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Reflecting on Our Teaching Practices¹

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In order to improve our teaching skills, it is important to first describe and evaluate our
daily teaching practices. We can probably start by asking “What do I actually do in my
classes?” and “What am I supposed to be doing in my classes?” This manuscript will give

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We hope that this manuscript will trigger heated discussion among the lecturers and participants of
the seminar, even after the seminar is over. Participants of the seminar are very welcome to contact
us for questions and comments either on the content of this manuscript or on any relevant issues in
English language teaching.

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you an opportunity to reflect on your teaching practices by focusing on the word *communication* in English language teaching.

1. Communication

1.1 What is communication?

Nobody would deny that *communication* is a very important notion in English language teaching because we are expected to have our students develop their communication skills in English. Needless to say, it is crucial that we teachers also have a sufficient communicative competence in English in order to achieve this goal. But what do we mean by communication?

In its very basic sense, communication requires at least two people who exchange message with each other. One is the sender, usually referred to as the speaker or the writer, and the other is the recipient, or the listener/reader. There is an exchange of message between the two when they communicate. This is an example of a very simple type of communication. In order to further examine what communication is like, especially in the context of English language teaching, let's look at some examples taken from English classrooms.

1.1.1 Example from a junior high school classroom

The following example comes from an English lesson at a junior high school. In this lesson, students practice the sentence pattern, "Let's do something." The students talk very actively during the pair work. For example, a student says, "Let's play a sport.", or "Let's go to Tokyo Disneyland." And his/her partner responds by saying, "Yes, let's." At a first glance, this activity might look very satisfying as all the students are actively involved in speaking aloud. There is virtually no silence during this activity, nor is there a remarkable grammatical mistake in students' utterances (mainly because the teacher has given model expressions as well as a chance for drill-like practice beforehand).

During this pair work, one student says "Let's go to Brazil," and his partner responds "Yes, let's," very quickly and accurately. The teacher of this class reports that the student who said "Let's go to Brazil" loves soccer so much that he actually has a dream of going to Brazil some day to watch soccer games there. Unfortunately, however, his partner didn't think so much about the meaning behind "Let's go to Brazil," and simply said "Yes, let's" because this was the "correct" response given by the teacher and the textbook. In other words, students in this activity would just say "Yes, let's," no matter what their partner says.

Students have little, if any, motivation to think why their partner has chosen a particular place in his/her utterance.

In this example, the first student has played the role of a sender very well by including his message in the utterance. However, we cannot say that his partner has played the role of a recipient very well. Although there was a lot of active talking in this activity, it was not communication as there was no real exchange of message, or meaning. Some of you might think this is an extreme case, or a bad example, but it is probably worth thinking back of recent communication activities, like pair work and group work, that you have done in your classes. Was there an exchange of message between the students? Were your students encouraged to encode messages in their utterances? Were they encouraged to listen for meaning?

1.1.2 Example from a university classroom

Let's take a look at another example. Below is a conversation by two university students:

X: My soccer ground is very hot and cloudy.

Y: Did you practice soccer every day?

X: Yes, of course.

Y: What time?

X: Two hours plus alpha.

Y: Two hours? From 5 o'clock to 7 o'clock?

X: 4:30 to 6:30. My practice time is from 4:00 to 8:00. Club practice time is from 4:00 to 7:00 but plus alpha was one hour.

Y: Very late. Did you think stop the clock?

X: No. It was very hard but...

Y: OK. Did you think someday, sometimes, ... did you have friends?

X: Yes. 10 persons.

Y: Ten persons. Practiced very hard or not working?

X: What? Because the teachers were very... not funny. They were very violent.

Y: Students love the teacher?

X: Yes.

Y: OK. Change topic. Did you have a girlfriend in high school?

X: Um... had? Have?

Y: Did you have a girlfriend in high school?

X: Yes. But I... I liked one girl for two years. The girl is very shy and she has problem in heart. She don't like men. I was very tired because... and I don't like girls now.

- Y: Now you don't want to have a girlfriend? Do you like someone now?
X: No. I don't. You?
Y: No, No. Now?
X: In high school.
Y: High school? Two people. Two girlfriends.
X: From first grade?
Y: From first grade to third grade. First girlfriend was from first grade spring to first grade summer.
X: You entered senior high school and soon make girlfriend? How? You said? (*He wanted to ask, "Which one of you showed an interest first?"*)
Y: No she said. I was said.
Y: First girlfriend you were said. What?

What do you think of this conversation? Obviously they made a lot of grammatical errors. However, the important thing is that they were communicating in English. They were exchanging messages. The sentences they used in this conversation were not presented by their teacher as "today's target expressions" but were created by the students in order to exchange messages.

In this conversation, the focus of the students was almost entirely on message. They enjoyed talking with each other. As you can see, every one of the responses in the above example is related to what their partner has said. We can conclude that this is an example of a successful communication in an English language classroom.

1.1.3 Communication in English language classrooms

Choice of topic

Let's look at the conversation by the two university students one more time. In this conversation, the students were allowed to choose the topic freely, and they decided to talk about club activities and girlfriends in high school days. In free conversation activities in which students are allowed to choose their topic, they will naturally pick up similar topics to those in their daily conversation in Japanese, be it club activities, part-time jobs, teachers they like, their favorite musicians, and boys/girls they like. However, it seems that the two students in the example had a hard time expressing themselves. For example, near the end of the conversation, one of the students apparently wanted to ask whether it was his partner or the girl who showed an interest first, but couldn't find a good way of saying it. He ended up saying "How?" and "You said?" and luckily his partner was able to understand his intention. Their conversation would have been much smoother if they had known words and

expressions to talk about, say, love.

Now, let's think about your own classes for the moment. In the previous section, you asked yourself whether or not you had given your students opportunities to communicate. This time let's ask "What have my classes been talking about?" To what extent are the topics of your choice relevant to your students' lives, whether at this moment or in the future? Are your students getting familiar with words and expressions in topics they would like to talk about in the future? What do your students want/need to talk about in English? We will explore this issue further in the manuscript *Tasks in English Language Teaching*.

How to encourage communication

Other than the choice of topic, it is important to encourage students to communicate in order to carry out successful communication activities. The conversation by the university students was recorded in May, and at the time they were very hesitant to talk during this kind of free conversation activity. However, when the teacher said errors were acceptable, they started to talk more and then to enjoy themselves. Once students notice that communication is meaning-focused, they become motivated to learn more expressions for on-going and future communication. In English language classrooms, however, Japanese teachers of English tend to worry more about the accuracy than the meaning. We sometimes cannot help noticing simple grammatical errors our students make, and cannot help pointing them out. If we keep doing this, our students will also worry too much about the accuracy or the forms of language thus cannot focus on the meaning even in communication activities.

Time

As discussed above, too much pressure for accuracy can discourage students from communicating more in English. Time pressure can be another kind of pressure that discourages them from communicating. How much time do you think is needed for a free conversation activity like the above example? It took those university students more than five minutes to complete the conversation. In another university classroom for introductory oral communication, students can easily spend more than ten minutes for free conversation without so much silence once they get used to it. It takes longer than we might think for students to get their messages across, especially when they are learning to communicate. How much time do you give to your students in communication activities?

Model

In Japan, students do not have so many opportunities to engage in communication in English outside the classroom, and the role of the teacher is therefore very important. We should provide students with model expressions and teachers themselves should be a role model of a good communicator. Through interaction with students in our daily lessons, we should provide them with useful expressions that students can use when expressing themselves. We should also try to talk about a variety of topics, especially those that are relevant to students' lives as mentioned earlier. Students will learn expressions to talk about themselves as well as attitudes necessary to become a good communicator. This is one of the reasons why we teachers should be good communicators in English, with appropriate proficiency and attitude.

1.2 Communicative competence of English teachers

By now it is obvious that a reasonable proficiency in English is a must for English language teachers. After all, we are one of the very few models of English speakers that our students have constant access to. Of course, teaching of English at junior and senior high schools requires far more than just English proficiency, but it is definitely a necessary part of good English teachers.

1.2.1 Communicative competence and TOEIC scores

The Action Plan issued by the Ministry of Education states that the targets for expected language abilities required for English teachers are the semi-first level of the STEP test, 550 points in TOEFL, and 730 points in TOEIC. Following this, all the English language teachers in public junior and senior high schools in Nagano Prefecture were required to take TOEIC in 2003. You may wonder if TOEIC scores really reflect your ability as English language teachers, and indeed there have been criticisms of it. Surely TOEIC does not measure all the aspects of English proficiency (in fact, no one actually claims so), and there are a lot of other skills and expertise in English language teaching besides English proficiency. In other words, we can say that not everyone who has a high TOEIC score can be a good teacher of English. How about the opposite then? Can we say "Not everyone who is a good teacher of English has a high TOEIC score"? Probably not. If you can communicate well in English, your TOEIC score will be high. And a reasonable proficiency in English is necessary for us as discussed above. Therefore, we cannot say TOEIC scores are totally irrelevant to the ability of English language teachers. Of course, obtaining a high score in TOEIC

should not be considered as a goal for teachers of English. It should be viewed more as a result of your effort to become a better teacher of English.

2. Reviewing communication activities

In section 1, we looked at the importance of giving students opportunities to communicate in English in the classroom. Actually, many teachers incorporate so-called communication activities in their lesson. However, not all of such activities can really be called communication activities if we take a closer look. In this section we will explore characteristics of good communication activities by examining a few examples.

2.1 Example 1: "Higher Mountain"

The first activity, titled "higher mountain," comes from a junior high school textbook. In this activity students form pairs and take turns to say, "Mt. Iwaki is higher than Mt. Aso," "Mt. Asama is higher than Mt. Iawaki," "Mt. Aso is lower than Mt. Iwaki," and so on. Can we call this a communication activity?

Higher Mountain
(Revised from *New Crown 2*, p. 63)

表を参考にしながら、例にならって high, low を使って高さを比べて言ってみよう。

(例) Mt Iwaki is higher than Mt. Aso.
Mt Aso is lower than Mt. Asama.

| Mountain | Height |
|------------|---------|
| Mt. Ontake | 3,067 m |
| Mt. Myoko | 2,454 m |
| Mt. Asama | 2,568 m |

2.2 Example 2: "Higher Mountain (2)"

Now let's look at example 2. As you can see, content and language forms used in this activity are similar to those in the first example. The main difference is that this activity uses two cards, each of which has slightly different information from the other. This type of activity is often referred to as an information gap activity. In this activity, students form

pairs, and a student holds card A and his/her partner holds card B. There are three pictures on each card and in the middle there is a big question mark. As you can see, the missing information in the two cards is different. Holders of card B have the answer to card A, and vice versa, which is why this is called an information gap activity.

Students will find the answer to the question by asking his/her partner questions, and they will choose the picture that best describes the mountain in question from the three choices. The necessary sentence patterns are provided as models below the pictures. A possible interaction will be like:

A: Is Mt. Myoko higher than Mt. Ontake?




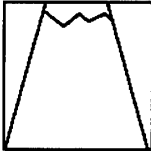


B: No, it's not.

A: Is Mt. Myoko higher than Mt. Asama?

B: No, it's not.

The answer for the card A is, therefore, number 3. Likewise, students who hold card B will find that number 1 is the answer.


Card A

| | | |
|---|---|--|
|  Mt. Ontake 3,067m |  Mt. Myoko ??? |  Mt. Asama 2,568m |
| ↓ | | |
|  1 |  2 |  3 |


A: Is Mt. _____ (higher / lower) than Mt. _____?
 B: (Yes, it is. / No, it's not. ? I don't know.)
 Is Mt. _____ (higher / lower) than Mt. _____?
 A: (Yes, it is. / No, it's not. ? I don't know.)

Answer ()

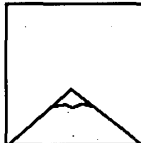
Card B



Mt. Asama
2,568m

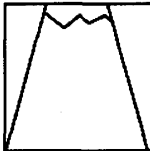


Mt. Ontake
???

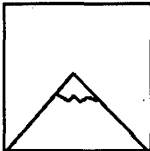


Mt. Myoko
2,454m


↓



1



2



3

A: Is Mt. _____ (higher / lower) than Mt. _____?

B: (Yes, it is. / No, it's not. ? I don't know.)

 Is Mt. _____ (higher / lower) than Mt. _____?

A: (Yes, it is. / No, it's not. ? I don't know.)

Answer ()

What is the difference between the two example activities? Which one do you think is more communicative? The second activity is obviously more communicative in that exchange of information is necessary to complete it. Students have to listen to what their partner says focusing on meaning in order to find the answer.

Information gap activities like the second example are often used in junior high school classrooms. This is a fun activity, and has a lot of flexibility in the choice of content. For example, you can replace mountains with rivers to create a similar but slightly different activity for students to practice comparatives using the words *shorter* and *longer*. If you put pictures of temples or other historical buildings, students can practice *older* and *newer*. Students can practice certain grammatical items and/or vocabulary while engaging in communication. In this sense information gap activities are good communication activities.

However, we do not want you to be satisfied with information gap activities. There are ways to make classroom interaction much more meaning-centered and communicative than information gap activities. In the manuscript *Tasks in English Language Teaching*, we will present alternative ideas for making classroom activities closer to real communication.

3. Communicative competence and knowledge of grammar

Many people believe that knowledge of grammar is crucial for better communication. For example, the conversation by the two university students shows that the students made a lot of grammatical errors. You might want to say that we need to teach them grammar and they need to practice to use the language more accurately. There are quite a few English language teachers who agree on this idea whether explicitly or implicitly, and as a result the majority of classroom activities aim for the learning of a grammatical rule and the accurate use of such a rule. We are not just talking about grammar-translation method here. Even in so-called communication activities, there is almost always a target structure to be practiced and learned.

However, we want to emphasize that knowledge of grammar forms only part of communicative competence, and there is much more students need to experience and learn other than that. When we say this, we often hear from teachers, both from junior high schools and senior high schools, that they have to focus on grammar so that their students can get high scores in entrance examinations. But we do not believe this is necessarily true. Let's take a look at one of the most-widely taken entrance exams in the next section.

3.1 National University Center Entrance Examinations

University entrance examination administered by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations is probably the largest of this kind in Japan. In 2004, more than 500,000 took the English subject of this exam. How important is the knowledge of grammar in order to be successful in this exam?

With regard to the written part of the current format of the test, problems concerning the knowledge of grammar only comprise about 20% of the entire test items. Most of the other problems measure various reading skills, especially reading comprehension (and of course, there is no translation question). How much of your class time do you want to spend to teach grammar (and translation)? And how much of your class time do you want to spend to work on other skills and knowledge?

In addition, it has been informed that the Center Exam will introduce the listening section for English in 2006, and all the students taking the English test will be required to take the listening section as well. According to the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, the listening section will last for 20 to 30 minutes in addition to the 80 minutes for the written test, and will be worth 50 points (in addition to the current 200 points). Other

university entrance exams tend to follow the trend made by the Center Exam, so more and more pressure is given to high school teachers to help students develop communicative competence in both reading and listening even for entrance examinations. By the way, in the entrance examinations for senior high schools, Nagano Prefecture introduced the listening section more than 15 years ago, and now 20 (out of 100) points are for listening.

3.2 How high can you jump?

There is an interesting anecdote that shows the relationship between knowledge of grammar and communicative competence. In a training seminar for English teachers, one of the lecturers asked a simple but quick question: Can you jump higher than a house? The attendants were requested to answer it quickly, and most of the attendants answered “No.” However, everybody can jump higher than a house, actually. We can jump higher than a house *can*. A house cannot jump.

What do you think of this story? As we all know, comparatives of adjectives and adverbs are taught even in junior high school classrooms. Teachers sometimes emphasize the form of the word following “than.” For example, we might say to our students, “Remember that we say, ‘*I can run faster than he,*’ but we cannot say, ‘*I can run faster than him.*’” If we apply the same rule to the above example, we should be able to correctly interpret the sentence, “I can jump higher than a house.” This is a basic rule of comparatives, but it is not easy even for English teachers to apply the rule for ongoing communication.

When communicating in a foreign language, especially in listening and speaking, we are required to use our grammatical knowledge quickly. Knowing about grammatical rules is not sufficient in this sense. In addition, we need to apply the rules when producing and interpreting in communication. This can be best practiced when students are involved in communication, and therefore it is very important for us to provide as many opportunities as possible to let our students use the language for communication. Explanation of grammatical rules is, even if it is necessary, just a beginning, and we should help our students to learn how to use them in communication.

4. Summary

The main issues in this manuscript can be summarized as follows:

1. Exchange of information is crucial in communication, and therefore it is meaning-centered.

2. English language teachers serve as models of communicators in English, and therefore must develop their own communicative competence in English.
3. Communication activities like information gap activities are useful, but we should not be satisfied with them.
4. Knowledge of grammar is just a starting point, and more emphasis should be put on the application of such knowledge in communication.