

## Sequential Development Modes as Catalysts for Communicative Competence

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### *Abstract*

The writer has explored techniques that deal with meaningful communication practice in an intermediate or advanced class, and experimented with several methods. Reflecting on his experience he has found several traps into which both the teacher and the students tend to fall. The trap for the teacher is to get irritated with the students' faltering presentations and begin to "help" them speak more smoothly, or to "enjoy" correcting their mistakes. On the other hand, the trap the students are "willing" to fall into is sitting back and enjoying the teacher's monologue, hoping that the teacher will continue speaking until the end of the class; or getting discouraged at the teacher's corrections and deciding to keep silent for the rest of the period.

To avoid the teacher's overcorrections or the students' silence, it seems essential for the teacher to create some structures that allow the conversation class to be student-centered and self-propelled toward clear objects to be communicated.

In this paper the writer will present these techniques in "Sequential Development Modes" and "Picture Transfer" as catalysts for developing communicative competence.

### Introduction

The English proficiency of Japanese students who have completed six years of English in high school is described by La Forge (1975) as follows: "They have learned how to read. They have accumulated a vast amount of vocabulary."

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They have memorized many sentences from the English grammar. However, they can't speak well" (p. 96). Berwick (1975, p. 283) made the same observation about most of his students who could hardly introduce themselves.

Another type of deficiency in English is detected among the students whose instruction has been based on the audio-lingual approach. According to Chastain (1971), "those students who drill constantly may become fluent in manipulating structure, but be unable to use that same structure to express their own ideas" (p. 217).

The students described above lack the ability to transfer their large store of passive English into use or to transfer manipulative skills to communicative skills. In other words, they all lack communicative competence.

For such students many teachers have probably attempted to use the following procedure with the hope that discussion sessions would proceed successfully and in a lively manner:

1. Each student presents a different viewpoint on a given topic.
2. The viewpoint is discussed by the rest of the class.
3. Further controversial points may be presented.
4. Some conclusion may be drawn by the end of the class.

However, the trap that the teacher easily falls into is to get irritated with the students' faltering oral presentations and begin to "help" them speak more smoothly, or to "enjoy" correcting their mistakes. At the end the teacher realizes with regret that he or she has been occupying the whole hour of the conversation class.

On the other hand, the trap that the students are "willing" to fall into is that they might smile at the teacher's monologue, wishing in their minds that the teacher would continue speaking until the end; or they might get discouraged at the teacher's corrections and decide to keep silent for the rest of the class period.

To avoid the teacher's overcorrection for the students' silence, it seems essential for the teacher to create some structures that allow the conversation class to be student-centered and self-propelled toward clear objects to be communicated. Also, the structures should work as catalysts for developing communicative competence.

#### Sequential Development Modes

The writer has explored techniques that deal with meaningful communication practice in the classes of intermediate or advanced English proficiency, and experimented with several suggested methods and their modifications. Reflect-

ing on his experiences, the writer will present the techniques arranged in "Sequential Development Modes."

The Sequential Development Modes are organized in the following order:

- 1) Prepared questions and answers
- 2) Unprepared questions and answers
- 3) Predetermined situations
- 4) Improvisation

The object of Mode One is to attain the ability to have a dialog with the help of prepared questions. The goal of Mode Two is for the students, who are capable of formulating questions easily, to be able to answer unprepared questions rapidly. With Mode Three, it is expected that the students will attain the ability to order information sequentially. With Mode Four, the aim is for the students to acquire the ability to create situations and act relevantly to those situations.

#### Mode One: Prepared Questions and Answers

For beginning students, it seems far more difficult to make questions than to answer questions. The former usually leads to silence. What is necessary for the teacher at this level is to prepare questions for the students by some device, such as Bonin's and Birckbichler's Interview and Conversation Cards (1975).

The conversation cards are designed to be used with the patterns currently being taught, and the interview cards apart from the textbook deal with the students' lives and interests.

The class is divided into groups of three. Each group receives three cards with five to ten questions per card. The group function works as follows. One student begins by asking the first question on his card. Another student answers the question while the third student listens. The third student should be prepared to assist the student who answers or to make a comment after the answer. The students alternate asking and answering questions from their own cards.

The first advantage of this method is that "the necessity for the student to 'think up' the question (what to ask and how to phrase it in the foreign language) is eliminated" (Bonin and Birckbichler, 1975, p. 22). The second advantage is that this method serves to transfer mechanical skills to communicative skills by means of the utilization of materials from the textbook. The third advantage is that the students' interests are treated in conversations by the use of the interview cards.

### Mode Two: Unprepared Questions and Answers

If the students have attained the level at which they can formulate various creative questions without the help of question cards, they can follow more challenging methods suggested by Morgenstern (1976): the "modified 'Sensitivity Session'" and "The Victim."

The "modified 'Sensitivity Session'" consists of two phases. During the first phase, each student gives two affirmative comments on the neighboring student in a circle and in the second phase each student gives one or two negative comments. The activity called "the Victim" makes each student in turn the victim of questions in rapid succession.

These methods seem effective only for the beginning part of the school year when the students have not yet got acquainted with each other. If the students know each other well, the questioners will know the answers or be able to predict them before asking the questions. Such "known answer" questions should be avoided. Also eliciting obvious or simple responses that would lead to boredom or distaste for language study should be avoided at this level.

### Mode Three: Predetermined Situations

Two types of organizer universals that Seliger (1972) used in his intermediate classes are helpful for learning the sequential order of sentences: the time sequence organizer and the causation sequence organizer. The former implies the "sentences in the discourse sequence are arranged according to the chronological order in which the events described in the sentences occur," and the latter implies "sentences in the discourse are organized according to cause and effect relationship" (p. 440).

These ideas were also used in the "Strip Story" by Gibson (1975). Each student is given a minute to memorize one sentence of a story. After memorization the students, who do not know the proper sequence of the sentences, go around and ask the others what they have memorized to reconstruct the story. In the meantime the teacher sits down, listens to, and observes the students. After the students organize all the sentences, the teacher invites them back to one group and asks them to say their parts one by one, reciting the story in sequence. In the follow-up period, individuals can be asked to repeat the whole story and then all can be asked to write it down, taking dictation from each other. Finally the comparison between their own work and the original will be made which naturally leads to a discussion about the differences and how they came about.

This method is excellent in that it provides the students opportunity to develop communicative competence

through the task, and it also provides the opportunity to use the skills of listening, speaking and writing. Finally, this is self-propelled out of the students' motivation to put the story back together by themselves.

#### Mode Four: Improvisation

Farid (1976) suggested "Student-Improvised Dialogues" as a classroom activity to develop communicative competence. Dialogue situations are based on selections in the reading textbook and picked up in advance by the teacher, who knows which topic really interested the students in the previous reading class. At the beginning of class the students are given five minutes of preparation to work on the arguments to be given in the dialogue. While they are engaged in the preparation, they are not allowed to write anything down, but may get additional ideas or arguments from the teacher. Then everybody returns to the circle and listens to the first dialogue.

"On Stage in Five Minutes," suggested by Morgenstern (1976), is an improvised dramatic presentation. First the students are asked to create dramatic situations that would involve three or four people in the presentation. Those situations written down on paper will be collected and then shuffled by the teacher. The necessary number of students for the chosen situation are requested to go to another room to discuss for five minutes their roles and things that will happen in the drama. Finally they come back to present it.

The first advantage of these methods is that the students can freely present opposing ideas in the style of debating and be trained in the logical development of their speech. The second advantage is that the students have to learn to act out their own given roles and coordinate their speech and actions in a dramatic presentation; therefore, it is most suitable for advanced students.

#### Picture Transfer: Fusion of Sequential Development Modes

The writer has incorporated the techniques previously mentioned and the group dynamics of the game "Rumor" as described in "Fusion of the Four Skills" (Elkins, Kalivoda, and Morain, 1972) into a game that has proved to be highly competitive and interesting.

#### The Procedure of the Fusion Technique

The class is divided into two groups: Group A and Group B. The objects of this game are to communicate a picture from one group to the other by a descriptive improvised dialog, and to examine the result of the communication.

*Step One (10 minutes):* The teacher prepares several pictures in advance and distributes one to each group of students, who are instructed to examine it carefully and to make as many descriptive sentences about it as possible. Then questions that can elicit the previous descriptive sentences are made by the same group.

*Step Two (10 minutes):* Group A first presents its own improvised descriptive dialog of the picture to Group B, which is allowed to take notes in order to reproduce the picture later. Next, Group B presents its dialog, and Group A listens and takes notes.

*Step Three (10 minutes):* Each group draws the other group's picture based on a verbal description. Unclear aspects or points can be clarified by asking the other group. An important part in this step is that the students should be well aware that *only an accurate drawing from the description* is demanded, not a display of their artistic talents.

*Step Four (10 minutes):* Discussion is held to discern the differences between the original pictures and the ones they have drawn. Then questions will be raised. How did the differences happen? How can the students avoid miscommunication?

#### Evaluation Method

Holley and King (1971) state that "stringent demands for grammatical accuracy are not only unrealistic but possibly harmful in learning a second language" (p. 498). Berwick (1975) said: "Corrections should be made only in the case of significant errors which interfere with communication" (p. 287).

In the activity of the fusion technique, the corrections of mistakes that might have interfered with communication are postponed until the evaluation period, and are treated as team points lost in a game rather than as an individual's punishment. For instance, when Group B has drawn an item on the wrong side or with the wrong shape because of Group A's inaccurate description, Group A loses one point from Group A's oral points. When Group B has made a wrong drawing because of Group B's miscomprehension, Group B loses one point from Group B's aural points. The total of the team points lost is the final key to deciding the winning team of the game.

#### Some Reflections on the Fusion Technique

The best part of this technique is the self-evaluation regarding the differences between the original and the students' own products. It is clear with the students what was communicated and what was not when they take the first glance at the original. They are also invited to discuss why those differences happened during their communication.

The second advantage is that it is a game. Out of the sense of enjoying a game, the students are motivated to win; therefore, they concentrate on making a dialog, and also on listening to the other group's dialog carefully. This is far better than the simple presentation of a memorized dialog given in an audio-lingual textbook.

One difficulty was that, though the students were informed that this was not a test to examine their artistic talents, some students spent too much time drawing the picture. As a result it took them longer than the assigned time. Another difficulty was experienced when the students who were not good at making questions and answers slowed the game down. The writer was convinced that those students needed to do more work in Mode One.

### Conclusion

It was found that the students can proceed in discussion sessions successfully and in a lively manner as long as they are well instructed regarding the objectives and the procedures of the Sequential Development Modes. These catalytic structures for communicative competence allow the students to start from any mode according to their need, and allow the teacher to create further possible techniques for the student-centered and self-propelled class.

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