Encouraging Learner Creativity at All Proficiency Levels With CLT

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Learners in Japanese university language classrooms are perceived to have low ability and motivation, and to be reluctant to engage in communicative tasks. However, lessons reflecting Howatt's (1984) "strong" version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in which grammar and language form are de-emphasized and most of the class time is spent on tasks reflecting real-life communication, yield unpredictable and creative language output. Through unstructured group conversations, learners are capable of nuanced meaning—of clever ideas, which spread around the language classroom, not unlike the spread of memes in a native English context. High proficiency and low proficiency learners alike can engage in similar levels of complex discourse. Feedback from learners showed they thought the lessons were challenging, but also effective, and a positive motivating factor toward language study.

日本の大学生は、語学の授業において能力とモチベーションが低く、コミュニケーション課題に積極的に参加しない、というイメージがある。しかし、Howatt (1984) によって提唱された「強いＣＬＴ」の授業方法は、文法にはこだわらず学生が自由に英語で会話することを中心としており、その結果、予想もつかなかった創造性に富んだ言語表出が生まれる。グループで台本なしの会話を通して、学生はニュアンスのある、巧妙な表現ができるのである。ネーティブ英語環境でミーム（模倣子）が流行ると同じように、学生の英語表現が教室内で広がるのだ。習熟度を問わず、どの学生も同じようなレベルの複雑な談話に参加できる。学生による授業アンケートの結果は、授業はやりがいのある、効果のある、モチベーションを上昇させる英語練習の方法だと示された。

IN ACADEMIC year 2013, in a 1st-year English course during a discussion, the instructor (one of the authors of this paper) suggested an idea to stimulate a discussion on fast food. Students were in three-person groups, hashing out ideas among themselves. The class was at a national university; the students had higher than average proficiency. "Does anyone know the opposite of *fast food*?" asked the instructor. No answer. "Has anyone heard of *slow food*?" continued the instructor, referring to the *slow food* movement started by one Italian as a response to fast food. "Okay, never mind, just an idea. Please continue."

Unbeknownst to the instructor, one woman in the class of 29 was familiar with the local, traditional food movement and explained it to the two other members of her group. As the group members changed and the practice started again, more students became familiar with *slow food*. After about 30 minutes of continuous group discussion, with members changing every several minutes, more than half of the groups had become familiar with what had become a classroom meme. At the time of the oral test, when students were required to take

opposing stances, several students showed familiarity with *slow food*. When asked by the instructor how they knew, the students answered that other members of the class had explained it. This is an actual example of student-generated conversation in a student-centered classroom. A short time later, the same thing happened at Hokkaido Information University, among students of a different proficiency level. Starting from the explanation of one student, slowly the entire class had their own understanding of *slow food*. This time the focus was on local farmers and fresh Hokkaido produce annually harvested from farm fields surrounding the university area.

Creativity in the title of this paper refers to times the authors have been particularly moved during class when students uttered phrases in English that were uniquely worded to convey a unique thought. Perhaps every teacher has had this experience, of hearing an unusual but grammatically plausible utterance and thinking to him- or herself, "I would never have thought to say it that way."

Research into creativity focuses on the creative genius level, as of Mozart or Einstein, as well as on the level of ordinary individuals. Kaufman & Beghetto (2009) expanded on the dichotomy of "Big-C" and "Little-c" to include what they call "pro-c" (professional) and "mini-c." The latter is the creativity of beginners or children as they explore and play with the novel things and concepts they encounter. Mini-c creativity aptly describes the experimentation and play of EFL learners in a strong communicative classroom (Howatt, 1984). As Vygotsky (2004/1967) noted, "Any human act that gives rise to something new is referred to as a creative act, regardless of whether what is created is a physical object or some mental or emotional construct that lives within the person who created it and known only to him" (p. 7). From these mental constructs come the creative ways that students express their thoughts and personal insights in the best English they can. From a sociolinguistics perspective, we posit that just as language

acquisition—especially oral output—takes place in a social context, the same can be said of creativity. It is the social interaction and the need to communicate successfully that can bring out a high degree of collaborative creativity, even among lower proficiency L2 learners with an imperfect grasp of their L2.

Murphy (2013a) outlined the implementation in several Japanese university classrooms of a discussion–debate classroom method that employs Howatt's (1984) strong version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Howatt saw this version of CLT as a way of "using English to learn it" (p. 279) and of developing a deeper understanding of English through, as Murphy (2013a) paraphrased it, "experimentation in genuinely unrehearsed conversation" (p. 422). In this paper, we define *unrehearsed* to mean that students are not required to recite memorized dialogues. In fact, while remembering words and phrases is encouraged, memorization of a set dialogue is avoided. Discussion and arguments are practiced in class through frequent group rotation, but there are no required words or phrases, no cued statements or prompted responses.

There is a perception that students of lower ability and motivation to learn English are reluctant to engage in communicative classroom tasks (Anderson, 1993; Doyon, 2000; Helgesen, 1993; Townsend & Danling, 1998), and that CLT has been generally difficult to implement in Japan (Humphries, 2012; Iwai, 2009; Kavanagh, 2012; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). Some of the difficulties of implementing CLT into what have traditionally been non-CLT learning environments include teacher unfamiliarity with CLT, low student motivation to learn English, and classroom time constraints (see e.g., Li, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). Some instructors may believe that in order to participate successfully in CLT-based classroom activities, students must first have a certain level of proficiency. In other words, they believe students need to know enough language to communicate before they ever actually try communicating.

We acknowledge that getting students to speak in English in class can be challenging. However, we believe that students—even those with lower proficiency—collectively *do* have enough basic language ability to sustain conversation when they enter university, even with only a rudimentary grasp of English from the 6 mandatory years they encountered English in secondary school before entering university. With the right activities and approach, the English they know can be drawn out, built upon, and spread around.

Johnson (1979) described CLT as a *deep-end strategy*, in which students are, as Harmer (1982) expressed it, "thrown into the deep end of a communicative task and left to sink or swim" (pp. 164-165). If we consider looking at CLT in this way, requiring lower proficiency students to navigate unscripted, unrehearsed conversation suggests they will experience undue difficulty and will not enjoy the task. However, a preliminary survey by Murphy (2013a) revealed positive student reception of the activities in low-proficiency classrooms. Out of 138 students surveyed 121 indicated they thought the class was challenging and 99 indicated that the class was fun (p. 429). In a similar preliminary survey by Rian (2014) of 125 students in classes using an almost identical classroom routine and syllabus, 105 responded that they felt their ability to express themselves in English improved and 119 said they thought the classroom design was an effective way to practice speaking English (p. 112-114). This paper offers samples of the language produced in classrooms using Murphy's (2013a, 2013b) discussion–debate design. Also included are responses from a new survey (see Table 4) indicating that students felt the class style was effective and motivating.

Summary of the Classroom Design

Murphy's (2013a, 2013b) discussion–debate classroom design consists of two main components: (a) in-class conversation practice and (b) oral and written testing. The in-class conversation practice includes three main activities:

1. Introduction of topics through a whole-class question-and-answer activity, in which students circulate to seek information on preferences, experiences, opinions, and any other information related to the topic. This activity helps introduce the topic, key vocabulary, and concepts. It also allows students to gauge the opinions of classmates in order to get a sense of the main arguments in the discussion.

2. Various role-plays in pairs or groups of three that allow students to act out a hypothetical scenario related the topic.

3. Group discussions in which students practice taking positions on a topic. Students rotate periodically to adjacent desks, forming new groups with different members.

Creativity: Student-Generated Memes

The inspiration for this research came from the authors' observations of students practicing small-group discussion in class, creating student-generated memes. Both authors employ a strong-CLT-based classroom design in all classes, with students of all proficiencies.

Conversation is a random and unpredictable act. Unless reciting poetry or acting on stage, people don't speak using memorized lines. In everyday discourse, people talk about what they know from their own life and experiences. Similarly, in a well-organized strong-CLT activity, learners access their own conceptual knowledge, or schemata. Schemata are mental structures of knowledge and representations of the world stored in the frontal cortex—memories that are accessed and used every time written or aural input is received. With every new input, the schemata are activated, updated, and made available for language output (Feldman, 2006). Schemata can be cross-referenced and used in an infinite number of ways (Rost, 2011). Metaphorically, it is like chess, but the combinations of moves are infinite.

Successful moves, as well as mistakes, are remembered through experience.

In the example about *slow food*, the teacher asked a spur-of-the-moment question. With that cue, the students continued their small group discussions on the topic of food. Much of the discourse developed around healthy–unhealthy, cost, taste, food safety, the environment, and convenience. However, in two classes a meme employing the notion of *slow food* spread through the groups. Table 1 includes student ideas addressing the *slow food* meme. Those from the higher proficiency group were recorded in an oral test; those of the lower-proficiency group were noted during class.

Table 1. Examples of Student Ideas About *Slow Food*

High proficiency (N = 29)	Low-intermediate proficiency (N = 15)
Have you heard of *slow food*?	It's like mother's cooking
Global movement	I like to cook at home
Started in Italy. An Italian food-lover's idea	Home-cooked food is more delicious / fresh
Opposed to fast food	I like to relax, enjoy cooking and playing guitar
Anti-fast food	Its symbol is a snail with friends
Against fast food culture	Hokkaido foods are more delicious
Uses local food	I want to support local farmers / Support …!
Against globalization	Hokkaido farmers use less chemicals
Organic	We can buy local foods
Safe food	There is a farmers' market near the university
No / less chemicals	Healthy / Healthy lifestyle
Fresh food	Invite friends to my home to cook

High proficiency (N = 29)	Low-intermediate proficiency (N = 15)
(Slow food is) "Eco" (= ecological)	Come to my room (apartment)
Not imported from China	We can save money
Enjoy slow eating	Cheap
Chew slowly	Lose weight. Stay slim
Save the world	
Eat more vegetables	
Eat foods in season	
Protect Japanese food culture	
Japanese food is unique	

The student ideas in Table 1 are not definitive; more items phrased in different ways occurred in the free classroom discussions and wording varied. When learners' background schemata are stimulated, a relatively complex discussion is possible, regardless of the learners' proficiency levels. The main themes are apparent, and it is reasonable to surmise that the schemata accessed reflect the individual students. The higher proficiency students were thinking of this as a global issue in terms of economics, environment, and culture. During the school term, it became apparent that they consumed much more daily news from the media and had more awareness of the world. In the case of the other class it is likely that the proximity of the nearby farmlands influenced the students' imaginations. Several students referred to the nearby farmers' market, local farmers, and Hokkaido farmers in their arguments. The *slow food* meme was, to them, a more regional, local issue including social relations and the enjoyment of food preparation and eating. In both cases, learners tapped into these schemata and these cognitive anchors—which indicate what they know of the world—to explain their points of view in the language classroom. Other classes developed ideas reflecting personal health experiences, tight budgets, lack of time, and part-time work in a fast food kitchen.

This lesson happened in the 2nd or 3rd week of the school term. In the weeks that followed, amid discussions around different topics, similar arguments developed in conversations. With regard to diet, many students offered that balance, self-discipline, self-responsibility, and healthy lifestyle were factors to consider. These imperatives to keeping a healthy diet were also found important by the students in later discussions around education and parenting ("Should parents be hands-on or hands-off?"). The vocabulary was used smoothly, and the ability to negotiate the meaning and nuance was evident. This suggested that the English formulations became schemata, and not mere L1-L2 translations.

Nunan (1987) posited that a truly communicative classroom is possible with exercises and activities that actually require students to use English as a tool to communicate. Learners do not wait for an expected piece of information found in traditional textbook drills or based on a limited number of example sentences or a model dialogue. In a strong-CLT-based classroom, a student might use lexical items and phrases in an unpredictable and creative fashion, drawing on references unique to that student's experience. This could even be random, as in cases when students change the subject completely to talk about what they really want to talk about. In this classroom design, there is no drilling, no scripted dialogues to memorize, no right or wrong answers—the main goal is practicing the act of discussion.

Another example of a student-generated meme came from discussions about whether video games were a good thing or a bad thing. In each class, between group rotations, arguments were solicited from groups and written on the blackboard. Table 2 represents the blackboard layout and provides a sample of arguments that were generated.

Table 2. Examples of Arguments About Video Games Recorded on Blackboard

Good points	Bad points
Exciting, can have fun with friends	Bad for your eyes
Stress release	Makes me tired
Good for killing time	Addiction / addictive
Learning tool	Sacrifice money, sleep time, study time
Communication tool	Never leave my house
– PSP, Twitter, online games—meet new people!	Should use time to study, play outdoors
– Coordinate action when play with friends	Study time is more important
Escape from reality	

Table 3 is a sample of actual statements and responses generated by students in lower proficiency classes. One student came up with the idea that through online video games, "I can get a girlfriend." This idea amused other students and it circulated for a while. Some students observed that online encounters may be dangerous, and another remarked that, online, there is no way to confirm gender. Another example of originality of argument was by a girl who argued against video games. She stated, "I like sleep more than games. Games cost money. Dreams are free." This notion circulated as well, and another student countered with "Dreams have no controller."

Table 3. Statements and Responses About Video Games Generated by Lower Proficiency Students

Statement	Response
Playing games is alone. We should be with friends.	→ But we can play games with friends.
I can meet new people.	→ Dangerous people?
I can get a girlfriend.	→ How do you know, girl or boy?
I can live another life.	→You shouldn't run away from your life.
I can escape my real life.	→ Game life is fake. Real life has no reset button.
Games are violent, have bad language.	→ Learning tool! We can learn bad language!
No exercise	→ How about Wii? Dance Revolution game?
Take a break. Refresh.	→ Games are not refreshing. Eyes get tired.
My life is like a bad game.	

The instructor can always supply better English than what students generate by contributing appropriate words or phrases. For example, all classes came up with the idea that video games are "refreshing," or otherwise a diversion from mundane reality. A clever student in one class astutely observed, "I think game is no refresh, because eyes tired is no refresh." The term *refresh* is *Japanized* English, and probably wouldn't be used to describe video games by other than Japanese speakers. The instructor supplied the phrases *break from reality* and *fun*. Previously, students had offered phrases like "eyes bad" and "tired" as negative points of video games. The instructor supplied *bad for your eyes* and *makes you tired*.

Another example of a student-generated contrast is the relation of video games to stress. Students said "games are stress down," for which the teacher supplied *playing games is a stress release*. A few students observed that games are fun when you win and, conversely, "stress up" when you lose—for which the instructor supplied *frustrating*. In each of these examples, students are generating the positives and negatives of the topic—building a discussion—using the English they know. The instructor contributes construction materials, but the students are the builders.

Lesson handouts include a number of questions that students can ask, words and phrases that students can use, and even a short model dialogue to refer to, although students are not required to memorize anything. However, this does not mean that students are not taking in ideas. Students come up with alternative and creative ways to express points in the handout. For example, the phrase *get addicted to* was reviewed and written on the blackboard. When asked later about good and bad points of video games, some students expressed this as "can't stop" or "endless play."

Students not only come up with creative variations of expressions and arguments, but contribute completely new ideas as well, even in the testing situation. Two conversation tests illustrate this. These ideas were not discussed in class, nor was the instructor aware of them circulating during in-class practice. The conversations included the following ideas:

Test Group 1: What is a video game? Are arcade games video games? If it has a screen, is it a video game? If so, is a slot machine a video game?

Test Group 2: Games = fantasy, can be someone else, be a hero, do incredible things like fly. Virtual heroes aren't heroes; you can unplug them. What's a hero? Famous baseball players? They can hit home runs but can't fly.

The actual language of the conversations in many of the lower proficiency classes was generally rudimentary. However, ultimately all groups managed to communicate in English, using no Japanese, with few long pauses and very few complete collapses in conversation, for an average of 7 minutes.

The Use of Nonnative English

The idea of communicating in imperfect (rudimentary, or *broken*) English may be difficult for teachers to embrace. Students can have a tendency to use *gairaigo*, or *Japanized* English, with Japanese pronunciation, which might be unintelligible to native English speakers who have not lived in Japan. Take, for example, the word *refreshing* to describe video games. This may not be a term most native speakers would use, and it could be argued that this classroom design promotes the acquisition of nonnative English. Samimy and Kobayashi (2004) take issue with native-English-speaker-based CLT norms, and point out that EFL contexts such as Japan may require different implementations of CLT than do ESL contexts, and that CLT needs to be sensitive to the culture in which it is used. We argue therefore that the accommodation of some Japanized English vocabulary is an acknowledgement of culture and of situation. These students are all Japanese speakers, speaking to each other in English that makes sense to them. It is an affirmation that imperfect English—even their English—can and does communicate. Besides English words and phrases, this is one of the most important lessons students can learn in the classroom.

Students' Opinions of the Classroom Design

We believe the evaluation of any classroom design should include soliciting feedback directly from students. To that end, the results of a survey expanded from Murphy (2013a) are presented (see Table 4). The survey was given to 10 classes at three universities—Otaru University of Commerce, Sapporo Gakuin University, and Hokkaido Information University—at the end of Spring Semester 2013. A total of 185 students responded to 11 questions in English. Following the questions, a space for free comments was also provided. Speaking in Japanese, the teacher instructed the students to think about their own English language learning experience and reflect on the in-class discussions, and to record any comments they were willing to offer.

The survey questions were aimed at determining the degree of challenge to basic skills involved in the class: speaking, listening, and using ideas. We also hoped the questions would shine light on the interactions in terms of the struggle to understand and be understood, and how conversations developed in an unscripted manner using ideas from classmates. All questions and results are included in Table 4 (parts were underlined in the survey, for emphasis).

Table 4. Responses to Murphy's Survey, Spring Semester 2013 (N = 185)

Question	Scale end points	Percent				
		100	75	50	25	0
1. Class conversation challenged me <u>to speak</u>.	agree – disagree	60	88	31	6	0
2. Class conversation challenged <u>my listening skills</u>.	agree – disagree	65	90	23	7	0
3. Class conversation challenged me <u>to think</u> of new ways to explain my ideas in English.	agree – disagree	64	79	33	6	3
4. Was understanding other students easy … or difficult?	easy – difficult	7	34	74	53	17

Question	Scale end points	Percent				
		100	75	50	25	0
5. In conversation I had to ask classmates to repeat.	agree – disagree	20	51	70	40	4
6. I had to repeat myself because other students did not understand my English.	agree – disagree	11	54	70	41	9
7. In conversation I learned new ideas from my classmates.	agree – disagree	73	86	18	5	3
8. In conversation, I had to ad-lib.	always – never	52	63	46	15	9
9. My <u>confidence</u> using English improved / did <u>not</u> improve.	improved – did not improve	21	70	58	25	11
10. I enjoyed this class style / I did not enjoy this class style.	enjoyed – did not enjoy	82	60	31	8	4
11. Overall, was the class effective – or ineffective?	effective – ineffective	88	63	27	6	1

The responses to items 1, 2, and 3 were not surprising. Compared to other methods, the class involved a high degree of student–student engagement. Especially at the beginning of the semester, the speaking activities were challenging. Many students who were not accustomed to a learner-centered class were at a loss about what to do.

Some comments related to the challenge. They showed the lesson as inducing the students to be active in the class. (Unless otherwise noted, original comments were made in Japanese and translated by the authors.)

> Students were made to think and made to speak, it was a good thing. They became active.

> It was difficult to convey our thoughts into sentences, but I thought it was good that we came up with many opinions.

> I realized that expressing opinions in English is a difficult thing.

Responses to items 5 and 6 were relatively symmetrical and unexpected. We expected students to report a higher need to use communication strategies such as asking for repetition and rephrasing. It is possible that by the end of the semester, some students had become accustomed to and were skillful at interpreting other classmates' utterances.

Responses to items 7 and 8 suggest that students picked up original or new ideas in class, having to ad-lib or come up with a suitable reply to keep the discussion moving forward. One comment illustrates this:

> I learned through hearing various opinions, my interests were widened. I also learned how to think about expressing my opinions in simple, easy-to-understand English.

This comment reflects the tone of the majority of positive comments. Not only was the class made interesting by interacting in English about complex social issues, but students also reported improving their ability to explain themselves in English. Another student offered (original in English):

> This class's form is very interesting and enjoyable for me. I can communicate with my friends in English, and can understand friend's opinion.

Overall, responses leaned toward the positive. While it is tempting to conclude that most students believed the CLT method we used was worthwhile, the results may reflect a halo effect—that is, students might be responding in a way they think they should, or that the teacher would like to hear, or that they themselves would like to believe.

Conclusions and Limitations

The two dominant features of this classroom set-up were a strong Communicative Language Teaching aspect and that it was highly learner centered. These two elements went hand-in-hand: Students learned English by using it, and they experimented with the target language with other learners. Grammar rules were not explicitly taught, the text was a handout to be filled in with vocabulary and ideas gained from other students, and teacher-centered time was limited to classroom management and announcing the beginning and ending of communicative tasks. While the instructor monitored student conversation and offered words and phrases as appropriate, feedback was informal and gentle so as not to dampen efforts to communicate. We feel that the students gained a sense of themselves as learners in a gradual learning process. Accordingly, this method was not only effective but also motivating. These sentiments were summarized neatly by the following student comment:

> When I was in high school I hated English and I couldn't do it. Now, I love it, and I have the sense that I got some English ability, if even just a little. This class is completely different from any other I've had before, and very fun. This is probably the first time I have ever had fun studying English.

The results we have presented here are limited in scope. They are only a small example of the creative processes that can occur when learners contribute their varied experiences and opinions in unscripted interaction. Future examinations of student-produced language in CLT classes could include a more detailed evaluation of student-generated discourse. Furthermore, when two instructors are using the same classroom design and activities, as we have been doing, a coordinated survey would facilitate direct comparisons of student responses across a number of classes. A contrast of language generated between classes of considerably different proficiency levels might also be insightful. Finally, experimentation with and continued research by other teachers into the classroom design we have outlined here would be invaluable.

Bio Data

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