalence of interview tests (for example the *Eiken* interview test) and also the nature of English as a language only experienced in a teacher-centered classroom, many students in a Japanese context seem to approach spoken interactions in English as a kind of interview. More precisely, they anticipate being asked questions by their interlocutor (either the teacher or another student) and see it as their role to answer the question in a factual, concise manner, displaying correct language use. Native English speaking teachers may also unconsciously contribute to this by being unrealistically patient or supportive interlocutors. Even English interactions with other students often take place in an interview format, with one student asking a question and the other student providing an answer which satisfies the transactional intent of the question, but little else. Consider the following recorded (videotaped) unrehearsed, free conversation interaction between two students in a talk-time segment of a university English class taught by the author:

S1: What did you do weekend? Last Weekend?

S2: Part-time job.

S1: Oh! What, what, what's job?

S2: Convenience store.

S1: Where? Where?

S2: Near my home.

S1: Seven Eleven?

S2: No, Circle K.

Student two gives responses to the questions in the briefest manner possible, with the interaction continuing in much the same vein, exemplifying content-poor speaking. Such interactions are by no means untypical. It is suggested here that one underlying cause of this kind of interaction may be students' failure to differentiate between transactional and interactional exchanges; that is, they fail to appreciate the kind of discourse they are being asked to engage in. Cook (1989) states, "The language learner, in order to be able to operate effectively as a participant in discourse needs to be able to identify what type of discourse he or she is involved in and to predict how it will typically be structured" (p. 49).

Applying the norms from one type of discourse (interviews) to a different type of discourse (conversation) will most probably not lead to naturalistic conversational interactions. Habituation to this transactional mode of speaking leaves students ill-prepared to engage in more expansive types of discourse.

In addition to misapplying discourse norms, students may also be mistaking the very nature of free conversation, assum-

ing "free" to mean "speaking without goals." But as McCarthy (1998) observes, "…casual conversation is no less goal driven than any other type of talk, even though the goals may be multiple, emergent and predominantly relational" (p. 31). Not only are the students not aware of the means by which they can fulfill conversational goals in English, they may not even be able to conceptualize what conversational (as opposed to transactional or display) goals are, nor conceive of them as legitimate targets in classroom activity.

To sum up, many Japanese learners of English have experienced spoken English discourse primarily as classroom language in which the teacher asks a question, the student answers briefly and the teacher provides feedback on the form or content of the answer. (See Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975, for a model of this kind of classroom discourse.) Alternatively, speaking activities may be used as practice for interview tests with a focus on correctness in forming sentences. The effects of this experiential background manifest themselves in the kind of stilted, content-poor speaking referred to above, which seems to validate Widdowson's observation that

> The acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities in a language. On the contrary, it would seem to be the case that an overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities. (1978, p. 67)

## Japanese Language and Discourse Interference

Expanding on the notion that students' speaking has been influenced by previous educational experiences and by expectations of what kind of speaking should (and should not) take place in a classroom, consideration also has to be made of the effects of Japanese language and discourse norms on students attempts to engage in spoken English interactions.

As a generalization, it may be observed that the Japanese language both at the sentence and discourse level tends towards omission, deletion and ellipsis in much everyday expression in a way that is starkly different to English. As Maynard comments, "It is a common practice in many languages not to verbalize known or obvious things. But in comparison with the Japanese language, English is under strict constraints. What one can leave unsaid in English is rather limited" (1998, p. 113). The implication here is that the things that can be left unsaid in Japanese are much more numerous than would be the case in English, with the logical extension being that things which can be left unsaid in Japanese may remain unsaid in English when students engage in English language conversations.

In Japanese speaking, single words can stand as full sentences in their own right. For example, in talking about an upcoming movie release, a Japanese language response *mitai* (Verb *miru* (see) suffixed with *-tai* showing volition) is acceptable, and both subject and object may be omitted. In English a similar level of ellipsis, "want (to) see", would not be considered appropriate. English discourse would normally feature a fuller expression such as, "Oh yeah, I really want to see it". Murphey (1994) makes a case for the role of short utterances or "mentions" in language pedagogy. However, many of the examples he gives are in the form of transactional, not interactional exchanges. It is not asserted here that English never resorts to short utterances, but that overuse, to the extent of relying solely on such short turns in an interactional exchange, is non-normative.

This aspect of Japanese language behavior seems to transfer into many students spoken English, with students failing to realize both the socio-cultural and also grammatical inappropriateness of this kind of expression. As a result, single words or short, ungrammaticized word strings are offered up as full

turns, as exemplified by the quoted student conversation above.

A further example of transference from Japanese that contributes to a sense of poor content is the area of re-lexicalization, that is, varying the lexis between and across turns. As McCarthy (1998) points out, "The ability to vary one's lexis while still saying more or less the same thing pushes the discourse forward and gives out important interactional signals (p. 112)." He goes on to give a concocted example, commenting that it "…would be considered by most people as odd."

S1: Hi! Freezing cold today!

S2: (with exact same intonation) Hi! Freezing cold today! (McCarthy, 1998, p. 113)

However, in Japanese discourse the repetition of adjectives across turns is commonplace. Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki and Tao (1996) report that repetition of lexis as a response is used twice as often in Japanese than in English, prompting Greer, Bussinguer, Butterfield and Mischinger (2009) to speculate that it is "…probable that Japanese learners of English (…) will tend to over-rely on this interactional practice (p. 8)."

In Japanese, the assertion that today is *samui* (cold) is generally answered with the same lexical item, although the intonation may be varied. Likewise, assertions that a meal is *oishii* (delicious) may be echoed exactly by the other diners with no sense of awkwardness. Thus, summer days are described in English by Japanese students as hot and seldom, if ever as boiling or roasting or scorching. Tests are difficult, not hard or impossible, and so on. In speaking, these kinds of reactions, used repeatedly, may contribute to an impression that is odd to native speakers or other proficient English speakers, and contribute to an overall sense of distance and disengagement.

In lexical recognition tests given by the author to students of intermediate, high intermediate and advanced level, students usually claim to know approximately 90% of adjectives from a list of 40 "daily adjectives", but claim to know less than 10% of their "limit" counterparts (e.g., Hot>Boiling, Funny> Hilarious).

The tendency not to relexicalize in (some areas of) Japanese discourse may be a cause of lexically poor utterances in students' English expressions, with the lack of knowledge of the relexicalization options being an epiphenomenon of the underlying discourse assumptions of the students. School experience may also be a factor here, with many vocabulary-building activities aiming to provide a one-to-one correspondence between word and concept and ignoring synonyms and near-synonyms. Whatever the cause or causes, it is clear that if the students do not see the need to relexicalize, they will not exert themselves to learn the vocabulary needed to do so. This may be an example of language use that lies at the fuzzy boundary between sociolinguistic and discourse competencies, but as Ellis (1994) remarks, "There is also general acceptance that transfer is a major factor at the level of discourse (p. 316)." Such transfer (discourse and /or sociolinguistic) may contribute to students' speaking in a way which, in this instance (and in all likelihood others as well), sounds content-poor and overly repetitious to native English speakers, although the students may have no awareness of this.

These brief descriptions of student speaking will be familiar to many EFL teachers in Japan. The suggestions as to some causes of content-poor speaking are not intended to be comprehensive, and doubtless other factors exist. In addition, the effects will vary from classroom to classroom, and from student to student. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that not all so-called poor spoken performance is due to simple lack of lexis and grammar knowledge, and that the actual causes, such as L1 discourse transfer and misidentified discourse type must considered if they are to be addressed.

## Content-Rich Speaking

Although central to the claims made by this paper, content-rich speaking is an elusive concept to define empirically. Because of the open-ended, holistic, subjective and emergent nature of this kind of talk, as was mentioned earlier, it may be best understood in terms of its opposition to content-poor speaking, exemplified by the previously quoted student conversation.

Content-rich speaking is speaking which goes beyond the minimal requirements of answering a (stated or implied) question from one's interlocutor. Content-rich speaking should not be defined so much in terms of its *content*, but rather in terms of its *intent*, namely, to appear engaged, friendly and committed. The ways that this intent can be communicated are highly varied, individuated and context dependent and as such defy precise delineation. In a general sense, content-rich speaking is speaking which is suitable for social interactions, and succeeds at the level of discourse and sociolinguistic appropriateness in that it (probably) contains a mix of subjective and objective statements within or across turns, rather than single assertions of fact or opinion. Encoded within the utterances is a willingness to communicate, be friendly and engaging, and to be proactive in moving the interaction forward, in addition to the informational or evaluative content of the message.

Unlike grammar, where "errors" can be clearly identified and dealt with, errors at the level of discourse are less accessible. As Coulthard and Brazil explain it, "It is partly because a quality of relevance, accessible only to participants, and valid only at the time and place of utterance, can attach to any utterance regardless of its form, that no generalized judgments about well-formedness in discourse can be made" (1992, p. 63).

That being said, some judgments about poorly-formed discourse can be made, although the judgments may be based upon traits in speaking that are emergent across several turns. The conversation quoted earlier, where a student gives three single-phrase answers in a row, can be judged as poor discourse for conversational purposes. Any one of the answers taken in isolation may be judged appropriate in and of itself, but the recurrence of this kind of brevity across several turns starts to create a generalized sense of inappropriateness. The answers may be described as content-poor, in that they contain one piece of information and one only, with no attempt at elaboration, expansion or evaluation.

By contrast, content-rich speaking, which is more appropriate for this kind of social interaction, consists of several elements. Not all elements need to be present in every turn, as was stated above, but the lack of elements over several, or indeed all turns renders the speaking content-poor. Consider the following videotaped conversation. (S2 is the same individual as S2 in the content-poor conversation quoted earlier.) This conversation was recorded 10 months after the first conversation.

S1: My image is Britain is absolutely freezing, you know?

S2: Yeah, me too, I think so too, but I heard, I hear, heared, (*sic*) same as Hokkaido.

S1: Wow, very cold.

S2: But, I haven't ever been to Hokkaido, so I don't know.

This version is clearly a more satisfactory phatic interaction than the earlier one, but is not much more sophisticated in terms of grammar or lexis, and it should therefore, at least in theory, be within the ability of the student to produce an utterance like this. The main differences are that the turns consist of more than one "unit" of information, have a mix of objective and subjective content, don't follow a strict question/answer format, have elements of relexicalization, and are marked. It must be stressed again that not all turns in a given interaction need to contain all of these elements, but as the turns continue, if none of the

turns contain any of these elements, the interaction will have an emergent quality that can be judged as content-poor.

## Marking, Smallwords and Fillers

Hasselgreen (2004) defines the term *smallwords* as "small words and phrases occurring with high frequency in the spoken language, that help to keep our speech flowing, yet do not contribute essentially to the message itself" (p. 135). These kinds of words (*Well, You know, I mean*, etc.) are variously described as *discourse markers* (Swan 1980, p. 172), or sometimes *fillers*, with different authors using different terminology to describe words and collocations that have a broadly similar function in discourse. The term smallwords will be used here.

The occurrence of these words in unrehearsed multiparticipant spoken interactions in English is very high. McCarthy (2010, p. 5) reports, for example that more than half of the 9,226 occurrences of *know* in the CANCODE corpus were accounted for by *you know* constructions. However, these kinds of words are often omitted from textbook conversations. Hasselgreen (2004) notes, "…dialogues in course books still tend to be cleansed of many of the very words and phrases that characterize living dialogue" (p. 238). To give an example from a well-known and widely used English language textbook, *Interchange 3* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 1998) has only four occurrences of *you know* and one occurrence of *I mean* across 31 separate conversation scripts printed in the text. Even if such words and phrases are included in texts, they tend to be included incidentally and without much focus as stand-alone lesson targets.

The centrality, importance and frequency of these words in normal spoken interaction cannot be overlooked. In a loose metaphor, these kinds of words serve something of the function of punctuation and capitalization in written language, that is, they give important signals to the receiver as to the structure and direction of the language being used. To employ the metaphor further, if a student submitted a piece of written work that was devoid of capitalization and punctuation, the teacher would have no hesitation in giving a failing grade, no matter how "correct" or sophisticated the grammar or lexis of the piece was.

The lack of smallwords in spoken language is not as easy to notice as lack of punctuation in writing, for noticing absences is always much more difficult than noticing the presence of aberrant forms, especially with items that have an element of choice about them, as these smallwords do. As with the emergent sense of insufficiency in turn length and content mentioned above, the absence of a smallword in a particular slot may or may not definitively affect the interaction, but the complete absence of these words within and across turns will lead to an emergent sense of "unnaturalness" and dysfluency.

For teaching purposes, one template for content-rich interactional speaking, at a very basic level, is as follows:

- An opener, such as "*Well*", "*Actually*", "*So*", "*Yeah*"
- A statement of fact or opinion.
- A discourse marker signaling intention to expand, such as "*I mean*", "*You know*", "*Like*".
- Further information or opinion or evaluation.
- A turn closer such as "*You know*", "*You know what I mean*", "*Right*", "*Something like that*" and so on. (Turn closing can also be signaled in intonation.)

This description is admittedly very coarse-grained and lacking in subtlety, but it will serve to introduce students to the underlying concept of language as discourse, which involves utterances of more than one sentence, combines subjective and objective utterances, and is rich in marking.

## Conclusion

If a student does not have at least a certain reserve of lexis and grammar to draw on, then of course spoken interaction will not be possible. However, as one of the central uses of language is to engage in free conversation, with the goal be social, friendly and accommodating, students must be given the awareness and tools to structure the language resources that they already have to best effect to meet the social, interactive demands of conversation. It is suggested here that students should be, at an early stage, made aware of the nature of so-called free conversation, of its rules, structures and components, as it is mistaken to assume that such awareness will emerge automatically.

In speaking, a certain amount of deviation from grammatically correct norms will be tolerated, for even a cursory glance at authentic native-speaker interactions reveals that grammatically incorrect utterances are commonplace. However, engaging in repeated content-poor turns, that is, single-word or single-sentence utterances, (continued over several turns) will not invite the same degree of tolerance. This paper has suggested that teaching students to avoid this kind of behavior and teaching them to mix both objective and subjective content in their utterances, engage in relexicalization and embed this within a framework of appropriate smallwords should sit alongside more traditional lexico-grammatical acquisition and practice lessons. The goal of this kind of teaching is to allow students to use language for its most common purpose, which is to converse with others for the sake of conversing.

## Bio Data

John Campbell-Larsen received his M.A. in TESOL from the University of Birmingham. He is currently teaching at Momoyama Gakuin University in Osaka. His research interests include teaching spoken language, discourse of conversation and student autonomy.

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