

Strategies for maximising student talking time
and increasing student-initiated responses
in English language teaching

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Abstract

A specific set of methods was employed to promote student-student communication and student-initiated responses amongst engineering students at Saitama Institute of Technology, during the 1994 and 1995 academic years. This paper presents the methods, the rationale behind them and discusses the degree to which they succeeded.

Introduction

The four techniques presented below were developed as a consequence of the author's experience of teaching four general English classes at Chuo University in 1993. The methods were applied during the following two years, to students at SIT. During this time, nine technical and three general English classes were taught. The methods are as follows:

1. *Strategies for checking answers with one's partner and answering the teacher's questions.*
2. *Strategies for extending a conversation.*
3. *Strategies for telling a story.*
4. *A motivational technique known as the "G Mark System".*

Strategies 2 and 3 were designed to stimulate student-student communication, and pertain exclusively to the general English classes. Strategies 1 and 4 on the other hand, were designed to promote both student-student communication and student-initiated responses, and each pertains to both technical and general English.

Checking and delivering answers

At Chuo the author observed that when students were asked to check their answers to an exercise with a partner, they would (a) look directly at their partner's sheet or exercise book and (b) use Japanese. This occurred even when the teacher asked them to use English and only English. The solution was to furnish the students with a small number of basic phrases they could use. This was taught right at the beginning of the academic year. Four simple phrases were elicited according to how sure the speaker was about their answer, and were placed in the context of a sample dialogue, as below:

Teacher: Two more minutes. Please check your answers with your partner.

Fumiko: What about Question two?

Hiroshi: It's 'Where are you come from?' (Phrase 1)

Do you agree?

I think it's (Phrase 2)

OK?

I'm not sure but I think it's (Phrase 3)

I'm sorry but I really don't know! (Phrase 4)

Fumiko: Yes, I do.

No, I don't. I think it's 'Where *do* you come from?'

OK. Sure.

That's right.

Hiroshi: What about Question three?

The students were then encouraged to keep the sample dialogue in view at all times for the first few classes, until checking their answers in English became second nature. Another, related, problem was that frequently when the teacher asked an individual Chuo student a question to which he didn't know the answer, he would stand up and remain completely silent for periods of up to thirty seconds. To avoid this profligate use of classroom time, the students were instructed to use the four phrases above to help deliver their answer, and it was emphasised that it was perfectly acceptable to use Phrase 4, "I'm sorry but I really don't know!"

Extending a Conversation

The following exercise¹ is a typical free practice exercise that was used at Chuo University:

PRACTICE

1 Grammar

Notice that **have** and **have got** are used in different ways in the question, short answer, and negative forms.

Work in pairs.

Ask and answer questions about the following:

- | | |
|-------------|------------------------|
| — a camera | — brothers and sisters |
| — a stereo | — a computer |
| — a car | — a part-time job |
| — a bicycle | — a credit card |

The students were instructed to use the prompts as a means of practising the target language and as a springboard for further conversation. However, the exercise would terminate within a mere two or three minutes because the majority of "conversations" followed either of the subsequent formats:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| A: <i>Do you have a car?</i> | A: <i>Do you have a car?</i> |
| B: <i>Yes.</i> | B: <i>Yes I do.</i> |
| A: <i>Do you like sashimi?</i> | A: <i>Do you like sashimi?</i> |
| B: <i>No.</i> | B: <i>No I don't.</i> |

The author introduced the following year at SIT the "A+ Strategy"² by presenting seven similar dialogues and asking the students to order them according to how natural they seemed. The two dialogues above were classified as interrogations and were deemed the least natural. The most natural dialogue was analysed by the class and it was found that B's response to "*Do you have a car?*" consisted of an answer *plus* a fact *plus* an opinion *plus* a question. Students were subsequently encouraged at all future times to give more information than the question required in the form of a fact or opinion, or both, and to ask a related question if necessary.

Guided Storytelling

Storytelling is basic to human communication. Indeed, it could be argued that virtually all communication that occurs can be reduced to storytelling, even when talking about the future. Knowing how to identify key information in a narrative is thus essential to the process, and this is where storytelling activities can be of great help. This third technique evolved from an observation that the students were, in general, unable to tell even a simple story fluently without guidance in the form of

keywords; a series of pictures alone was not enough. The guided storytelling exercises that the author found in textbooks lacked one essential quality: they were not communicative. Even if the exercises had both pictures and keywords, the speaking task was set up in such a way that Student A would tell the whole story to Student B, the problem being that Student B didn't actually have to listen! The situation was virtually repeated when it came to be Student B's turn to tell the story to Student A.

In order to make the task communicative, the silent student had to be active. The author's solution was to transform the material into a "jigsaw listening" activity³. This was achieved by manipulating the mechanics of the exercise in such a way that the silent student actually had to *listen* to his partner—because if he didn't realise when it was his turn to speak, the smooth flow of the narration would be severely compromised. To illustrate the technique, we can consider an example adapted from a well known textbook⁴. In the example, the students have just completed a reading task to test their comprehension of a short story about James Bond. The original exercise required the students to retell the story from memory with the help of eight pictures to remind them of what happened. This task is far too difficult for almost all Japanese university students, including Chuo students. The author adapted the material as follows: each student had all eight pictures; on Student A's sheet, keyword prompts in English were placed under pictures 1, 3, 5 and 7, while the remaining pictures had no keywords; on Student B's sheet, the opposite configuration was used. Student A narrated the odd-numbered pictures, whilst Student B narrated the remainder, each student alternating in order to advance the narrative. After the students had practised telling the whole story two or three times,

they were given a second set of pictures, identical to the first set except all the English keywords were replaced by pictures—or icons. The students then attempted to tell the story using only their memories and the pictures. The aim of the exercise was to practise both fluency and the past simple and past continuous tense forms and this was reflected in the nature of the keywords.

G Mark System

It is widely opined that Japanese students are unwilling to take risks and make mistakes when placed in a group environment, and that Japan's sociocentricity is responsible for the "nail that cannot stand up" syndrome. While such forthright behaviour may not be so desirable in a more lecture-oriented subject, the nature of the field of communicative English is such that activity rather than passivity is greatly conducive to mastering the skills and knowledge that are being taught. At Chuo, the author taught four classes of general English to about 120 students. The cumulative number of times students raised their hands during class - the hand count - for the entire year was exactly six. The G Mark System was an attempt to remedy this situation.

G Mark Philosophy:

At the beginning of the academic year, the author issued the students with a Classroom Information sheet that included the following instructions:

When a student answers a difficult question correctly, the teacher will give him a G Mark (G=Good). When a student speaks English a lot or tries to speak English a lot, during class exercises, the teacher will give him a G Mark. When a student puts his hand up

often and tries hard to answer the teacher's questions, the teacher may give him a G Mark, even if the answers are not correct. Put your hand up often! If a student gets enough G Marks (usually about 8), he will have no exam at the end of the semester and will be automatically given a Grade A. The names of those students who do not have to do the exam will be decided in July and December.

The students were informed that each G Mark is worth between 5 and 10% of their end-of-semester score and that each G Mark awarded during class would be added to their examination score. Some examples were then given to illustrate how this scheme worked. In order to record G Marks, the author used a seating plan marked out on an A4 sheet. Below the name of each student was a small grid of 15 rectangles arranged in 3 columns and 5 rows, each rectangle corresponding to a particular day in the current semester. The rectangles were used to record lateness, absence and G Marks. A G Mark was recorded as a capital "G", a half G Mark as a small-caps "g."

G Mark Instructional Language

The teacher let it be known to the students that a G Mark was on offer by referring to the opportunity as a "*G Chance*." For responses that didn't quite merit a full G Mark, the author would offer "*Half a G Chance*." As an example, if the teacher is going through the answers to an exercise with the class and the next question is slightly difficult, the teacher might typically say "*OK. Question 3. G Chance. Anyone?*" If a student is only able to give a partially correct answer, then the teacher might award him half a G Mark. It was important to try to ensure as wide a distribution of G Marks as possible, in order to encourage all the students and not just the best. Thus, if six or seven students raised their hands, the teacher would sometimes wait

an extra couple of seconds to give some of the slower students, or students with few or no G Marks, a better chance. This strategy of waiting before selecting a student to answer was used increasingly as the semester progressed. In order to make G Marks more accessible to the poorer or slower students, many of the questions the author asked were not at all difficult, often just a recap of what the class had previously covered. For example: if the chalkboard says "Miho is studying English.", the teacher might ask "*What tense is this sentence? G Chance.*"

As a further example of the language used to execute the scheme, suppose the students are listening to eight speakers and that they have to match each speaker with a different picture.

<teacher plays tape; speaker number one only>

Teacher: OK. Which picture is speaker number one? G Chance.

<six students raise their hands; teacher chooses Fumiko>

Fumiko: I think it's Picture D.

Teacher: Hmm. Not quite but close. Takafumi?

Takafumi: I'm not sure but I think it's Picture F.

Teacher: That's right! Speaker 1, Picture F.

<teacher marks answer on BB to demonstrate to the students the format of the exercise; teacher marks G under Takafumi's name on register>

Teacher: G Mark. Good! Now please listen to the other seven speakers and number the pictures. Listen to the first speaker again and check the answer.

<teacher plays tape from beginning, all the way through, twice; teacher checks the remaining seven answers with the

students in a similar fashion>

G Mark Applications

The system is unbounded in its applications. The author was able to use it in almost any situation where language production on the part of the student was desirable and almost any question the teacher asked the class carried with it the offer of a full or half G Mark. For extremely easy and trivial questions, no G Marks were offered in general because to do so would typically result in an unmanageable deluge of twenty or more hands. Instead, the teacher would pre-empt any student-initiated responses by selecting a specific student. In addition, the system was used as an adrenaline shot to increase the tempo and excitement of games and warmers such as communicative crosswords, dominoes or bingo. Other situations in which G Marks were awarded include:

- when a student volunteered to demonstrate a dialogue or communicative activity.
- when the teacher accidentally made a mistake and a student raised his hand to point this out.
- when a student didn't understand something, or didn't take something the teacher had said for granted, and asked an insightful question.
- when a student scored ten out of ten on a vocabulary revision dictation quiz.

The common thread of these situations is that the G Mark could only be awarded if the student raised his hand.

Discussion

Out of the four techniques presented, the guided storytelling and the G Mark system were the most successful. The students

were able to narrate a story entirely in English to the point where only visual iconography was used as a prompt. The guided storytelling may have held special appeal partly because of its visual nature. Although most students did not produce grammatically accurate language, they were able to speak with an uncharacteristically high degree of fluency.

The G Mark system was very well received by the students. The enthusiasm with which many students raised their hands and the fact that scores of positive comments were written by the students on their end-of-semester questionnaires, both serve to underscore this statement. It thus seems that they were sufficiently motivated by the prospect of not having to attend their end-of-semester exam. There was, of course, a proportion of students to whom the goal of being exam-free seemed too difficult to achieve. Even these students—or at any rate most of them—appeared to be motivated simply by the fact that they could at least *improve* their grades by accumulating G Marks.

One difficulty lies in deciding what actually merits credit and what doesn't. Experience will allow the teacher to fine tune the system in this respect. The author feels it is very important that the students see the teacher marking the G Mark on the A4 sheet. This provides visual reinforcement that they are surely boosting their final grade. Indeed, both Nelson⁴ and Mills⁵ went so far as to use participation cards in order to provide this important feedback for the students. The author originally set out to award G Marks to those students who tried hard during pairwork activities, but, due to sheer numbers, was unable to implement this fairly. Perhaps the use of participation cards as suggested by Nelson and Mills might make this aim more practical. In any event, it is not uncommon, especially during the latter half of each semester, to be swamped by a dozen students, each vying to check that the teacher did indeed mark

down his G Marks correctly, each counting his total tally, and each aiming for the magic number 8.

By telling the students that each G Mark is worth between 5 and 10% of the final grade, the teacher gains some flexibility in how grading is actually implemented. Because the author only fails students with unsatisfactory attendance, even the worst student will get at least a C- in his end-of-semester exam. In practice, each G Mark boosts a student's grade by one notch (C to C+, B- to B etc.). Suppose for example, that the teacher decides Hiroshi should get a B- for his end-of-semester exam performance and suppose he has three G Marks. Then, his final grade will be an A-, which is an A when rounded up. 6 G Marks would also take a student from C- to A-.

The first strategy, checking answers in English, was less successful. The students were apt to break into Japanese because it was easier and more time-efficient for them to do so. The author found himself constantly reminding and prompting the students to try to use English. At any rate, the author hopes that this prompting at least helped to impress upon the students the importance of trying to speak English in order to learn the language.

The second strategy, extending a conversation, met with a somewhat mixed degree of success. It was certainly very successful in improving the students' conversations to the extent that they not only responded with an answer but also gave a fact or an opinion. However, for most students the improvement went no further, for few of them could take a single topic that interested them and talk about it for more than a couple of minutes.

Conclusion

The G Mark technique provides an effective, easily implemented and relatively quantitative method of assessment. Its quantitative nature seems to appeal to the Japanese predisposition towards numerical symbolism and the student response has been very positive. It has been rewarding to observe inactive students in Semester 1 become more active in Semester 2. Perhaps the most rewarding thing of all, however, is to see some students reach the point where they raise their hands regardless of whether any reward is offered.

It was also rewarding to see most students communicate relatively fluently in the guided storytelling exercises, even though the activities were more controlled than the author would ideally like. In future, the author would like to experiment with more free-based storytelling exercises after having given the students enough experience doing controlled storytelling exercises.

Less Japanese could be encouraged when students are checking their answers by adopting some sort of penalty system for those students who speak too much Japanese. Mills⁵ used a participation card system, whereby inactive students were given a red card signalling that the teacher had noticed their inactivity. A similar system could be used in order to warn students when they are speaking too much Japanese.

The strategies for extending a conversation possibly need to place more stress on the importance of asking further questions. To this end, the author would like to experiment by giving the students special practice in forming and asking questions.

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