

An Oral English Curriculum Based on Student Presentations

学生発表に基づいたオーラル・イングリッシュ・カリキュラム

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要 約

本論文ではコンテスト・ベースト英語コミュニケーションの授業を紹介する。学生はそれぞれが選定したテーマについて、学生向のディスカッションを行い、それに基づいて資料を作成し、発表する。最後に、その発表会では学生達がお互いに評価をすることである。

A B S T R A C T

A content-based English communications class is described. Students choose themes and make a list of discussion questions. They interview each class member and use the information from the interviews to make a presentation. Finally students evaluate each other.

Key Words: content-based, student centered, English conversation

Introduction

Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College has a curriculum built on content-based teaching. For the past two years, as an experiment in student centered teaching, a curriculum for Oral English I & II classes based on student-generated content-based themes was tested by the author. Students chose a theme, developed discussion questions, and then discussed the topic with each member of the class. Although other activities were included for either variety, training or establishing a supportive atmosphere among students, discussions and presentations took up most of one semester's class time.

There were four general principles of the curriculum: student-centeredness; trust and respect for each individual; the teacher as coach not director; and clarity of goals for activities. Pairs or groups of four or five student peers were the center of preparation, interview process, training, practice, presentation and evaluation. This focus on peer groups can create an informal, private, and usually supportive atmosphere. Trust and a feeling of being supported by the group are important for successful communication. Group dynamics exercises, games, and values clarification were used to build a positive environment for communication (Ito, 1998).

In line with the emphasis on group or student-centeredness, the teacher acted as a coach and was more on the sidelines than at the center. The teacher should be seen as someone who supports the development of each student or group and not the primary source of evaluation -- either

positive or negative. Finally, for groups to work independently and for the teacher to coach, clarity of goals is necessary. The teacher or the teacher and students together should decide on the goals for each lesson and these goals should be referred to as often as possible. The teacher can only coach a student and assist her in achieving a goal that she is motivated to achieve.

2.0 The curriculum: student-centered interviews and presentations

The curriculum began with students choosing topics and developing discussion/interview questions related to the topic. Over the next several classes, each student interviewed all of the class members one by one. Students then used the results of the interviews as the basis of a presentation. Finally, they evaluated each other's presentations and reflected upon the advice given in the evaluation.

2.1 Choice of topic and development of questions

Students often spend a great deal of time selecting topics. One method of motivating students to make decisions more quickly is to begin topic selection in the last ten minutes of class. Students were told that as soon as they decided on a topic and checked it with their teacher, they could leave. Decisions that might have taken twenty minutes were suddenly made in two. The teacher checked whether the topics selected were suitable, too narrow, or too broad. The student then wrote the topic on the board. No other student could choose that topic. Students could change their topic or could decide to come up with a topic for homework if they needed more time.

Should the teacher put restrictions on topic choice? The answer to this question should be related to the goals of the curriculum. The teacher may choose to narrow the range of topics before the choice begins. For example, in a content-based History class, the range of topics may be restricted to those that have a relation to the content field. "Popular movies" may not be acceptable because of its focus on the present but "the directing career of Hisao Miyazaki" would be fine.

Another goal related to topic selection is to encourage critical thinking about the topic by students. Beyond simply being of interest, the topic should be suitable for discussion over several months followed by a presentation. The topic should also be of general interest, with most students having enough information about it to discuss it at length. Some topics, such as "music," may be too broad to easily make a comprehensive series of questions that would result in a presentation. The teacher can give suggestions in narrowing down the topic or let the student stay with a broad topic if she wants it and does not agree with the teacher's advice.

Most of all, the topic should be related to students' lives. Students will be discussing their opinions, ideas and feelings. A topic that most students have no opinions, ideas and feeling about will not be effective in generating a conversation. There are many ways of focusing topic selection more narrowly. For example, in a second year conversation class the teacher requested students choose a topic related to a social problem, human relations problem or personal challenge that most people in the students' social group had experienced or about which they had strong feelings..

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Following topic selection, students write questions that they will use to interview their classmates. Here too, the design of the questions presents a thinking challenge. How interesting are the questions? How suitable will the answers be for an interesting presentation?

Four question styles were presented for student choice. Yes/no questions are good for getting general, quick information but sometimes the results are not so interesting. Multiple-choice questions can be used to focus the interviewee's choices. Open-ended questions can provide interesting answers but there may be no pattern in those answers. Finally, situation questions, in which the reader is presented with a situation and must give their solution, can be good for leading to a longer discussion or focusing on the interviewee's values. As students design their questions, the teacher can circulate among them, checking grammar or appropriateness to the topic.

2.2 Interview mechanics:

After the questions are completed, the student finds a partner and interviews her. Students proceed in interviewing at their own pace. Timing interviews so that all students can change partners at the same time is virtually impossible. Instead, students waiting for a partner sit in five or six chairs lined up at one end of the classroom. These chairs are designated as the "I'm waiting for a partner" area.

As soon as one interview is complete, the students in that pair join the waiting for a partner group. If there is someone there they have not interviewed, the two of them go to another area of the classroom and begin interviewing. If the students waiting have interviewed each other, they sit in the waiting area and engage in free conversation until a new partner comes. If there is only one person in the waiting area, the teacher can chat with her or become an interviewee as well. Visible classroom management, or management based on visible cues, is an important part of this process. Students who are waiting for partners are visible to other students in the room, which makes it clearer to the next pair who finish that they have people waiting for the next round of interviews.

Another approach to visible classroom management is to use a standard form on which students write their questions and record their answers. The form (Swanson, 2000) in Figure 1 has distinct areas for each of ten questions that make up the interview and the names of the people who were interviewed. Beneath each question is a row of ten boxes, one for each of the answers given by the ten interviewees.

Figure 1 : Interview Form

SURVEY

Names of people you asked:

1.	6.
2.	7.
3.	8.
4.	9.
5.	10.

Question 1:									
Answers:									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Question 2:									
Answers:									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

By circulating around the classroom and observing each pair's forms, the teacher can more clearly understand the pair's interview progress. How many people/questions have they asked? What is the pace of the interview? Are students asking follow-up questions or "How about you?" to make the interview a discussion or is it relatively on-sided? Are the students interviewing or talking about another subject? The form can show the timing and pace of each student's progress.

2.3 Preparation of presentations:

As the first students near the end of the interview process, the class must begin preparations for the presentations. The presenter must evaluate the data and decide which is appropriate for a presentation, decide whether it is necessary to expand on the data in the questionnaires, and decide on a format for the presentation. These three decisions are not sequential, the student is faced with the challenge of thinking about all three of them at the same time -- going back and forth between them -- in order to design an interesting presentation. Students may become lost in the mechanics of the process: how many questions, how long the presentation should be, what is the difference between using a poster or computer slides. The teacher can encourage students to look beyond the details of mechanics to broader criteria -- will the presentation be more interesting if it is longer or shorter, covers more or fewer questions or takes place using poster or computer slides.

2.3.1 Evaluating the data and expanding on results

The presenter needs to evaluate the answers she has received to her questions and decide which information can be used to make the presentation interesting. This is the stage where she can really learn the relationship of question style to gathering information. It is also a good teaching opportunity for helping students to become conscious of the results that can be achieved from various styles of questions.

Typically, yes/no questions are the most frequently discarded. Yes/no questions are often used as rhetorical questions in order to introduce topics. The answer is often assumed by the questioner before the question is asked. In this sense, they do not provide interesting data for a presentation. If a poster or slide is being designed, for the most part, there is no reason to display a graph that shows the answer to be 100% the same.

An exception to this is when the questioner's assumptions in designing the question have been challenged by the interviewee. For example, in a second year all women's English conversation class, only one student answered "No." in response to two different interviewers' questions, "Do you want to marry?" and "Do you like foreigners?" In both cases, the interviewers had expected all class members to answer, "Yes." In the first case, the assumption was that all young women wanted to marry. In the second, the presenter had many foreign teachers but did not realize that one student found them frightening. In each case, the questions provided interesting data because the data challenged the assumptions of the presenter and of the majority of the class.

In the same way, the results from other questions (multiple choice, expanded, situational) can be

judged for their suitability to be included in the presentation. Some results may be discarded because they were too predictable. Other results may show no clear pattern in the responses. In a worst-case scenario, a student may judge that the results of only one or two of her ten questions are suitable for the presentation. In this case, the student may have to expand on her data in some other way.

2.3.2 Expanding on the findings

Most students will probably want to expand their findings by developing new questions; by discussing the results in detail; or by including related information.

Students can develop new questions to ask before the presentation or develop questions for use during the presentation. They may decide to ask only one or two questions very quickly to all of the students in the class. This can be done in class while other students are working on their presentations, outside of class, or in written questionnaire form. Most of the time, these kinds of questions will expand on the answers already received by exploring them further. Students may, however, decide to take a completely different approach and design entirely new questions. Another approach is to ask new questions during the presentation. This has the added benefit of making the presentation interactive and, therefore, probably increasing audience interest.

Students will invariably include a discussion of their results during a presentation. This may take the form of brief comments after the results of each question presented or the form of a conclusion. Discussion may, in fact, be more extensive than reporting the results. This balance is up to each individual student. The key should be encouraging students to think about what will make the most interesting presentation. A dry recitation of results will probably not be interesting but mindlessly following a set formula for what the balance of results and discussion should be may be equally boring.

Finally students may choose to expand on their results by including research or experiences from sources other than their interview questions. Private research, personal experience, and the use of media or realia (objects) fall into this category. Private research, such as in the library or on the Internet can provide interesting information related to the topic. Relation of personal experience can make the topic seem more connected to the social milieu of presenter and audience. The audience can also be given an experience of the topic through media or realia. Pictures, music, videos or objects can convey information, at times better than words. A presentation on rock music would probably be more interesting if one or two songs were played. The idea that some people love animals and some people are afraid of them was illustrated when one of the presenters suddenly produced her hamster from a hidden box and asked students to pass it around and observe each other's reactions.

No matter what form the evaluation of and expansion on data takes, it is important to consider the target of the presentation – the audience. One of the simplest ways to do this is to make every decision subservient to one criteria: "How can it make the presentation more interesting?" How

long should the presentation be? Any length is OK but depending on the contents, it should be long enough to be interesting. What kind of questions should be asked? Questions that produce interesting answers or discussions. Does the presentation need to be interactive? Not necessarily, making it interactive is only one route to making it interesting. The audience can be brought to students' attention simply by asking "What do you think will make the presentation most interesting?"

2.3.3 Deciding on format

Expansion on questionnaire results is intricately related to decisions on the type of format the presentation may take. Basically, there are two main areas of decision-making involved: what media will be used to convey information and how interactive the presentation will be. Other factors, such as the physical location of speakers and listeners or the use of equipment may also be considered.

All presentations are interactive. Even an audience listening quietly will interact with the speaker by expressing themselves through body language or eye contact. Presenters can use interaction as a way of illustrating a point, heightening attention, or making a presentation more interesting or fun.

Interaction can involve the listener's five senses. Touching an animal, tasting food, smelling a chemical, hearing a song, or seeing a picture or video of something that is being discussed, can illustrate the presenter's point at a deeper level than simply listening to words.

Interaction can also involve presenter and listeners in a dialog or activity. Listeners can answer questions as a group by raising hands, calling out responses, writing, or being selected by the presenter one by one to give a response. Questions can solicit opinions or information from listeners, which often make a presentation feel more personal.

Questioning can be used to heighten listeners' interest in a particular part of the presentation. For example, during a group presentation on fortune telling, the presenters prepared a poster with four animals used in *dobutsu uranai*. Next to the animals, the names of eight of the listeners' teachers were concealed. Listeners were asked to guess "Who is a tiger?" "Who is a koala?" Students suddenly became much more engaged in the presentation, expressing surprise or laughing as they discovered the answers.

Interaction can also take on a more traditional format, a question and discussion session at the end of a presentation. This is especially useful in small groups. Students often feel more comfortable questioning each other or discussing in small groups of peers than in front of the whole class. This is perhaps true anywhere in the world, but especially so in Japanese secondary and tertiary education culture. Teachers who wish their students to become fluent in large class discussion should not only teach the skills involved, but also be certain that the classroom is seen as a comfortable and safe place to take risks specifically working to design activities that desensitize students to this culturally risk-laden task.

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Finally, preparation involves decision making about the medium of the presentation: spoken, poster, or computer generated slides (e.g. OHP or PowerPoint). Each has its benefits and drawbacks. OHP and PowerPoint presentations are dependent on the availability of machines yet are more suited to presenting a great deal of information graphically. There is no limit to the number of slides that can be created for the presentation. If the slides are created on computer they are easy to edit and can be sent to the teacher for a check of content or grammar/spelling. The slides can be sent to the teacher as an e-mail attachment that makes it easier to continue teacher-student dialog about the presentation outside of limited classroom time.

Posters have only a limited amount of space in which to present information. They are difficult to edit once made. Larger posters, suitable for audiences of ten people or more, may be unwieldy. Spoken or poster presentations are simple to prepare and require no extra equipment. Small posters can be hand-held and are particularly suitable for practice or presentation in small groups.

2.4 Practice & Feedback

Practice and feedback are important because it is here that most of the language learning in the presentation takes place. If students only give a presentation once, there is little chance for improvement. If they practice four or five times and then give the actual presentation another four or five times repetition will hopefully result in improvement.

Practice can also be part of the preparation process. It is best to begin practice before students have completed their poster or slides. If students have a chance to run through their presentation as they are designing it, the design will probably change as a result of the practice experience. If students are hesitant to practice before their materials are finished, the teacher should present the practice as this sort of test of the design, not a rehearsal for the final presentation.

Students will probably most strongly feel the need for practice just before they "go on stage." At other times, they may feel that practice is unnecessary or boring. Teachers can take advantage of this heightened need by giving students a five or ten minute practice session before each round of presentations. In this way, presenters become engaged in twice as much language production and they are usually very focused on learning.

Feedback is also an important part of the practice session. Students should be guided to give specific feedback to the presenter or other members of the group during practice. What were the presenter's good points? What was not understood clearly? What was so interesting that the listener wanted to learn more? How could the presenter improve her presentation? The teacher can also observe students practicing, coach individuals, and adjust her instruction to more closely meet the needs of the class.

2.5 On stage: The presentations

Although most of the language learning associated with presentations happens before the event,

the presentation itself is probably most important to students. The teacher should prepare for the logistics of the presentations so that everything moves smoothly and that the students, both presenters and listeners, have a positive experience.

Presentations can be time consuming and by their nature involve the audience in passive listening more often than active language production. How much time will be devoted to the presentations? In a class of 15 students, will each student give a ten-minute presentation before the whole class? Will students make group presentations? Will only one presentation take place at one time or will simultaneous presentations be taking place in each of the corners of the classroom?

The answers to these questions will depend on the goals of the curriculum and the time available. One student or a small group presenting to the entire class may help students to adjust to formal public speaking, but unless there is a specific curriculum goal of large group public speaking, small group audience, simultaneous presentations are usually more useful both for solving timing problems and for increasing opportunities for language practice.

2.6 Evaluation

Evaluation has importance both as feedback and as a possible source for grades if they are required. What is the place of evaluation in language learning? What is the role of the teacher in evaluation? The student presenters? Listeners? As stated above, one of the principles of this curriculum is that the student group should be central and the teacher be seen as coach rather than as evaluator. In this sense, the majority of the evaluation that the teacher provides to the students takes place before the on stage phase of the presentations. Ideally, evaluation should not be to produce a grade but to engage students in metacognitive critical reflection on their own language learning.

Peer evaluation is one way to stimulate the process of critical reflection. During presentations, both listeners and presenters evaluate the presentation by criteria set by both teacher and students. Peer evaluation may also be useful if the teacher has to grade students. The evaluation can be designed to include both quantitative and qualitative sections. The quantitative results can provide a number that the teacher can easily include in a grading scheme.

Figure 2 contains an example of a system of peer evaluation. One criterion for evaluation that has been returned to from the choice of topic to the final presentation is "Is it interesting?" Students evaluate each presentation quantitatively by Interest on a scale of 0 to 10. Zero is "One of the most boring things I've ever listened to in my life." Ten is "More interesting than my favorite TV drama!"

Figure 2 : Student Evaluation of Presentations

The form is titled "Class English 3" and "Student Evaluation of Presentations". It features a vertical scale on the left side ranging from 0 to 10, with a label "Interest" next to it. To the right of the scale, there are several sections for feedback:

- A section for "Comments" with a large empty box.
- A section for "The organization" with a large empty box.
- A section for "Other" with a large empty box.

At the top right, there are several lines for identifying the presenter and the topic, with labels like "Name", "Topic", "Date", and "Time".

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Five other quantitative criteria are included with scales of 0 to 6. In the example in Figure 2, four of the criteria have been decided by the teacher: eye contact, clear voice, English ability, and poster. There is one blank line for the presenter to decide her own criteria for evaluation. It would be just as suitable, however, for the presenter to decide all of the categories. This could be done at an early stage of the preparation process and could become a valuable method of involving students in more extensive reflection on their own goals in language learning.

The three qualitative sections of the form ask for evaluations of good points, not so good points and advice to improve the presentation. These sections are probably the most valuable for presenters because they may focus on areas of the presentation that the quantitative sections could not consider.

Presenters are also asked to do a self-evaluation and after reading the listeners evaluations, report the average scores of the quantitative criteria and the most frequent qualitative comments to the teacher. Students are often more critical of themselves than their peers. The comparison of the self- and peer evaluations that the report to the teacher requires can provide a chance for critical reflection. The evaluation also gives the presenter practical advice for the next round of presentations as well as giving the listeners the chance to consider what worked well and could be used in their own presentations.

Peer evaluations give listeners the chance to reflect on what makes a good presentation. The teacher may need to coach or support listeners in this process. Are listeners really thinking deeply about the presentation or are they simply filling in a form as quickly as possible, choosing their responses from the same standard list? Do students feel comfortable listing another's weak points or their own strong points? The teacher, while not evaluating the presenter herself, should coach students in writing evaluations that will be useful to the presenters as they try to improve their language skills.

3.0 Conclusion

The experiment in student-centered topic selection, interviews, and presentations was successful in providing the content of an Oral English class for one semester. Students proceeded through choosing a topic, designing questions, interviewing, designing a presentation, presenting, and evaluating at their own pace. Some students needed more coaching than others or fell behind because of absences but all were able to complete the process and present. Students, themselves, evaluated the curriculum as being interesting.

While the curriculum was successful, and students were able to proceed on their own with interviewing and decision-making, dialog with the teacher, feedback and coaching were also an essential part of the process. Each step of the process is connected with the others. At first, it may be difficult for students to see the connection, for example, between designing questions and making a presentation that will not happen until two months later. The teacher can help students to make these kinds of connections. Given this kind of coaching, student centered presentations can

easily be used as the center of a semester- or year-long curriculum.

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