

Brainstorming and Storytelling in Intermediate Oral English Classes: Content-Based Oral Practice

中級オーラルイングリッシュクラスにおけるブレインストーミングと
ストーリーテリングコンテスト・アプローチによる口答発表の試み

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要 約

北星学園女子短期大学英文学科では、2年次における英語による一般教育科目の準備のために、1年次で一般的な語学能力に力を注いでいる。本論文では、1年次学生のための会話練習について紹介する。学生は、2人組み、あるいは少人数のグループ内で、ストーリーについて発表する。ストーリーの意味を明らかにするために、パートナーからの質問に答える。最終的に、彼らはストーリーについて、自分のパートナーの意見、アイデア、感想を尋ね、内容についてディスカッションを行う。日本語でブレインストームをつくり、キーワードを英語に訳することで、その練習の準備を行う。日本語のプリントや、講読のような他の授業、あるいは学生自身が経験したことなどから、ストーリーの内容が決められる。この会話練習によって目指すところは、他の授業で使う英語や、学生自身の経験したことに関する単語を中心として、学生の語彙能力を高めることにある。

ABSTRACT

Hokusei Women's Junior College's English curriculum emphasizes general language skills in the first year that prepare students for content based instruction in the second year.

This paper describes content-based speaking practice for first year students. In pairs and small groups, students tell a content story. They answer questions from their partner to clarify the meaning of the story. Finally they ask for their partner's opinion, idea or feeling about the content of the story and discuss the content. Students prepare for the practice by creating a brainstorm in Japanese and translating key words into English. The content of the stories comes from the teacher (content printed in Japanese), from another class such as reading class, or from the student's experiences.

It is hoped that a practice using content from other classes or related to student's experience will result in increased retention of vocabulary.

1.0 Students and content-based education

Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College has designed an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum which emphasizes general language skills building in the first year with a

focus on content-based instruction in the second year (Alison, *et al.*, 1995; Gettings & Iwasaki-Goodman, 1996). The first year includes courses in Reading, Graded Reading, Vocabulary Building, English Composition, Listening/Pronunciation, and Oral English. Oral English I meets four times a week for a total of three hours. *New English Firsthand Plus* (Helgesen, 1991) is used as the text. Students are at an intermediate level in conversation.

1.1 Oral English I content-based communication

In the author's Oral English I classes, as part of the preparation for second year content-based classes, students practice content-based discussions. To decide the content they read a story in Japanese during the class or are asked to focus on a topic from their experience outside of Oral English class. They brainstorm key elements of the story in Japanese and then use Japanese-English dictionaries to find the English translation of key words. Following this, the brainstorm paper is used as a reference when they tell and discuss the story with a partner or a small group in English.

1.2 Content for Oral English

Content can come from a variety of sources: from students' general knowledge, from another class within their course of study, or can be provided by the teacher. Each type of content source creates problems related to classroom management. Relying on students' general knowledge may be inadequate for focusing on particular subjects. All students may not have an interest in or information relating to the same topic. Content topics from students' course of study may not match the timing of the oral class or students may have varied courses of study which prevent coordination with oral classes. Content that is provided by the teacher has to be accessed by the students in class or as homework. Using content stories written in the students' native language can reduce reading time. However, there still may not be adequate time for teacher-chosen content to be studied either in class or for homework.

Each type of content source also offers opportunities for classroom management. Content from the students' background knowledge such as information about their hometown, family, or high school experiences is especially useful as an icebreaker in the beginning of the first year. Content introduced by the teacher is especially useful when the focus of the lesson includes exposure to decided vocabulary, grammar structures or conversation strategies. Using content learned in other classes in the students' course of study can reduce the time necessary to learn new material and can reinforce vocabulary and ideas learned in the other classes.

The author's oral classes use all three sources of content in communication activities. Teacher prepared content, however, is restricted to stories written in Japanese or in both Japanese and English. Using the students' native language for content input saves time and gives students a better grounding in the content than if the stories were only in English.

(Halvorsen & Gettings, 1997). The English translation is offered as a source of new vocabulary. Stories that students read in Graded Reading class have also been used as the source of content for oral production. From the start of the class year, students are trained to communicate content in a brainstorming and storytelling process that includes discussion to clarify information and to express ideas, feelings and opinions.

2.0 Description of the brainstorm/storytelling process

2.1 The brainstorm process

*Students write the topic in the middle of a paper and put a circle around it.

*Students think about the topic and write any idea that comes to mind. If the idea comes in English, they write it in English. If it comes in their native language, they write it in their native language. No dictionaries!

*Students do not write sentences, just key words or short phrases.

2.2 Learning new English vocabulary and focusing on key ideas

*After students get about 15 or 20 keywords on the paper, they think about the ones they will need to tell the story. They use a Japanese-English dictionary or the English translation of the story to find the English for the keywords. Students write the English translation next to the Japanese word. When they talk about the topic they can refer to their brainstorm paper if they need to use the keywords. They add more keywords during the process as they think of them.

*Students write four or five questions to ask their partner about her opinion, idea or feeling about the story.

"How do you feel about _____?"

"What do you think about _____?"

"If you were _____, what would you do?"

These questions focus on ideas that the student thinks are important. She can develop these ideas in discussion with her partner by asking her partner's opinion.

2.3 The storytelling process: telling the story, clarifying questions from the listener and opinion questions from the speaker to the listener

Students give a short speech. Following this they answer clarifying questions or "questions to get more information" from the listener. Finally the speaker asks the listener her opinion, feeling or idea about the story. During the last part of the process students also express their own ideas, prompted by the listener's "How about you?" questioning.

Beginning intermediate students will struggle with meaning and spend more time telling and questioning for information about the story. Advanced intermediate students may quickly deal with the details of the story and pass on to discussing their feelings about the issues

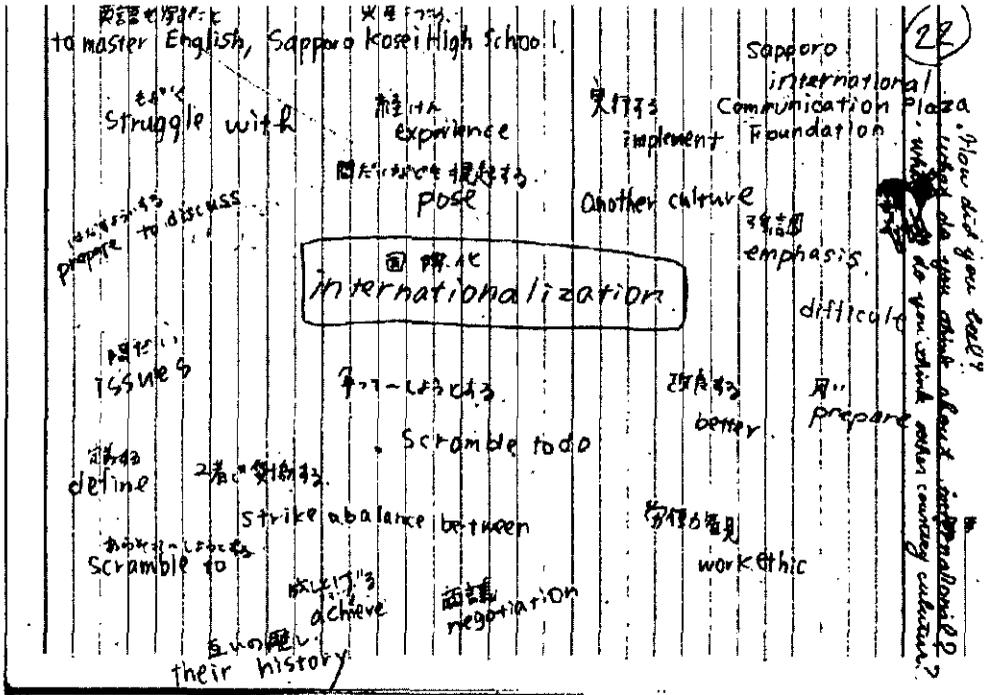


Figure 1. Example of a brainstorm with translation of keywords and feeling, opinion and idea questions.

that the story touches on. Training students in this three part communication practice will eventually give them a framework to continue in a pair work conversation for five to ten minutes without prompting from the teacher.

3.0 Training students in the brainstorming/storytelling process

The teacher should start with easy content and repeat the brainstorming exercise often. Students need to become used to finding topics, doing a brainstorm, developing opinion questions, telling stories and directing discussions. The teacher should isolate aspects of this process and introduce students to each of the aspects in a clear, do-able way. Brainstorming should be at first taught with easy content so that the student will not have to spend much energy on anything other than learning the brainstorming process itself.

3.1 The brainstorming process

A brainstorm should be fast, messy and students should use their native language as often as they need to. The first step of a brainstorm is to get as many ideas as possible on a piece of paper. It should be very fast. Students should be encouraged to not use erasers, to not write in neat lines, and to not search for English translations if the idea comes to them in their native language.

This is very difficult for students to accept in an Oral English class, especially from a native speaker, who may have been endlessly encouraging students in other situations to use "all English." Students may need encouragement to use their native language.

After getting the key concepts on paper, students should use a Japanese/English Language (or native language/English) dictionary to translate the useful keywords. Students should be encouraged to add to the content from their own background knowledge. The power to express one's own opinions and ideas about the content should be stressed. Developing a personal vocabulary is an important aim of the exercise.

3.2 The storytelling process: speech, questions to the speaker and questions from the speaker to the listener(s)

After completing the initial brainstorm, students should be given a supportive atmosphere in which to talk about their story. It should be stressed that they do not have to tell the whole story, but just give a hint about the content. Their partners will do the work of finding out more information by asking questions.

Quick exchanges with several partners are a good way to start storytelling. Have the students find partners with a different story. Give the first student one minute to tell the story. Follow this by two or three minutes of clarifying questions from the partner and two or three minutes for the storyteller to ask her partner's feeling, opinion or idea. Students get a sense of how adequately they have prepared for storytelling but are not extensively challenged because of the short duration of the exchange. After one or two five-minute exchanges with partners, students can be given more time to develop their brainstorms accordingly.

Change partners many times, each time varying the storytelling time: three minutes, 30 seconds, one minute. Students will react to very short storytelling times with laughter and some frustration. Stress the challenge of finding out the content by asking questions rather than by telling the whole story.

Forbid dictionaries in the storytelling process. Brainstorming is the time for dictionaries. Storytelling is the time for oral production and for experimenting with communication strategies. When a student searches in a dictionary for a word, communication stops. Rather, the student can ask her partner "How do you say _____ in English?" If her partner knows the word she can teach it. If not, she can answer, "I don't know." At least the concept will be understood in Japanese and the partners can move on to other discussion. After the conversation is finished the storyteller can use a dictionary to find the word and add it to her brainstorm.

Recycle the brainstorms to increase their value. One reason for this practice is vocabulary development. Students can be asked to use old brainstorms from time to time in order to reinforce the learning that took place when the brainstorm and conversation were original.

ly undertaken. Students can be asked to keep a notebook with brainstorm and other materials from the class. Their brainstorms and their personal vocabulary become a part of the "textbook" that others in the class are also exposed to and study.

When teaching the process it is necessary to remain fairly rigid in having all students do the same step at the same time. After students learn the process allow a degree of freedom. Students will naturally adjust it to their own needs. Students can be told to develop brainstorms according to the level of support they need for telling a story. Higher level students may not need such developed brainstorms. Slower students can be encouraged to develop brainstorms according to their needs as homework. This reduces the amount of class time that is taken away from oral production.

4.0 General Methods

One reason that the practice is so strictly structured is so that the teacher can check student behavior to see if they understand or are focusing on each step of the process. At first students are brainstorming in Japanese. The teacher can easily check students' progress by walking around the room and observing the amount of words that they have written on paper. Students who are having problems can be coached.

At each stage there are observable processes that the teacher can check and evaluate. In the second stage they should be focusing on dictionaries. During storytelling, only one person should be talking. During questioning two people should be discussing and talking equally. The teacher can check these observable aspects of the process in order to see if students understand the practice, are on target, or have other needs that should be addressed in order to make the practice more successful.

4.1 Creating a safe atmosphere for conversation can lead to a more interesting, effective class.

Lachman (1997) has stressed that student's concept of the classroom as a safe place is essential for learning. Learning involves risk taking and students will accept challenges to learn only to the extent that they feel safe with the risks involved. Ito (1998) points out that for Japanese students even talking in their native language to someone they do not know may be difficult. The risks of making mistakes in front of others, of deeper communication and the expression of opinions requires a *honne* relationship to be established between the communicators. This *honne* relationship is based on knowledge of the partner and a history of experiences of sharing and trust. Ito suggests that using Structured Encounter Group activities in Japanese as part of the EFL curriculum can establish this basis of *honne* that can serve as the framework for risk taking with a partner in the target language, English.

4.2 Creating a frustrating, challenging atmosphere with opportunities for success can lead to a more interesting, effective class.

Creating an “all English” atmosphere: Students should be encouraged to attempt an all English conversation. This may be frustrating for them. They may not believe themselves capable of it, so it should be taken in stages. At first, 100% English may be an unattainable goal. If the student assesses her conversation to be about 50% English she can be encouraged to attempt 60% in the next practice. Then higher in the next. There is no real communicative reason for students to use English with a partner if both partners have the same first language. The teacher must present an all English target as an artificial yet essential language practice and create an atmosphere that will be accepted by students.

Emphasis on body language, eye contact, non-verbal communication skills, English *aizuchi* or other easy practices can make an all English focus easier. One way of giving students a feeling of success in an otherwise difficult English practice is to focus their attention for a short time on some element of conversation that is observable and easily attainable. If the teacher focuses on student ability to make eye contact during storytelling rather than on “all English” production, this may take pressure from students and put their focus on the human connection. This may in turn result in the storyteller realizing that she can relax a bit and rely on the listener’s clarifying remarks or knowledge of vocabulary to help her in the storytelling process.

Giving inadequate time to complete the brainstorm in class: A brainstorm is a tool that makes storytelling easier and helps to increase students’ vocabulary. It is never really completed. It develops as the storytelling/discussion process calls up students’ need for new words. Students should never be given enough class time to “complete” a brainstorm. After the first session of brainstorming, students should be given a brief chance (perhaps one or two minutes) to test out their stories, to see if their brainstorms have been developed as useful tools and to get a sense of what new words they will need for a more complete explanation and discussion of their story.

Students sometimes feel that the task is extremely difficult. They often feel frustrated when they are not given adequate time to “complete” a brainstorm. These feelings are positive. The task, indeed, is difficult. It is intended to be so. The teacher should check students’ feelings about the difficulty and affirm both the difficulty and the students’ ability to meet the challenge of the topic. The teacher can also adjust the difficulty of the next storytelling session depending on students’ responses.

The frustration during storytelling that students feel can also be positive because it is essentially frustration over not being able to communicate difficult concepts in the target language. If students are given a method that will help them to develop their communicative

ability and to communicate their message more adequately the frustration will not be a dead end but become accepted as a natural part of the learning process.

One approach to building a feeling of positive frustration in students is to introduce a new topic at the end of class. Students can be given an inadequate time to brainstorm and tell their story in order to assess its difficulty. They can be given the option of developing the brainstorm as a homework assignment if they feel it is necessary. In this way students who need more time or have less developed vocabularies can choose whether or not to do extra work outside of class. Students with more developed vocabularies can also choose to develop or not develop their brainstorms according to need.

4.4 Varying timing and attention to group dynamics can lead to a more interesting, effective class.

Varying the timing: Varying the timing of the practice can emphasize specific aspects of the communication process. An extended storytelling time (4 - 7 minutes) can encourage students to learn background vocabulary and organize their thoughts. A shorter storytelling time (1 - 3 minutes) puts the emphasis on questioning by the listener to elicit information. A very short time (15 to 30 seconds) forces students to speak very quickly and is almost always followed by laughter as the students realize exactly how little of their story they can get across in this manner to their partners. When most students have heard all of the stories, storytelling time can be reduced to a question, "My story is about _____. Have you heard it?" and the students can continue with only discussion.

In a similar manner, varying the time of the questions from the listener and the opinion questions can emphasize other aspects of communication. After students are trained in the three part process, they can complete it at their own pace. The teacher can simply ask students to discuss a story for five or ten minutes and students will pace storytelling, questions from the listener, and opinion questions as needed.

Varying partners: Frequently varying partners aids in fulfilling the cognitive aims of a lesson by giving students the chance to practice telling a story, to experiment with different communication strategies depending on each partner's understanding of English, and to discuss a variety of responses to the story. It affects in the affective parameters of a lesson by increasing the probability that students will find a partner that suits them and makes the practice more interesting because of the emotional connection of talking to others. Finally it affects the physical components of a lesson because the actual act of standing and moving can increase the physical energy the students have available to use in the lesson. Changing partners is especially useful when students are bored, tired or distracted.

Changing partners can be a time consuming process, especially in a class which requires

lots of partner changes. Some students find partners quickly. Others may take quite some time. Students may see the storytelling pair work as the language practice and wait until the teacher formally commences the storytelling to begin speaking English. This can result in the students switching to their native language during the partner exchange.

One way of getting around this loss of time is to stress that changing partners in itself is an English target exercise and that the students should always practice English as they change partners. Students can be taught a structured practice for changing partners: 1) finding a new partner using English; 2) greeting the partner in English; and 3) engaging in free conversation with the partner until the teacher gives the signal to stop. Students can easily internalize the three part structure if they are coached consistently in using it whenever they change partners.

There are a wide variety of levels of language ability among intermediate students. During storytelling a high and low ability student will feel some frustration when paired together. Their vocabularies and communication strategies may not match. Giving students the freedom to choose their partner or group can improve classroom dynamics. Students can choose to group according to English ability, because of interest in another student's story's content, or to be with friends. Choice of partner allows students to experiment with different storytelling situations. Through this experimentation they can meet their own cognitive and affective needs.

However, students should not always be given the freedom to choose their own partner. Random or teacher directed pairing exposes students to partners with different levels and interests. Communicating with others who are different may be frustrating but also provides situations where students are challenged to develop new communication strategies or respond to new ideas.

Varying the group size: Group size has an effect on which aspects of the process are emphasized and how much time each student is engaged in language production. Groups of two are the optimal size for language production. Each student has 50% of the practice time. Groups of three or four students may be more useful in classes of mixed levels. Advanced students can model the tasks and coach beginners in asking questions or clarifying the message of the speaker. Larger groups (four or five students) increase the formality of the practice and can be combined with having the speaker stand as an introduction to public speaking. This is also a useful way for the teacher to observe individual student oral production for grading.

5.0 Conclusion and ideas for the future

Students seem to adjust quickly to the highly structured brainstorm/storytelling approach. After they learn its elements they are able to carry on independent, non-structured

conversations that include the elements of preparation, information giving, clarifying information and discussion of opinions. Coordination of content with the Graded Reading class has provided a continuing source of changing content that is difficult enough to provide most students with a challenge that they can succeed at. It is hoped that using stories from Graded Reading will also increase students' retention of vocabulary. In the future the author hopes to include the content from other classes and to have students do extensive writing (Nelsen, 1998) in English Composition class that is coordinated with their Graded Reading and Oral English practice.

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