

Ways to Activate Students' English Utterances¹⁾

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Abstract

Given many EFL students hesitation to speak English during conventional classroom activities, pictures taken from newspapers, the Internet, and other sources can act as a catalyst to encourage students to communicate in the target language. This paper will address topics ranging from the selection of appropriate pictures to the need to provide an atmosphere in which students can feel at ease in the classroom. We will discuss how teachers can provide an acquisition-rich experience in the classroom, and engage students in English more positively.

Keywords : visual materials in the classroom, positive engagement, acquisition-rich experience

Introduction

According to the TOEFL data summary based on data taken from July 2001 to June 2002, the average score of 60,114 examinees whose native language was Japanese was 184, while that of 52,506 examinees whose native language was Korean was 201, and that of 45,355 examinees whose native language was Chinese was 204. Since various types of language learners take the TOEFL, the test score does not always accurately reflect each examinee's real English ability. Reliability and validity of the TOEFL have been an issue of concern as well. However, it is clear that 6 years of English curriculum at the junior high school and senior high school level has not been as effective as it could be. "It has been contended that some students become 'allergic' to learning English as a result of some school curriculum/methodologies" (Hasegawa, 2002).

Reviewing the methodologies and strategies employed commonly in English education in Japan, traditional ways of teaching English such as the 'translation method' remain common in many schools throughout Japan. Understanding the language through translation is simply a small part of language learning. The primary component should be focused on the acquisition of the

target language through the actual manipulation of the target language. The question arises: what can instructors do in addition to traditional methodologies in order to prepare students to cope with the real situations in which they have to use English for communication? One of the roles of the instructor is to provide students with the necessary target language tools to do the job of speaking English with their partners in a student-centered activity. Therefore, in this report, each author introduces his/her activities using visual materials as a way to activate the learners' English performance.

Learning Environments and Students

The educational environment and the Japanese society as a whole are changing rapidly. The trend among the Japanese public is to slowly shy away from printed mediums and become increasingly more dependent on mobile phones and the Internet for news, information, and entertainment. The use of the Internet in the classroom became common around 10 years ago. This new technology caused a temporary rise in students' motivation for learning English. However, the use of the Internet for language learning has now become so common that students are generally not as excited about learning English through CAI/CALL (Computer-Assisted Instruction/ Computer-Assisted Language Learning) as they once were. Indeed modern technology for language learning is becoming increasingly accessible for everyone. However, this will not necessarily lead to an increased proficiency among language learners. It is up to educators to continually seek out constructive and effective methods of facilitating language learning among the students.

Many students have a certain amount of desire and/or expectations to become fluent in English. In reality, however, most of them find it very difficult to articulate themselves in English even after six or eight years of English instruction they received. This is partly due to the fact that English is regarded as a foreign language, not as a second language in Japan. The truth is that outside the classroom, English is not required in the daily lives of most Japanese. As mentioned above, students need to be exposed to the target language to learn it, and should be placed in situations where they have to use English for communication.

Based on the reasons briefly described above, it is essential to provide opportunities for the students to use English for communication in real-life like situations. Considering that Japanese students tend to be shy and afraid of making mistakes, it is important to encourage students to participate in student-centered small group or partner activities. The instructor should provide feedback in a mostly positive manner. By doing this, a safe peer atmosphere will be created which students find fun and relaxing. Using visuals in the classroom reduces learners' stress from speaking in a foreign language because it is more focused on visual than textual cues, which leads

to the development of positive learning environments. Visual input often stimulates the students' imagination in a less stressful way than textual input because it encourages students to form their own answers based on their true feelings, interpretations and knowledge.

Pictures directly related to the students' present lives, for instance, school life, sports, and other activities familiar to them are generally better than pictures which do not reflect familiar experiences and activities. It is also important to keep in mind that it is impossible to find a single picture that is interesting for all students. Despite this fact, instructors should make their best efforts to find pictures that will stimulate and engage the students' imagination.

Tips to consider when looking for pictures:

1. Pictures that are directly related to the students' daily life
2. Pictures with many items to describe rather than a single item picture
3. Pictures that students will want to try to describe should contain; interesting scenes, humor
4. Pictures from newspapers, magazines, the internet, and other sources which are authentic

Certainly, it is best for each student to have a personal photocopy of EFL materials. To this end the instructor can turn to one of the many photocopiable books that are available such as "the Card Book" (Tom & McKay).

Activities by Tae Kudo

Introduction

There are mainly two reasons using visuals helps students to get more involved in foreign language activities. First, using different kinds of visuals helps create real-life situations even in classrooms. Simulation provides richness in learning, which appears to be unobtainable by other methods (Crookall and Oxford 20). According to Richards and et al, "in simulation activities, learners are given roles in a situation, tasks, or a problem to be solved, and are given instructions to follow" (335). It is easier to introduce simulation activities with visual input in addition to written instructions. Visual cues aid in developing one's creativity and imagination. In addition, activities can be designed to deal with a particular subject or skill area. Because simulation activities with visuals cues are experiential, they help language learners to move from the classroom to the real world.

An additional advantage of using visuals is that "students can practice and develop a range of communication skills in a relatively safe setting" (Crookall and Oxford 22). The students often heavily rely on reference materials such as textbooks, dictionaries, or peers when they are asked to speak out in the target language. This might be partially because Japanese students tend to have an especially high level of anxiety about making mistakes in front of their peers. When employing visual cues, students have an opportunity to come up with answers or responses in their own words

in contrast to using textual prompts, which limit the possible range of answers. This provides language learners opportunities to think and talk in the target language in which they feel safe to stray outside the comfort zone of their trusted reference materials. By employing visual input, students are encouraged to use the target language without relying on reference materials such as dictionaries. Every human being uses language to express him/herself in daily life. The goal is to encourage the students to do this in the target language in an environment that feels safe. With visuals, students are not encouraged to depend on textual prompts, but to actually use their brains to articulate their own true opinions, feelings and interpretations regarding the visual stimuli.

I have conducted a variety of student-centered activities. The following activities have been successful. Materials needed, procedures, and variations are described for each activity as well as students' reactions and effects.

Activity 1: Who Am I?

Levels: Can be used at any level as an initial warm-up to the class

Size of groups: Total class

Materials: A list of all the vocabulary (see Appendix 1)

A set of pictures of vegetables/fruits

(e.g. 25 pictures of more than 15 kinds for 20 students)

Tape

Procedure: This activity is intended to get students to break the ice and speak to others in the class through simple yes/no questions. Students will go over the vocabulary on the list (see Appendix 1). Participants should be encouraged to ask questions if there are any unfamiliar words. Then, students pick up one picture of a vegetable/fruit and tape it on their backs. In doing so, they are not supposed to see what vegetable/fruit they themselves have. Each student must find out what vegetable/fruit they have on their backs by asking other participants questions. The following are the rules: 1) ask only one question to one person at a time, 2) give a short self-introduction (name, greeting) to each new person, 3) use only yes/no questions, and never use interrogatives. When the students know what the vegetable/fruit is, they must come to the teacher to ask the final question, which is "Am I (vegetable/fruit)? It is important to prepare enough pictures for all the students.

Variations: Vegetables/fruits can be replaced with occupations (see Appendix 1), names of countries, and names of famous people.

The language used for this activity is very simple, but the important points are that: 1) the students are not simply reading lines from the worksheet or textbook, they are thinking on their own and talking in the target language, and 2) the students are actually out of their seats and

communicating with others. Japanese students can be very shy when they need to speak English. This can be especially true for lower level students. However with this type of format, they are less afraid of talking with others, due to the nature of the activity. Even students who are less enthusiastic about learning English generally enjoy this activity. Because the language is simple, students feel there is less risk of making errors. Many participants have mentioned that they found themselves enjoying this activity and feeling more confident in speaking English. As mentioned above, this activity can be used as a warm-up, icebreaking activity for a new group of students because it allows students to get to know each other more easily.

D-I-E

The following two activities are based on the D-I-E method. Therefore, D-I-E should be discussed prior to introducing the next activities. D-I-E stands for *Description*, *Interpretation* and *Evaluation*. It is sometimes referred to as O-D-I-E, which adds *Observation* to D-I-E. "*Description* has to do with what one actually *sees*, with the objective facts, with the events various observes agree took place. *Interpretation* has to do with what one *thinks* about what one sees. *Evaluation* has to do with what one *feels* about what one sees" (Althen 153). These four skills are completely different from each other, however it is often pointed out that people blend *Interpretation* with *Evaluation*, and/or *Description* with *Interpretation* and so forth. The D-I-E method has been very helpful and useful as a tool for cross-cultural training. In addition, it can be effective in conducting activities in language classrooms.

Activity 2: Picture Story

Levels: Intermediate, advanced (beginner level with teacher's facilitation)

Size of groups: Groups of 3 or 4

Materials: A series of pictures. Pre-designed pictures may be used as well.

Procedure: The O-D-I-E method is employed to conduct this activity.

Observation: Students observe the series of pictures (see Picture 1). Students should be given enough time to do so.



Picture 1

Source: Retrieved from Nono-chan 4 p282 Tokuma Shoten (The Asahi Newspaper)

Description: Students describe several pictures in small groups. Students take turns in describing each picture. The teacher may ask the students some questions to entice students'

answers, for example, “What do you see in Frame 1?” Generate vocabulary from the students. Write the words on the board so that students can learn and use them in the next step, which is *Interpretation*.

Interpretation: Students identify the language for each bubble. Ask them to name each character in an effort to make them more real. Ask them what kind of relationship people might have in the picture. Tell students to use their imagination, and make sure to explain that every answer is correct. Encourage students to share their ideas with others.

Evaluation: If possible, have students prepare and act out a skit. Direct them to use gestures, as well. Having watched other groups’ skits, students can discuss the differences and similarities of all the skits created from the same pictures.

Variations: You may have difficulty in getting novice level students, or those who are not particularly enthusiastic about learning English to participate in this kind of activity. Regarding the novice level, acting out skits and discussing other skits may be too challenging for them. Such students may feel too nervous or shy to do so. In this case, *Evaluation* can be skipped, but the remaining O-D-I can be conducted. The *Observation* phase is generally quite easy. For the *Description* phase, give lower-level students forms to fill out so that they do not have to create sentences from scratch. It is also helpful to review the grammar points accordingly. The following procedure is an example.

Observation: Students observe a series of pictures (see Picture 2). Students should be given enough time to do so.



Picture 2

Source: Retrieved from Easy Picture Words –Set 2, Frank Schaffer Publications

Description: Forms are given in order to describe the visual. In this case, “there (is/are) XXX” and “S (is/are) V-ing” are suggested. The students’ only task at this time is to fill out blanks with the appropriate nouns and/or verbs. Encourage participants not to use a dictionary and have them take turns in making sentences.

Interpretation: Questions are given in order to discuss the visual, for example, “Why are they in the library?” and “What are they going to do next?” and so forth. After students are accustomed to this type of activity, they can form questions on their own.

As mentioned above, *Evaluation* can be skipped, or the students may self-assess their own work using an evaluation form. In addition, they can reflect on their own personal experience with the learning process.

O-D-I-E is intended to serve as an analytical method. Students can learn to distinguish between *Description*, *Interpretation* and *Evaluation*. Students may be unsure about the usefulness of this type of activity and have some difficulty performing them at first. However, after becoming familiar with O-D-I-E activities, students can perform them smoothly and often enjoy doing so. Some students commented that they can employ this concept in their daily lives. The O-D-I-E method both helps activities go smoothly, and also encourages logical thinking. Through these experiential activities, the students succeed in learning how many different ways one particular picture can be interpreted. In addition, they come to understand that no one's answer is wrong and that every participant's ideas and opinions will be respected and appreciated. Thereby, a comfortable and enjoyable language learning environment can be created in which target language usage flourishes among the students.

TOEIC

TOEIC is the Test of English for International Communication. It tests English-language abilities, and evaluates how well non-native speakers read and understand spoken English in real-life situations. It consists of 200 questions, and takes about two and a half hours to complete. Naturally, this can be somewhat tiring and challenging for the students.

On the TOEIC Test, part I, for each question, there is one picture in the test book and, the examinee hears four statements only once. They are not printed in the test book, so the examinee must listen carefully and understand what the speaker says. The pictures are printed in black and white, and often the print quality makes pictures somewhat unclear. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to see small details in the pictures. It is also common for the examinee to confuse what appears in the picture with their own interpretations. The O-D-I-E method can be effective in distinguishing *Description* from *Interpretation* or vice versa.

Activity 3: O-D-I-E and TOEIC

Size of groups: Groups of 3 or 4

Materials: Pictures used in the TOEIC Test (see Picture 3 and 4)



Picture 3



Picture 4

Source: Retrieved 07/31/06 from [http:// www.englishclub.com/esl-exams/ets-toEIC-practice-1.htm](http://www.englishclub.com/esl-exams/ets-toEIC-practice-1.htm)

Procedure:

Observation: Students observe each picture carefully. It is suggested that the time for this be more limited once students are familiar with the activity.

Description: Students take turns in describing each picture in pairs or small groups, for example for Picture 3, they may say “there is a computer” and “a woman is sitting in front of the computer”. It is important to be as detailed as possible. Once students have nothing more to say about the picture, they can go on to the next phase.

Interpretation: Students think about how each picture can be interpreted. Have them exchange ideas with others. Lastly, groups should compare their interpretations to see how different they are.

Evaluation: Finally, students do the listening section. By the time they get to this point, they are often very interested in what they will be listening to because they have been thinking about the pictures. After listening, they will reflect on the whole process.

The TOEIC test lasts for two and half hours, and while taking it, some examinees become very tired. In the TOEIC preparation classes, I introduced the above experimentally and the students enjoyed part I of the test more than I had expected. The students enjoy the group work and they have learned the importance of distinguishing description from interpretation when taking the TOEIC test. As an instructor, I have explained the importance of the differences between description and interpretation. However, only after the students experienced them, do they fully understand these differences. Having done this activity, the students learned through their experiences. Students are more motivated by group work activities because they are more fun and exciting than traditional chalk-and-talk teaching approaches. This creates a very pleasant learning atmosphere in the class.

Discussion

Activities with visual input inspire students to speak more in English because these tasks are student-centered, and therefore shift the focus away from the teacher. They encourage students to learn from each other, and complete tasks on their own. The teacher becomes more a facilitator of

learning. Additionally, the O-D-I-E method helps students to think more logically with each step (*Observation, Description, Interpretation and Evaluation*). This method also allows students to reflect on their entire learning process and experience, which differs according to each student's individual learning styles and strategies. Finally, students do not simply read lines from the textbook without thinking because the nature of the activity is task-oriented and puts the focus not only on just the language but also on visual input. Thus, hopefully it will reduce the level of anxiety associated with communicating in a foreign language. Thereby students will gain more confidence in speaking in the target language through their positive experiences. There are many different ways to encourage students to talk in a foreign language. As a teacher, we should always remember the importance of facilitating students' learning.

Activities by Kinji Kawamura



Picture 5

Source: Retrieved 05/15/05
from the Yomiuri Newspaper



Picture 6

Source: Retrieved 03/10/05
from the Daily Yomiuri Newspaper

Describe the Picture in Detail:

Show the students a picture and direct them to have a free discussion about the picture in groups. Encourage them to use their imagination and describe as many small details as possible. It is important for teachers to gently correct mistakes made during speaking activities, but if this is done while the students are involved in an energetic discussion, the conversational flow might be destroyed. Therefore, the participants should be allowed to speak out as freely as possible without interruption. The teacher should quietly observe and take note of common crucial mistakes while listening to the students engaging in the activity. The instructor can address some of the common mistakes that were made after the activity. Some of the comments my students made about the picture were: A lot of people are standing near the building. Some old people are standing outside the building. There was, however, no student who said "People are leaning against the building." They understood this expression after the instructor demonstrated it. This is but one example of the limitations of the students' active vocabulary.

Students find this picture of a textbook made of rice very unusual and interesting. It tends to spur a lively group discussion among the students. The following question led to lively discussions:

which is more important to you, learning or eating? Some commented, “We cannot survive without eating but we can live without reading.” This is a fact of life. Other students described this picture: “Though it is important to know how to read, it is more important to survive by eating.” Through the introduction of this picture, students not only learned English but also an important lesson about life.

Activities by Eric Hail

Generally speaking, Japanese students are rather poor at physically describing people in English. An invitation to a student to describe a person in English usually results in silence on the part of the student. This is due to the fact that many Japanese students never actually learned the necessary vocabulary. Therefore, the instructor should first provide the appropriate vocabulary accompanied by pictures of the physical features.

One effective way to remedy this weakness in students' English abilities is to frequently use pictures of people in the classroom to teach and elicit this target vocabulary. Facial features, hair and eye colors, hairstyles and lengths, body types and age categories are important physical attributes that should be taught as part of a basic English education.

Activity 1: Who is that?

Levels: Can be used at any level with higher levels providing more detailed descriptions

Size of groups: Groups of two are preferable

Materials: Color photos of people from a magazine or other sources

This is an entertaining student-centered activity that allows language learner's to practice using and understanding the target language involved in physically describing people.

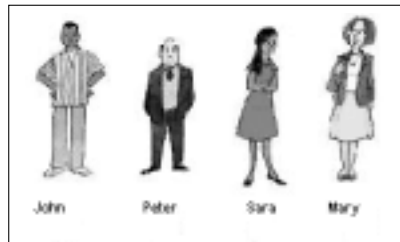
Procedure:

Students should be introduced to the target language for describing people's physical characteristics using pictures of people.

Then give each pair of students a number of detailed pictures of people and their names. Ideally, the pictures should contain a wide variety of eye and hair colors, ages, heights, body types, clothing, etc. One student should choose a person and describe him or her to the other student using as much detail as possible without revealing which person he or she is describing. The other student should try to name which person his or her partner is describing based on the description. More advanced students can be asked to speculate about the personalities of the people based on their appearances. Switch roles and repeat.

Additional activity:

Have the students discuss which person they would like to be friends with and why.



Picture 7

Source: Retrieved 07/31/06 from <http://www.skillsworkshop.org/cloze/describe-fillin.htm>

Activity 2: Police Sketch Artist

Levels: Can be used at any level with higher levels providing more detailed descriptions

Size of groups: Groups of two through four are preferable.

Materials: Detailed photos of people from a magazine or other source, crayons, colored pencils, or markers are useful.

This is a fun student-centered activity that allows students to practice using and understanding physical descriptions in the target language. This activity allows the listener to demonstrate a detail-by-detail understanding of the description in the form of their drawing. One drawback to this type of activity is that it may not be possible to include details concerning hair, clothes, or eye colors, since students may possess a limited assortment of writing colors.

Procedure:

Students should be introduced to the target language for describing people's physical characteristics using pictures of people.

One participant is given a detailed picture of a person. He or she should not allow the other participants to see his or her picture. The student with the picture should describe the person in the picture using as much detail as possible. The task of the partner(s) is to draw a person with the features described. Remind the students that great artistic skills are not at all necessary. As an example, draw a stick figure on the black board with big feet, a small nose, shoulder length hair, and a big smile. The students briefly compare the picture to the drawing after a drawing has been produced. Switch roles and repeat. Additional activity:

Allow the students to first create an alien. The students will then describe their alien to the others. Their partners should draw what is described.

Conclusion

It takes a great amount of time, energy, effort and motivation to acquire fluency in a foreign language. One of the most challenging aspects in this process is learning the vocabulary well

enough to produce it (Lars-Gunnar 51). One important point which instructors should bear in mind is that they should not expect that the more they teach, the more knowledge the students will gain. In EFL situations, students have few opportunities to employ their knowledge of the target language in real life, thus the students should be given chances to express themselves in the real-life like situations in the classroom. By practicing the target language in the classroom, students will gain a deeper understanding of English through trial and error. The activities described in this report will help students practice English for communication. The practice gained through these entertaining, engaging, student-centered activities will hopefully improve the students' attitudes and motivation toward acquiring the target language, and foster the critical thinking required to communicate in English. "A simple answer to the question 'What makes a good teacher?' is that good teachers care more about their students' learning than they do about their own teaching." (Harmer 3) The instructor should always continue to positively encourage the students to use the target language at every available opportunity both inside and outside the classroom.

Note

1) Portion of this report was presented at Thai TESOL in January 2006.

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Appendix 1

ROUND 1:

Fruits/Vegetables

| | | | | |
|---------|-----------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| apple | peach | pear | kiwi | watermelon |
| orange | grapes | strawberries | lemon | grapefruit |
| banana | pineapple | cherries | blueberries | lime |
| cabbage | asparagus | onion | potato | cucumber |
| pumpkin | carrot | corn | broccoli | mushroom |
| tomato | garlic | spinach | soy beans | peas |

Helpful Vocabulary:

Colors (red, blue, pink, orange, dark (light) green, etc.)

Shapes & Tastes (round, long, big, small, hard, soft, sweet, sour, bitter, smelly, etc.)

ROUND 2:

Occupations

| | | | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------|--------------|
| accountant | actor/actress | artist | hair dresser | carpenter |
| cashier | janitor | electrician | farmer | firefighter |
| journalist | lawyer | mechanic | pharmacist | photographer |
| police officer | receptionist | secretary | translator | interpreter |
| travel agent | waiter/waitress | taxi driver | teacher | architect |
| flight attendant | | pilot | computer programmer | |

Helpful Vocabulary

Verbs! (for example, write, act, clean, serve, make.....) Use your imagination!!