

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Discussing the Leader Method

Liz Wade

Ristumeikan University

Reference data:

Wade, L. (2009). Discussing the Leader Method. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 conference proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper explores the amount of control a teacher should hand over to students in order to promote student-centered lessons. This is discussed with specific reference to a learning approach called the Leader Method. The approach also calls for an examination of the relationship between the teacher and student.

リーダーメソッドと呼ばれる生徒を主体に考えた学習をベースとして、教師と生徒の役割と関係について考えましょう。授業中、とりわけ課題の説明や他の重要な取り組みの際、教師の誘導は最小限におさえるべきです。

A popular approach for practicing meetings skills employs meetings simulations wherein students role-play a business scenario. For example, one student is a chairperson; the other students hold various other roles. As a group, they have to come to an agreement about a particular problem the company faces. The students prepare in advance for their participation in the meeting. The teacher observes and gives feedback at the end of the “meeting.” Students then incorporate this feedback into their performance the following lesson, which is another meeting simulation. After managing several meetings-skills courses, the benefits of allowing students control over the conversation (Kasper, 1997) seemed evident. As a consequence, the Leader Method originated as a pedagogy that places a priority on student control.

The Leader Method (sometimes known as the Student Leader Method) has been in a process of development since 2001 and was initially implemented in Business English courses for both international and Japanese companies throughout Kansai. It has been adapted for use in courses offered to the general public as well as Japanese civil servants. With its more recent adoption in two Kansai universities, it is now being used to provide communications and TOEIC courses to over 400 undergraduate students.

This paper explores the benefits of using a method that allows students to assume control of conversation both in the class meetings and beyond, and opens a discussion about the role of the teacher in the Leader Method.

A basic outline of a Leader Method course

Today, in learning situations that use the Leader Method, classes either consist of one small group, or are split up into several groups of four or five students. Each lesson one student from each group takes on the role of chairperson or “leader.” The others in the group operate as a team, interacting according to their level of English. The teacher gives the students phrases to lead and to behave as a team, and the leader uses the phrases to move from one topic to the next as well as to start and finish the lesson. Leaders ask for feedback from the teacher, and all students are encouraged to ask the teacher for assistance. The choice of topics depends on the course requirements in addition to the students’ needs and requests, and, when students become more comfortable with the method, they are encouraged to choose topics from a range offered by the teacher. As for the topics themselves, they are arranged in an agenda, which is either prepared by the teacher or by the students, and is printed or written on the board. Leaders often circulate the agenda in advance via email. This means that everyone has an opportunity to clarify the lesson contents before the class. This also serves to train students for real life, where agendas are often sent prior to a meeting. Moreover, it creates an atmosphere where English is not just reserved for the classroom.

A typical lesson will comprise of small talk, followed by topics that reflect the course goals. The teacher monitors carefully, and presents feedback at the end of the lesson or between topics. As mentioned above, teacher input such as feedback is requested by leaders and, once the feedback is completed, the teacher uses set phrases to hand control of the meeting back over to the leader. The leader then moves onto

the next topic or closes the lesson. The students can therefore control how much time they would like a teacher to talk. Indeed, if the students prepare agendas themselves, they can decide how much time is spent on each topic. Again, this is encouraged as the course continues.

Who should control the lesson?

One point of interest concerning the Leader Method is the extent to which teachers can or should hand over control to the student. This paper argues in favour of handing over control, whilst recognizing that other teaching methods allow for development of additional skills such as understanding verbal instructions. It goes on to suggest ways of increasing the amount of control students can exert in conversation by using the Leader Method.

As Ward, Wade, and Dowling (2008) maintain, there are a number of student-centered styles of teaching that offer the learner opportunities to give peer-to-peer correction or lead individual tasks. However, the Leader Method takes these approaches one step further in terms of student-centeredness. Through several years of training teachers to use the Leader Method, and through class observations, a clear scale seems to have emerged. At one end of the spectrum are teachers who are comfortable handing over control for the whole lesson and, in effect, speak only when spoken to. On the other end of the scale are teachers who find it more of a challenge to be less directly involved with setting up tasks and moving the class to the next topic. This is often the case when the teacher would like to achieve a certain amount within a given time frame. With the Leader Method, students work at their own pace, so even if the agenda includes,

for example, a five-minute speed-writing activity, it is the students' responsibility to adhere to that limit. If they run over time, the teacher should let them do so, perhaps offering advice about time-management later during feedback. It may seem that a teacher who interrupts to move the class onto the next item or to set up the task will be able to cover more. However, can the learner gain confidence to control conversation outside of the classroom if they do not practice that skill within the lesson?

The Leader Method trains even the beginner student to start and stop conversation, to ask for help, and manage time. On the surface, this may seem as if learners are merely developing skills to operate within a meeting. However, on an affective level, students gain confidence, through experience, to control their interactions in the real world. For instance, non-native English speakers will often defer to native English speakers in an international meeting or in conversation. If students can learn to control conversation, they will be better equipped to hold their own when in the presence of a native English speaker. For example, assuming that modern North American culture is a predominantly control-orientated culture, in that individuals are encouraged to take control of their destinies (Rosinski, 2003), it stands to reason that a non-American would benefit from learning a similar skill in order to deal with an upcoming negotiation with a group of North Americans.

Achieving linguistic goals

If we accept the position that social interaction is essential for language acquisition (Long, 1983; Van Lier, 1996), and if that interaction is at its most motivating when it has a

clear purpose (Brown & Yule, 1983), then when students initiate small talk or move between topics without the aid of the teacher, they can see immediately that they are able to control conversation in English, and are in turn motivated by this. As a consequence, language acquisition has been promoted through interaction.

Introducing small talk into the Leader Method

Let us consider small talk as an example of such interaction. During the early developmental stages of the Leader Method, teachers were starting lessons with warm-up exercises or with a review of the previous lesson. Whilst both of those activities are valuable, the move towards simulating real-life interactions raised questions when considering every aspect of the lesson. For example, grammar exercises were adapted to relate to students' jobs, or a chairperson was introduced to the lessons. Concerning the beginning of the lesson, questions such as, "Do we start natural conversation with a warm-up activity?" and "Do we start conversation with a review?" were asked. The answers were both "Yes" and "No." For instance, we may indeed start teacher training with a warm-up exercise, or a monthly progress report meeting with a review, but more often than not, small talk will precede either one of those events. In fact, small talk can be seen as one of the most important aspects of communication, providing a site for equality and establishing harmony (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003) before another, seemingly more important, interaction takes place. Where the Leader Method aims to train students to interact as they would in a natural environment, it follows that small talk is an integral part of the Leader Method. However, this paper goes further to

suggest that the Leader Method is an integral part of learning how to conduct small talk in an L2 situation.

Relinquishing control in favour of teaching transitions

Looking at this last point in more detail, a common observation made by teachers who teach small talk, with or without the Leader Method, is that students will frequently announce the commencement of small talk. For example, a student may say, “OK, let’s start small talk.” Students can be trained out of this via feedback, demonstration during feedback, discussion of Japanese small talk, and by leaving the topic “small talk” off the written agenda whilst still allowing time for it. If students continue to announce small talk, it is questionable if they will learn how to start natural conversation outside of the classroom, i.e., without the aid of a formal framework. Moreover, it is arguably more challenging to learn how to move from small talk to the task at hand, for example, when meeting friends and chatting with them before going into the cinema, or starting a workplace meeting, or when employees would like to return to their desks after a chat by the coffee machine. Within the Leader Method, students make the transition themselves from small talk to the first topic, whether it is a role-play, a text-based grammar task or a presentation.

Through practicing this every lesson, students learn how to finish a conversation (in this case, small talk) and move to the main point of the interaction or meeting. If the teacher interrupts at this stage to give feedback or to set-up the next topic, students lose the opportunity to practice that transition skill (Willis, 1996). The teacher essentially remains in control of the conversation.

Of course, students also practice conversational control when moving between subsequent topics on the agenda. However, as goals differ from course to course, students may find themselves moving from an email-writing task to peer-to-peer correction. It is when they finish small talk, that students are offered an opportunity to practice a situation close to real life. It therefore seems preferable that students learn how to finish small talk and move to the first topic without interruption from the teacher.

Culture, control, and the teacher’s role

Indeed, with undergraduate students, small talk has been reported to be the most popular part of the lesson, where students can get to know one another in a natural fashion. In fact, students often reflect that, although initially the Leader Method is challenging, the clear benefits and outcomes make it enjoyable. This paper has already mentioned language acquisition as a motivator, but it is worth considering if the Leader Method is culturally appropriate for use in Japanese classrooms. Perhaps the lesson in its entirety can be argued to follow a format suited particularly to Japanese students of English. For instance, the Leader Method relies heavily on successful teamwork. In kindergarten and after, establishing peer groups becomes increasingly important (Hendry, 1989). It follows that, by university, students are already primed for teamwork situations. Moreover, considering the skills Japanese students learn at school, it seems there are additional reasons why the Leader Method may be effective in Japan. Japanese students learn ritualized phrases and habits (Hendry, 1989), phrases that will help them to operate both in Japanese society and within the classroom.

Furthermore, mothers are encouraged to teach their children ritualized behaviour by means of repetition. Similarly, the participants in classes using the Leader Method, whether university students or more mature Japanese learners of English, use the same leader phrases and follow a similar outline for an agenda. Consequently, it is easy to see why, once learners have internalized this format, applying the skills learned through the Leader Method becomes second nature. Indeed, Krashen and Terrell (1983) support this suggestion that learning set phrases can aid language learning.

However, there are aspects of the Japanese education system that have been suggested as obstacles to learning (McVeigh, 2001). Some of the rituals that are learned in schools may contribute to this. For instance, students often wait for the teacher to give input and are used to focusing away from language production. To break these particular habits, it is again essential that English language teachers hand over control to the students. With the Leader Method, one of the first things students learn is not to wait for the teacher. In a sense, the teacher is attempting to teach language from an informal culture, i.e., English, to a formal one, i.e., Japanese (Rosinski, 2003). As long as the teacher remains the “sensei,” the emphasis of the class will be formal, thereby slowing progress on communicating in a natural setting. Indeed, if teachers are in control of the conversation, they are providing a context that fails to support the rhetoric (Rosinski, 2003).

By un-training certain behaviours, such as waiting for the teacher, educators can redefine their role away from “teacher” and influencer – an influencer defined by Rosinski

as someone who tries to persuade others to follow their personal agenda – and towards coach or guide. To break the traditional student-teacher role, the teacher will often start a Leader Method-based course more as an observer. As the course develops and students become accustomed to the Leader Method, the teacher can afford to become more and more involved. However, it is essential that students and teachers break those patterns early on, and alter their beliefs about the lesson from “the teacher is teaching us” to “we (the students) are interacting with each other.” The aim here is to encourage students to apply beliefs that relate to natural interaction rather than those that are necessary only to operate in a classroom.

In order to understand elements of how the Leader Method functions, it may be useful to look to cultural context theories. It has been suggested that non-verbal cues are more important in high context cultures such as Japan and other Asian cultures (Rosinski, 2003). For instance, in one business case study, where an American executive was negotiating with a Korean, the American misread the Korean’s silence as a sign of agreement, and the ensuing discomfort created an awkward situation. In this case, both parties were trained to understand and offer suitable gestures to facilitate smooth and successful negotiations. This seems to support the notion that language learning involves cultural awareness as well as learning grammar and vocabulary. A way of addressing this is by learning how to operate in low-context situations through controlling conversation.

While the students may be learning how to function in a low-context environment, for example, by using phrases and adopting behaviours to control, clarify and be assertive

in conversation, the teacher takes on the role of coach, communicating with students in both a high and low-context manner. This includes, for instance, giving feedback, writing instructions on the board (both of which are low-context) but at the same time encouraging and motivating students in a high-context fashion through avoiding direct criticism.

Roles, trust, and relationship building

Rosinski maintains that “relying on relationship and trust will in turn ensure proper implementation [of decisions]” (2003, p. 154). With the Leader Method, there is a strong emphasis on trust and relationships. The groups develop bonds by communicating with each other each week for most of the class time. Furthermore, the leader is not necessarily the only individual who leads. “Natural” leaders also take on the role of leader, forcing the group to deal with the kind of push and pull that is evident in natural settings. Regarding trust, the more teachers trust the students to communicate unprompted, to lead, to talk at their own pace, and to control time, the more students have the space to flex their communicative muscles and use the language they know.

It is worth noting here that rapport building is sometimes a concern of teachers who have been trained to use the Leader Method. Rapport building or bonding periods (Rosinski, 2003) are occasions when the teacher and students can establish a high-context relationship. It is achieved in intervals, initially in the first lesson, when the teacher talks more than at any other time in the course, when students re-evaluate their goals, and during feedback. As mentioned before, once the students are using the Leader Method

comfortably, the teacher can interact more, without fear of disrupting the class.

Feedback and the Leader Method

The benefits of monitoring without interrupting have been discussed earlier in this paper and are advocated by Willis (1996), Panova and Lyster (2002), and Brown (2003). Nevertheless, when using the Leader Method, it is essential to offer students feedback, thereby providing them with an opportunity to build on their skills. As coach, it is necessary for the teacher to create an atmosphere of support while discouraging dependency. This can be achieved by offering feedback at selected intervals. As mentioned earlier, feedback includes a high level of positive encouragement. This is especially important because high-context cultures require feedback to feel motivated. In fact, no feedback equals negative feedback in such cultures (Rosinski, 2003). In large classes, where there may be four or five small “meetings” taking place, the teacher is, as a matter of course, less able to monitor each student. In such cases, feedback can be given after activities and/or at the end of the lesson. Students also respond well to having useful vocabulary, hints, and phrases noted on the board. Conversely, in a single group class, students are often reluctant to be interrupted by the teacher and prefer feedback to be at the end of the class. The students are communicating within their group and tend to want to focus on that context rather than switch between interacting with their group and looking at the board. When this occurs, notes on the board are often ignored by students and actual verbal interruptions are often met with slight annoyance. This has been seen with beginner learners as

well as those on other levels and is considered an ideal scenario as it shows that the students are fully focused on communicating with each other and managing their own time rather than “being taught.”

Recommendations

The Leader Method could be developed to further encourage students to operate at a level where they are culturally sensitive when engaging with both native English speakers and other non-native English speakers, while simultaneously retaining their cultural mores. Rosinski (2003) describes a case study where this is evident. A group of British business people and a group of Italian business people learned to appreciate what the other group’s culture of communication could bring to the table. They even adopted some of the behaviours themselves, all the while maintaining elements of their own culture, bringing those elements into play when necessary.

In terms of research, there is a call for testing how the Leader Method relates to student preference for delayed correction and the effect of such correction, based on the premise that feedback should be given at the end of tasks or the lesson. It would also be useful to investigate the difference between teachers who favour controlling classroom management and those who hand over more control to the students, and the effect this has on the Leader Method in action. Indeed, although the method has developed as a result of feedback from students, teachers, and clients (for example, Human Resource managers, university boards, and students’ immediate supervisors), further research on its effectiveness as a language learning

tool would be beneficial, as well as on teachers’ perception of their role in the Leader Method.

Conclusion

The Leader Method seems to be a useful tool that enables students to interact in lessons that attempt to simulate real-life scenarios. It is effective because it encourages teamwork, establishes trust, and provides culturally relevant, ritualized opportunities to take control of conversation. In order to maximize the efficacy of the Leader Method, it is essential that teachers hand over as much control as possible. In doing so, teachers have to revise their traditional role and become educators, facilitators, and coaches.

Liz Wade has had 15 years experience in Human Resources and Corporate Training and for 10 years has been involved with ELT in Japan, Egypt, and England. She has been developing the Leader Method for 7 years and has been training teachers to use it for the last 3. Currently, she is Chief Coordinator for a program at Ristumeikan University, Biwako, and Ivy International. <lizwade_simul@hotmail.com>

References

Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language: An approach based on the analysis of conversational English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- PAC7 at JALT2008: Shared Identities
- Brown, J. (2003). Promoting fluency in EFL classrooms. *JALT2003 Pan SIG-Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Hendry, J. (1989). *Becoming Japanese. The world of the pre-school child*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Holmes, J., & Stubbe, M. (2003). *Power and politeness in the workplace*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Kasper, G. (1997). Can pragmatic competence be taught? (NetWork #6) [HTML document]. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center. Retrieved [April 6, 2009] from the World Wide Web: <http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/NetWorks/NW06/>
- Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T. D. (1983). *The Natural Approach*. New York: Pergamon.
- Long, M. H. (1983). Native speaker/non native speaker conversation in the second language classroom. In M. A. Clark & J. Handscombes (Eds.), *On TESOL '82: Pacific perspectives on language learning and teaching* (pp. 207-25). Washington, DC: TESOL.
- McVeigh, B. J. (2001). Higher education, apathy and post-meritocracy. *The Language Teacher*, 25(10), 29-32.
- Panova, I., & Lyster, R. (2002). Patterns of corrective feedback and uptake in an adult ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36, 573-595.
- Rosinski, P. (2003). *Coaching across cultures*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- van Lier, L. (1996). *Interaction in the language curriculum: Awareness, autonomy and authenticity*. Harlow: Longman.
- Ward, D., Wade, L., & Dowling, A. (2008). Pushing the student-centered envelope: A corporate meeting-style approach. *The Language Teacher* 32(9) 13-17.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.