

PUTTING PASSIVE KNOWLEDGE INTO PRACTICE THROUGH DISCUSSION-BASED CLASSES IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITY CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

University English classes are often organized around a target structure that is emphasized implicitly or explicitly followed by focused practice covering the four skills as many of the popular textbooks are organized. While this is one way of having students attend to specific structures of language, there are other ways that would seemingly be more appropriate for students with a vast passive knowledge of English like Japanese students who have been studying the language for over six years. This paper will focus on a case study of curriculum change in the form of discussion-based classes that are being incorporated into university English communication classes at Tohoku University in Japan to further “noticing” through adequate preparation time, repetitive usage and various types of output to improve motivation, and increase students’ opportunities to use the language in meaningful and authentic ways. The objective of this paper is to provide the rationale for changing the curriculum, and detail how the course was designed. The results of a questionnaire administered to three second-year classes consisting of 105 students will also be provided to better understand the students’ perceptions of their learning in a student-centered discussion-based classroom compare to their more traditional prior learning.

Keywords: *Discussion-based Learning, Second Language Acquisition, Noticing*

1. Introduction:

Japanese learners come to their first university classes having had six years of formalized English education prior to entering university. Many of these students have supplemented this education in cram schools to prepare for the ubiquitous entrance examinations. Although a communicative approach to teaching has been emphasized in recent years by the Ministry of Education through new policies, curriculum changes and the hiring of native English speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs), in reality much of what continues to take place in junior high school and high school classes is grammar translation or audio-lingual methodology.

The reason teachers do not or cannot embrace a communicative curriculum more fully is largely due to the entrance examinations required by high schools and universities. These examinations focus on translation, reading, grammar and vocabulary. The students’ ability to do well on these tests impacts their futures, and their schools’ reputations, which is the reason why the stakeholders (the students, parents, teachers and administrators) put an emphasis on test preparation rather than communication. Thus, students entering university come to the classroom with a vast knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary but with little practice putting that knowledge to use in oral communication. This also means that students have had few opportunities to interact with their teachers or other students in the classroom. This should be of great concern to teachers since most of the students are severely lacking in the areas of interaction and output, which are main criteria for language acquisition according to Interaction Hypothesis put forward by Long (1996).

Because of their previous experience with English, many students enter their university English classes with certain expectations about how English classes should be conducted and in many cases a dislike for English in general. This situation makes the university teacher's task difficult. One often wonders how to wean students away from a teacher-centered classroom where they focus on rules and accuracy to a more student-centered class where communicative competence is the goal. This difficulty in determining an appropriate approach at Tohoku University is compounded by large classes of 30-40 students with varying ability levels. Based on the students' past English education experience and the realities of the classroom, many teachers turn to mass-produced textbooks, which often are still often grounded in an audio-lingual method where a specific grammar point is the focal point around which the lesson is built. These texts allow teachers to maintain a sense of the familiar with the grammar focus, but provide a variety of listening and speaking tasks to make the classroom more communicative.

This seems to be a rational approach to the situation that the university English teacher is presented with, and I followed this approach for a number of years. However, I became dissatisfied with teaching aspects of language that the students had obviously been exposed to numerous times before and with how the activities were often disjointed. Instead of spending time in class discussing a grammar point and checking homework devoted to this issue, I intuitively felt that having the students spend more time communicating would give them more opportunities for exposure and experimentation with the language.

In exploring alternatives, a discussion-based method, which devoted almost all of class time to output, discussion and reaction writing, seemed to better fit language acquisition theory especially in relation to Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) and research related to "noticing" (Schmidt, 1983). A method a colleague of mine initially began, the PDR Method, seems to match the concepts in second language acquisition. Thus, I began using it and helped improve it over the course of subsequent years. This method was based on students preparing outside of class by reading articles or watching videos and answering questions about the input, using their answers to promote discussion in the classroom and writing a reaction to the topic and their discussion about it. This paper explains the rationale for using such an approach, details the course design, and provides student feedback about the course.

2. Rationale for course design

While a variety of theories have had a great impact on the best practices of language teaching, a key concept within this body of research is the idea of "noticing" (Schmidt, 1983). Basically, this means that learners need to become consciously aware of aspects of language for those structures to move from short-term to long-term memory. Many teachers have worked under the assumption that by highlighting, explicitly or implicitly, structures in class students will notice them and subsequently learn them. This approach is understandable because much of the research and many teacher education programs focus on teaching to learners who are beginners. As any teacher can attest to, though, from anecdotal evidence, just because one teaches some aspect of language, sometimes numerous times, students might understand the rule and might even be able to satisfactorily state or use this rule for a written test, however, this knowledge has not become implicit knowledge, or knowledge that can be accessed automatically for practical purposes. For implicit knowledge to develop, learners must be given opportunities to use language in natural and meaningful ways. (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Brown and Larson-Hall (2012) synthesized previous research to point out that attention, which may foster "noticing", can be achieved in a variety of ways. Firstly, the input that students are receiving can be enhanced by highlighting the target forms in some fashion. Secondly, teachers can give learners information about form to emphasize how their native language is different from the target language (English in this case) and how it might interfere with their understanding. The target

form is then practiced through carefully designed activities, much like “Input Enhancement” mentioned earlier. Thirdly, learners may be aided in “noticing” by being given sufficient time for planning. If learners are able to plan in advance for output, they have more opportunities to internalize the language. Fourthly, repetition allows students to attend to language and helps move that language into long-term memory. By using the target language, vocabulary, or grammatical structures multiple times and in a variety of ways, students are more likely to gain a deeper understanding of it. Finally, having learners produce certain types of language in various forms aids in “noticing”.

For beginning language learners, the first two ways, highlighting target forms and making distinctions between the target and native language, obviously must be used more prevalently by teachers. However, students with a broad knowledge of English would need less emphasis on these ways to notice language. However, many textbooks used in university courses are based on presenting a target grammar structure to the learners either inductively or deductively, followed by some sort of controlled practice (many times filling in blanks with the appropriate form of the structure being studied), and then a communicative activity where the intention is for the learners to use the target structure. As one can see, this method embraces many, if not all, of the “noticing” strategies highlighted above depending on how the teacher chooses to conduct the class. However, students who already have a vast passive knowledge of English would seemingly be better served by the last three methods for “noticing”, which could better incorporate the natural and meaningful aspect mentioned by Ellis & Shintani (2014). The question we faced in designing the new curriculum was to develop a method that would incorporate these three ways of noticing and also be as authentic as possible.

Brown (2001) emphasizes that to foster communicative competence, “...instruction needs to point toward all its components: organizational, pragmatic, strategic, and psychomotor. Communicative goals are best achieved by giving the attention to language use and not just usage, to fluency and not just accuracy, to authentic language and contexts, and to students’ eventual need to apply classroom learning to previously unrehearsed contexts in the real world” (p. 69). This statement by Brown implies that not all oral production is equal. Levelt’s (1989) Psycholinguistic Model breaks a communicative activity down further into four components: 1) Conceptualization, 2) Utterance formulation, 3) Speech articulation, 4) Self-monitoring. When students just participate in oral practice, they are missing the first two steps in the communicative activity. Based on these hypotheses of language learning and focusing on the last three ways of “noticing” presented by Larson-Hall (2012), it was decided that a discussion-based curriculum would fulfill the fore-mentioned criteria and help students develop their language most effectively.

In designing this new methodology, Brandl’s (2008) criteria for implementing communicative activities were followed as closely as possible. These criteria include making the goals clear from the start, equally involving participants, making sure students are adequately prepared, mixing groups as much as possible, using relevant and interesting activities, teaching interaction skills, and holding groups accountable for completing tasks on time.

3. Course Design:

There are two key aspects to ensuring the success of the Preparation, Discussion, Reaction Method, which is being implemented in a variety of classes at Tohoku University. These are an extensive course guide and a model of how discussions should proceed in the class. The course guide explains in exhaustive detail the expectations of the students and the way the class will proceed and is a document the students will refer back to throughout the class for clarification. Research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has shown that the more information we provide our students, the more successful students will be in a course (Diamond in Grunert et. Al, 2008, p. xi), which is further support for presenting the goals as clearly as possible.

A model of how to conduct discussions in the class is the other key aspect to ensuring the success of this methodology. As mentioned previously, Japanese students often come from a teacher-centered environment and may have little experience interacting in a group setting. By providing a model on the first day, the teacher can demonstrate to the students the role each member should play and allow them to practice this role by reading through a dialogue. Students can and often do refer back to this model dialogue in the first few classes in determining how to begin the discussion and how to keep them proceeding.

In addition, community in the classroom can be a key component to student success (Astin, 1993; Meyers, 2009). By having students discussing in groups three separate times with random group selections, students are able to meet and discuss with other students in the class whom they might otherwise not have a chance to interact. This allows them to build a network of peers that can help them not only in their English courses but in other courses they have together at the university. On many occasions students have mentioned how important this aspect of the class is to them.

3.1 Preparation:

The preparation aspect of this method consists of students either reading a short article or watching a TED Talk video on a certain topic, filling out a preparation worksheet consisting of five or six questions pertaining to the topic, and writing an original question of their own and answering that question prior to coming to class.

By requiring students to prepare prior to coming to class, they are able to spend as much time as necessary to fully comprehend the input. This is of extreme importance especially at our institution where students are randomly placed into classes rather than being placed into classes based on ability. Weaker students, thus, might need more time preparing for class. When the students enter the class, the teacher checks the preparation worksheet for completion by stamping the paper with a red "X" if it is incomplete or with a blue "OK" if it is complete. This is a vital part of the process because not preparing for class means that students are unable to fully participate in the discussion phase, which is where the majority of the class time is devoted. Since the students must use their preparation worksheets throughout the discussion, this simple act of stamping student papers means that other students can easily see if others in their group did not do their homework causing embarrassment. These seem to be enough of a deterrent that students rarely come to class unprepared. The preparation worksheet is collected at the end of class and then checked more carefully and given a score.

Prior to the start of class, students are required to write their original questions on the blackboards at the front and back of class. These questions are checked for accuracy by the teacher, and common errors are addressed immediately or between discussions. The original questions are then used for the third and final class discussion described below.

3.2 Discussion:

After the students' preparation worksheets have been checked and the students have written their original questions on the blackboards, all of which takes place before the class actually begins, the teacher divides the class randomly into groups of three. This can be done by numbering off students as I do, or in any other fashion. However, it is best not to assign students to groups just because of proximity to one another. Students tend to sit with students they already know well, which may make the discussions less effective.

After the students get into groups, the first five minutes of class are devoted to rereading the preparation worksheet that each student has prepared. This activity helps student to recall what their answers are since they may have done their homework many days in advance and also to rethink the wording. Then, a leader is decided upon usually through the game of “rock, scissor, paper”, and he or she starts and maintains the 15-20 minute discussion. If necessary, the students are allowed to read from their preparation worksheet during the first discussion. While the students are talking, the instructor will circulate among the groups, listen to the interactions, make note of common errors, and interact in the group discussions from time to time.

When the time has elapsed for the first discussion, the teacher assigns new numbers randomly and regroups the students for the second discussion. Once again a leader must be chosen for the group. In the second discussion, students are not allowed to look at their answers when talking in their groups. Finally, students are regrouped for the last discussion, in which they only use the original questions for the blackboards that the students wrote at the beginning of class.

As one can see, there is a progression from controlled (prepared) to uncontrolled (unprepared) in the discussion process. The teacher’s role is to circulate amongst the groups, participating at times or providing language clarification where needed. If common errors occur during these discussions, short impromptu explanations of the issue can be conducted between each discussion section. If you refer back to Brandl’s criteria for implementing communicative activities, each aspect can easily be identified within the PDR Method.

3.3 Reaction:

After completing three 20-minute discussions of the topic, students are required to write a reaction paper in the last 15 minutes of the class. The reaction paper is a way for them to synthesize their opinions of the source information and what they have learned from the discussions during the class.

As with the discussion phase of the class, the students are provided with a model of a reaction paper so that they understand the organizational structure of writing in English. The students are free to refer to this example when they are writing or to any other resource, such as dictionaries or the Internet. However, they are cautioned that spending too much time looking up information will limit the amount that they can write.

The written reaction is not graded for accuracy in an attempt to get students to focus more on fluency within the class. It is rather graded on content and inclusiveness.

4. Questionnaire Results:

At the end of the course, a questionnaire was distributed to three separate classes consisting of a total of 105 second-year students in an effort to determine their reactions to the course and to help improve the course in the future. It was decided to limit the questionnaire to second-year students because they would have had a number of other English classes at the university to which they could compare their discussion class experience. Some of the more interesting findings from this questionnaire are listed below.

1. How much did you speak English in this class compared to other classes?

Much More	More	Same Amount	Less	Much Less	No Answer
68	26	9	1	0	1

2. How would you rate your experience of doing group discussions in English?

Excellent	Good	Average	Fair	Poor
17	58	21	7	2

3. How much do you think your discussion ability in English has improved?

A lot	Some	A little	None
33	60	11	1

These first three questions give insight into the amount of time spent on oral production in class and the students' perception of this on their own abilities to discuss in English. The first question shows a clear distinction between the time spent on the task of oral production in the PDR classes compared to other English classes with 90% of the respondents saying the spent more time speaking when compared with other classes. Some of the students may have had other discussion classes previously, which may account for some respondents answering "same amount" or "less". This increased time for discussion was clearly seen as favorable by most of the students with 71% rating their experience doing group work as "good" or "excellent". In addition, nearly 100% of the students felt that their ability to discuss in English had improved at least to some extent with 89% showing a higher level of improvement to their English discussion abilities.

4. How much time did you spend on the homework each week?

Minutes	15-30	31-45	46-60	61-75	76-90	91-105	106-120	>120
	0	3	10	23	24	15	12	18

5. How much time did you spend on homework in other English classes?

Minutes	15-30	31-45	46-60	61-75	76-90	91-105	106-120	>120
	22	26	27	8	7	2	13	3

Questions 4 and 5 show a distinct difference between the amount of time students spent preparing for the discussion-based classes and other English classes at Tohoku University. While a large percentage (88%) of the students taking the discussion-based classes spent over an hour on the homework each week, only 31% of the students spent more than an hour in other English classes. The discrepancy between classes becomes even great when comparing study times of more than 1.5 hours, 43% and 17% respectively, and more than 2 hours, 17% and 3% respectively. While the biggest complaint about the class from the students was the amount of time required for preparation each week as can be seen in the student comments that follow, this increase in preparation time is viewed in a positive light by the instructor because it increases the amount of exposure students have to language. In an EFL environment where the students' main contact with the language is what happens in the classroom and the homework they are given each week, the more time students can engage with the language outside of the classroom is a benefit.

6. I feel more confident communicating in English after taking this class.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither A/D	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
47	38	11	8	0	1

7. I felt more confident communicating in English after taking other English classes at Tohoku University.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither A/D	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
17	28	23	24	13	0

Students also indicated that they felt more confident communicating in English after taking the discussion classes as compared with other English classes at the university. While 82% of the students who took the discussion-based course felt more confident communicating in English after taking this class, only 43% of them indicated an increase in confidence after taking other classes.

Along with these findings, a large percentage (70%) of students indicated that they were motivated to continue studying English and 84% believed that they broadened their understanding of a variety of topics through the discussions.

4. Conclusions:

A general dissatisfaction with my classes because of a perceived inauthenticity of the activities incorporated into most textbooks and the amount of time students spent on other tasks than production made me look for alternative approaches to teaching. The PDR Method was designed in an effort to make my teaching more closely match my own beliefs and popular beliefs about language acquisition based of second language acquisition theory.

Even though the method of teaching was most likely much different from students' prior experience and expectations of how an English class should be conducted, the survey results indicate an overall positive impression of their learning and classroom experience. Other teachers who have observed the discussion-based classes are also impressed by the ability of the students. We as teachers often assume that students know less or are less capable than they actually are. These findings should encourage teachers to explore other methods and approaches to teaching that although may be quite different from traditional methods may better fit the students' needs or the goals of the class.

However, introducing the PDR Method or any more student-centered curriculum into your classroom can be difficult for many reasons. Firstly, it can be a difficult adjustment for a teacher who is used to a more teacher-centered approach to become comfortable with spending little time imparting knowledge from the front of the classroom. The teacher's role becomes one of course designer, classroom manager and facilitator in that he or she must circulate between groups assisting where necessary and summarizing common errors from time to time. In addition, the adjustment for the students may also be difficult. If students are used to a teacher-centered approach, they may be resistant to a class where they are in control of what happens in the class. Not meeting their expectations can lead to dissatisfaction.

To ensure the success of the class careful planning and detailed explanations for the students are necessary. Research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has shown that the more information students have about a class, the more successful they will be and this has led teachers to develop multi-page, comprehensive student-centered syllabi. For the PDR Method we have created both a course guide detailing every aspect of the course in both English and Japanese for clarity and a topic guide, which lists the topics, readings or videos, and questions that students must answer for each of the assignments. With careful planning problems associate with a new approach or curriculum can be overcome

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