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The Younger Learners column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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Creating Language Learning Spaces for Low-Proficiency Junior High School Students Through Communication Strategies and Assessment

Mayumi Kako

In an after-school context, many of my students had been with me since they were elementary school students. They learned basic expressions, and I encouraged their classmates to react to the utterances at times in order to create a friendly L2 atmosphere. Their rapport seemed built to last.

Yet, it was during the first performance test that I conducted for them after entering junior high school that I realized that this wasn't true. Although they came prepared with model dialogues and their planned arrangements, their conversation turned to their own speeches in which they rarely cared about what their partner said.

Many junior high school students in the Japanese context are explicitly asked to remember grammar rules and word lists for the school tests, which encourages them to pursue accuracy rather than communication with interlocutors. They simply try to narrate lines they memorize. Consequently, the shorter students' memory is, the more difficulties they are likely to have. According to Young (2011, 2019), co-construction of meaning is inevitable in social interaction. There is a lack of opportunities for students to be taught how to co-construct conversations. This article will explore how adolescent students help and learn from each other in interactive activities in an after-school L2 classroom by utilizing communication strategies (CSs), which are enhanced through task-based instruction, including assessment.

Educational Background

English education in Japan is largely affected by entrance examinations. To survive the discrete-point testing in which students have to manifest knowledge of language rather than its use (Hidri, 2018), regular school tests are created and conducted to meet these educational needs. Consequently, instruction prioritizes reading and writing evaluation, often at the expense of interactive and communicative classroom activities. To perform well in this context, learners are sensitive about test scores and resist the idea of the language classroom being an interactive space. Consequently, L2 turns into a tool for achieving superficial but easily quantifiable academic goals, rather than as a means of communication. Grammatical accuracy is focused on so consistently that learners are rarely provided a chance to think about how to use the language, which restricts the interactional affordances within language learning spaces and denies a fundamental element of communicative language teaching (CLT). In this sense, classmates are no longer learning partners who support each other, but rather competitors who isolate themselves from each other in the classroom. This contradicts social phenomena where students tend to strive to obtain information through social interactions such as social networks (Murphey, 2017). This mismatch of input processing between academic and social learning contexts highlights the need to integrate them into a more holistically oriented and socially constructed L2 learning community. The traditional roles of teachers, who are authoritative transmitters of knowledge in the language classroom should be reconsidered (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

Communication Strategies

Learning new grammar items is not simple because there is a fundamental gap between knowledge and practical use. To address this gap, practice is crucial. Therefore, curricula need to be developed carefully such as with a task-based approach which consists of three stages: pre-task, task, and post-task. As a pre-task, students are asked to create their own sentences using the target grammar items. This is followed by a task where their topics are expanded upon and

explored in conversation with their partners. The longer L2 communication takes place, the more opportunities are offered for students to use the resources they have learned. This is not provided by drilling using traditional methods. Even though the significance of recycling the resources is admitted, what is still unaddressed is what students need to keep the conversation going, that is CSs.

In pair activities during the task stage that I use in my school, students are encouraged to talk about familiar topics that I choose based on their preferences and interests. The topics are explored by using the following strategies:

- opener/closer: greetings
- rejoinders: reactions and comments
- shadowing: repeating key words
- follow-up questions
- fillers: devices for saving time while thinking
- clarification: requests to clarify the interlocutor's utterances

As teaching a list of the phrases may confuse students, you can start with a casual opening which is familiar to students such as “hi” as an opener and “thank you” as a closer. Note that it is more impressive for them to include names (e.g., “Hi [name]”). They can also enjoy changing their tone of voice (e.g., “Thank you” to “Thank YOU”). Rather than depending on verbal competence, utilizing the emotional non-lexical element (see Figure 1), which is also called paralinguage, is helpful to unwind their preoccupied minds in the traditional classroom. In particular, rejoinders “ah” and “oh” can be used in various contexts. For example, saying the phrases with falling intonation at the end can show their sympathy. Because expressions that students tend to use are helpful only in a positive context (e.g., “That’s nice”), the casual and flexible short phrases are convenient for any proficient student to manage on the spot.

Figure 1

An example of prosodic rejoinders (response tokens)



In addition, CS categories are frequently overlapped, and “ah” is a good example. Not only as a rejoinder, which is mentioned above, a phrase using “ah” can be tried as a filler when students are stuck and need time to think. This is equivalent to the Japanese version, *etto*, and is easy to use instantly rather than “well” or “let me see.” Another CS example of the overlapped categorization is shadowing. Repeating a key word at slow speed with a rising intonation in the end can function as a clarification request (see the example below) rather than as a simple reaction. Since students gradually learn the technique through practice, including the target strategy in the greeting sequences is one way to give regular opportunities for use. For the practice of a clarification request, you can also add some words that students are not aware of. Here is an example:

Hi _____. It's chilly!

CHI-LL-Y?

I mean cold.

Ah!

By the way, (a target sentence).

(Students keep the conversation going with CSs.)

Anyway, don't catch the flu!

F-LU?

I mean influenza.

Ah! Same to you.

Therefore, encouraging your students to be engaged in the conversation with the simplest phrases first can help to foster “a sense of security” (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 80). Based on this, students can add more advanced CSs later.

Supportive Activities and Materials

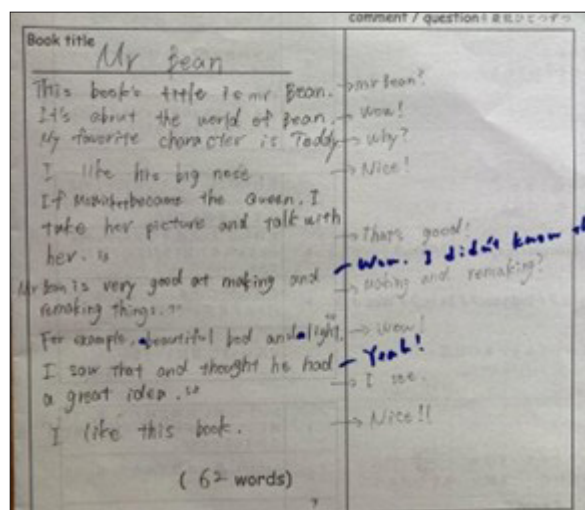
Although the careful introduction of CSs can play a significant role for students' engagement as argued in the previous section, there is a gap in learning aptitude. According to Wood (2011), utilizing CSs “will give students the power to overcome gaps in their L2 knowledge” (p. 234). This does not mean, however, that their progress is the same. Naturally, students improve their strategies at their own pace. Even though active and/or high-proficiency students are eager to speak with various CSs, passive and/or low-proficiency students tend to use a limited number of reactions and rarely ask follow-up questions. Especially in the Japanese context, students are used to remembering what they are taught without any doubt, instead of asking questions. As asking questions is a way to show

goal, in this case, that students make the most out of the test time utilizing CSs, which includes negotiation of meaning or repair technique (e.g., Wong & Waring, 2020).

Considering readiness for the speaking test, what can be effective for low-proficiency learners is imaginary dialogue. Here is an example of the instruction. First, students are required to expand their essay written at the post-task stage along with a topic a teacher decides on in the preparation sheet. Second, after peer commenting, in the revised final essay, they add CSs on the right side (see Figure 4). Note that all CS categories they have learned are included in the criteria. Third, as homework, they are encouraged to imagine how the conversation goes in the target time. At this moment, rubrics are shared, if possible, on the back side of the preparation sheet.

Figure 4

Imaginary dialogue



Note. The comment and corrections in bold (PDF version) are provided by a teacher after students' essays are submitted.

Students in the Japanese context tend to focus solely on their own performance. However, the key to assessing L2 interaction is not only how capable the student is of developing not only their own topics, but also other-initiated topics (Galaczi, 2014). It is important to encourage students in pairs to support each other. This can be done by having categories such as:

- supportive non-verbal behavior (e.g., showing the picture, eye contact)

- supportive listening (e.g., various reactions, follow-up questions)
- interactional management of self-initiated topics (e.g., greetings, small talk, fillers)
- accuracy (e.g., clear sound production, clarification of "who" and "what")

Therefore, although the main purpose of the test is to assess their speaking skills, writing skills are incorporated as well. In this regard, imaginary dialogue plays an important role in the transition from narrative to dialogue.

To raise spontaneity, pairs are decided on the test day. Students can underline a couple of parts in the final essay that they are eager to explore. This is because, in many traditional Japanese classrooms, they tend to memorize and say all the prepared lines. After practicing with other classmates, the test is conducted. The conversation is video-recorded by a teacher and, if it is allowed, audio-recorded using the students' own phones.

Common Error Activity

While they are transcribing their conversations based on their recordings, the teacher may write sentences which include common grammar/spelling errors on the board. This activity is aimed at exploring students' learning potential through the pedagogical learning of scaffolding with the help of classmates (Murphey, 2017). There are two procedures to correct the sentences. To recognize their connections to the class, first, students are asked to write the right ones and self-evaluate without any help. Second, they should ask for help, for example, starting with "I'm not sure about #1," and classmates should only give hints rather than directly telling each other the answers. (L) use after that is allowed if it benefits their understanding. With this advice, students revise their answers and self-evaluate themselves once again. They are also required to write the name of the helpful classmates (see Figure 5). In this procedure, the teacher can be out of the room leaving a recorder to check what is discussed by whom. Sometimes, only particular students are talking, and the others are out of the loop. In other words, this is a chance to see how their rapport is built. Finally, the teacher comes and explains the errors. After taking a second look at their essay and revising it, they submit it.

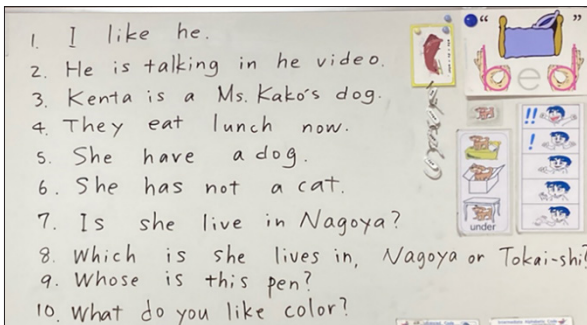
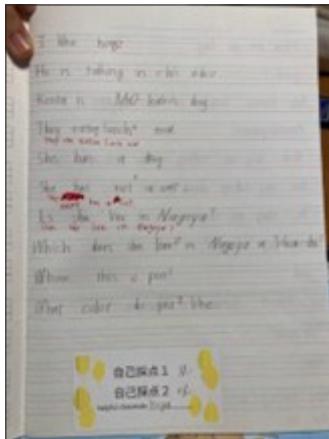
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Figure 5

Common error activity



Reflection

There are many ways for students to reflect on their performances. Examining their transcript is one of them. Students are asked to underline two parts: one is their good performance and the other focuses on areas they could improve, while also adding a simple comment. If time remains, they can write about their partners' good/not-so-good points, for example, on a post-it and give it to their partner.

Reflection forms are also meaningful for them to self-evaluate their interaction. It can be conducted after the performance or both pre- and post-test. Note that for helping students scaffold their thoughts, the pre-test questionnaire can have only Likert-scale questions and be used as orientation while open-ended questions can be added to the post-test self-evaluation to allow students to elaborate on their ideas.

Lastly, a newsletter can be created. The main purpose of this is to show students that they are in the same boat (Kindt & Murphey, 2000). By sharing their engagement and difficulties, they are

reminded, "You are not the only one who has a hard time." Their essays are finalized with the teacher's comments in the letter as well. For example, the re-written part is displayed in bold, additional letters are written in square brackets, and omitted parts are denoted by ellipses (see Figure 6). Student comments from the open-ended questions in the post-test survey are shared as well. Furthermore, how students co-construct their conversations in the interaction and also their common grammatical and pronunciation errors are once again highlighted here. The way of utilizing newsletters varies.

Figure 6

Newsletter



Note. The comment on the right page was originally written in students' L1.

Conclusion

This instruction, which included assessment, provided students with ample opportunities to use the resources they have learned. According to Benson (2011), "[l]anguage aptitude...is generally considered stable, while motivation is likely to change as a result of learning experience" (p. 82). Although active/high-proficiency students can learn directly from classmates in collaborative activities, passive/low-proficiency students are likely to be overwhelmed. There is a necessity for educators to consider how student autonomy is nurtured and fostered. Rather than pushing them to utilize their linguistic resources, encouraging them to embody their ideas leads to their engagement. This explains how paralinguistic elements, which represent various "ah"-reactions and fillers, help the students who have shorter memories feel secure. Eventually, these minimal CSs provide them with their rich interactional repertoire.

Moreover, Dam et al. (1990) argues that readiness involves taking ownership of one's own learning and can be gained by acting both independently and in cooperation with others. That is, imaginary dialogue, for example, is not only an activity that they can engage with individually, where they can develop the task freely at their own pace and prepare for the pair-talk test by imagining their own world, but the imagined CSs lead to peer-collaboration or the social dimension of autonomy. Reacting and asking for help if needed makes a significant contribution to individual accountability as a social and responsible person.

It is said that low-proficiency students learn slowly. However, this does not mean they are not competent or able. Rather, they need time to orient themselves. With teaching approaches introduced in this article, it is hoped that teacher-educators will discover a "diamond in the rough" in those students.

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