

# Improving Communicative Competence Through Focused Feedback and Interactive Activities

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper details the progress of one group of students in Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class. The class was chosen as the focus of a teaching journal due to perceived problems in communicative competence. As the instructor of this class, I targeted the perceived communication weaknesses mainly during the feedback stage of the lesson in an attempt to raise students' awareness of their deficiencies and provide guidance on how to improve. Additionally, interactive activities were introduced with the goal of enhancing students' communicative competence. Through maintaining a teaching journal I was able to monitor the progress of the students and the results are detailed as well as other factors which may have contributed to improvements in communicative competence. I conclude with some ideas of how instructors may address some of the communication deficiencies described in this group, particularly amongst Japanese English language learners and suggest possible areas of future research.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University is a mandatory course in the first two semesters for all first-year university students. Each semester consists of fourteen once-a-week classes which last 100 minutes. The course aims to improve student speaking fluency as well as the ability to participate effectively in three or four person group discussions. Throughout the course, students are introduced to a number of prefabricated discussion phrases which perform certain functions such as discussing opinions, supporting opinions with reasons and examples and giving different viewpoints. Students are graded on their ability to perform these functions during discussions. Students are separated first by their major then into four levels based on TOEIC test scores at the start of the year. Classes range from seven to nine students. The subjects of this paper are a group of eight Level III economics students with TOEIC scores ranging from 385-400. All students had taken EDC in their first semester and all had successfully passed the course. Yet, in the first few weeks of this second semester, this group of students demonstrated signs for concern as compared to other classes and thus this group was chosen as the focus of this study.

Whilst EDC is primarily focused on enhancing students' abilities to participate in three- or four-person group discussions on a range of topics, Hurling (2012) also sets out a number of affective objectives for the course such as enjoying discussing topics in English, informing the speaker when a point has not been understood and appreciating the importance of negotiating the meaning of unknown vocabulary or grammar (p. 3). This group of students was not meeting these objectives as they displayed obvious signs of apathy towards discussions and failed to negotiate meaning successfully in English, often reverting to Japanese to resolve any breakdowns in communication. Additionally, whilst they were able to perform many of the desired discussion functions when taking the role of the speaker, such as expressing and marking their opinion then supporting these opinions with reasons and examples, they were failing in some of the other cognitive objectives of the course, mainly when listening to others during the discussion, such as reacting to others appropriately, asking relevant follow-up questions to help the speaker develop the topic, effectively signal when they did not understand something, or effectively appeal to others to help clarify anything they did not understand (p. 3). The result of this was that in their extended discussions there were often periods of silence, frequent L1 usage and a number of

communication breakdowns when students clearly hadn't understood each other. Due to a lack of questions from other group members, there was also a failure to develop many of the ideas raised during the discussions.

The deficiencies of the group may be referred to as deficiencies in communicative competence, a term first used by Hymes (1972) to describe the knowledge of linguistic properties and the appropriate social contexts in which to use the language. A number of other terms have since developed in the field of second language acquisition such as *interactional competence* and more recently, Hall (2018) has argued for use of the term *interactional repertoires*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to define exactly which terminology is appropriate for the field, so communicative competence will be used to refer to the above-mentioned ways in which the students used (or failed to use) English to interact with each other in discussions. In particular, during the course the focus was on improving students' sociolinguistic and strategic competence, terms used by Canale and Swain (1980) to refer to students' ability to use their second language in social situations (in this case a group discussion) and the ability to overcome breakdowns in communication which occurred due to linguistic deficiencies. In the process of addressing these areas of communicative competence it was also hoped that students would enjoy the discussions more and that their motivation, which seemed to be lacking, would be enhanced.

I decided to monitor the students' progress by maintaining a teaching journal in a stream-of-consciousness style, which has been said to be an effective method for generating ideas and awareness in teaching (Farrell, 2007). I added notes after each lesson on the students' behavior as well as the actions I had taken during the class which may have had an impact. I later reflected on these journal entries, analyzing patterns which are detailed more fully below.

## DISCUSSION

In order to address concerns about students' communicative competence, first, attempts were made to raise student awareness of their problems. In each lesson students participated in two group discussions, the first for 12 minutes and the second for 16 minutes. It was believed that an appropriate stage of raising student awareness was after the first discussion as students could then implement changes in their behavior during the second discussion. Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) set out seven principles of good feedback: clarify what good performance is, encourage self-assessment, deliver high quality information to students about their learning, increase instructor and peer dialogue, increase motivation, provide opportunities to close the gap between current performance and desired performance, and finally provide instructors with information to help shape future learning. Based on these principles, the feedback stage was separated into three parts: content-related instructor-fronted feedback, peer-to-peer feedback, and instructor-fronted feedback.

In the content-related instructor-fronted stage, I provided comments on the content students discussed, highlighting some interesting ideas the students discussed as well as contributing some information about the topic from a different cultural perspective. This stage of feedback was designed to increase instructor and student dialogue and student motivation by enhancing the students' interest in the topics.

Secondly, students were given peer-to-peer feedback questions to discuss in pairs. These varied from week to week depending on student performance in the discussion. As mentioned, one area students showed weakness was in asking relevant follow-up questions; therefore, in one discussion, where there was a clear lack of follow-up questions, the peer-to-peer feedback questions included "How many questions did you ask in the discussion?" and "What question could you have asked to make the discussion more interesting?" At other times, the questions were more general, such as "What did you do well in the discussion?" and "What could you improve

in the next discussion?” When students struggled with performing that week’s relevant discussion skill, such as sharing sources of information, then focused questions were set, such as “Did you ask for sources of information?” and “Did you share any sources of information?” At other times, the feedback focused on communicative competence such as negotiating of meaning or use of L1, such as “Did you understand everything in the discussion?” and “What could have helped you understand?” or “Did you use any Japanese in the discussion?” and “What could you have said in English?”. This peer-to-peer stage was designed to increase peer dialogue, provide the instructor with information to shape learning and encourage self-assessment.

Finally, after listening to students discuss their thoughts about their performance, I provided some comments. These usually drew on something the students had highlighted as well as being based around something I had noted during the discussion. This stage aimed at addressing the remaining principles of good feedback detailed above—clarify what good performance is, deliver high-quality information to students about their learning and provide opportunities to close the gap between current performance and desired performance.

## **Results**

Through maintaining a teaching journal, I was able to track which feedback seemed to be productive in influencing student performance in the second discussion. Firstly, in the content-related teacher-fronted stage, students seemed to be more motivated to participate in the second discussion when I shared information about the topic from my experience. For example, students discussed Japanese customs in the third lesson, such as the custom of students cleaning the school at the end of the day, and after this discussion I informed students that in the UK students were never asked to do this and perhaps as a result, students had a tendency to drop litter on the streets more than in Japan. This appeared to stimulate students’ interest in the topic. Additionally, students appeared to relax when there was some humor involved, such as in Lesson 4 when I highlighted that a student said the main reason to learn English was to prevent hijacks on planes. This may also have had an effect on building rapport between the students and me as well as among the students. Although all students were taking the same major and knew at least one other student from their previous discussion class, many of the students did not know each other at the beginning of the course. Some of the perceived communication problems could also be seen when the students interacted before and after class in their native language. Whether due to shyness, a lack of interest or other reasons, when speaking with each other, their conversations were usually very brief and similar to their interactions during lessons; they did not ask follow-up questions and as a result communication was stilted and lacked fluidity. As the course progressed their interactions became more frequent and friendlier. This change could be seen both in discussions when they were speaking English as well as outside of class time when they were speaking Japanese. This feedback stage may have contributed to building a more positive class atmosphere, but it is more likely that as the students became more and more familiar with each other they began to relax, they became more interested in each other and therefore improved their communication both in Japanese and English.

With regards to the peer-to-peer feedback, it was observed that when questions were general such as “What did you do well?” and “What could you improve?” some students either failed to fully engage in the question, such as saying they did everything well or gave very general answers—such as they should improve their speaking fluency or English ability. Some student observations were of interest, however, particularly in highlighting the discrepancy between what students believed to be good performance and what I expected. Lantolf (2000) has noted how students’ motives and goals often differ from the instructor’s intentions. For example, students often mentioned they wanted to improve their vocabulary or grammatical accuracy. This is not an

explicit goal of EDC, but it did provide some valuable information on how the students valued vocabulary development. This was incorporated more through the introduction of a vocabulary building tool which will be discussed later.

The peer-to-peer questions which seemed to generate the most significant change in performance during the second discussion were more precise, such as “What did you say in Japanese in the discussion?” and “What could you have said in English?” This led students to mention that they had used Japanese, such as saying “*Dou iu koto?*” (What do you/does that mean?) and that they could have used phrases such as “What do you mean?” to successfully negotiate meaning. Sometimes the students didn’t know what they could have said in English such as when discussing government they used the Japanese word for parliament (“*kokkai*”) but were able to suggest they could have used other words to explain this idea, such as saying “country meeting” and giving examples of members of parliament. Other similarly closed questions which seemed to have a greater effect on performance were those focused on target language such as “Did you ask for both advantages and disadvantages?” and “Did you balance your opinions by talking about advantages and disadvantages?” These were leading questions with clear answers and as a result students were quickly made aware that they had not performed the function. In these given examples, there was a clear uptake in negotiating meaning, such as asking “What do you mean?” and explaining ideas using English, as well as increased use of the target language, such as asking for advantages and disadvantages to balance their discussions. This is in line with research which suggests vagueness in feedback can impede learning and specific feedback tends to aid improvement (Shute, 2007).

Similarly, when I made comments after the peer-to-peer feedback, focused, specific comments received more noticeable uptake than generalities. For example, when I agreed with a student about the need to ask more questions and urged students to ask follow-up questions when they were listening, there was little increase of follow-up questions in the second discussion. Yet, a more precise example yielded increased uptake. In Lesson 10, when the target language was asking for advantages and disadvantages and the topic was work-life balance, I highlighted how students had taken turns saying limiting overtime was a good idea for improving work-life balance and asked students what question could they have asked. By eliciting that they could have asked “What are the disadvantages of limiting overtime?” this led to increased use of this question in the second discussion. This followed on from the peer-to-peer questions mentioned above which had raised students’ awareness that they had not asked for both advantages and disadvantages.

Another example of this was when there was a breakdown in understanding. One student had asked “Do you understand?” and the other said “maybe” but then continued to proceed with their own opinion. By eliciting possible questions they can ask when they don’t understand something, such as “What do you mean?” and “Can you repeat that?” the students were able to use this in their second discussion when a similar breakdown in understanding occurred. This skill of negotiating meaning was repeatedly focused upon such as the examples of resorting to L1 use above, so this repetition may also have aided uptake.

One other use of feedback was during Lesson 5 when students were interrupted during their discussion. During their first discussion, students had adopted a turn-taking dynamic that did not appear to be conducive to developing ideas. One member would say their opinion on the topic followed by the next in a circle before the group moved to the next topic. This is a similar dynamic described by Young (2015) which had been altered due to the introduction of turn-signaling phrases such as “Does anyone want to make a comment?” and “Can I make a comment?” Whilst similar turn-taking phrases had been learnt by this group of students and they had demonstrated knowledge of such phrases through prior use, they had for some reason reverted back to this circular turn-taking dynamic. Corno & Snow (1986) argue that if a learner is actively engaged in

a task (in this case the group discussion) then they should not be interrupted as it may be disruptive and impede learning. With this in mind, the delayed feedback methods mentioned above were usually used, but it was deemed beneficial to students on this occasion to interrupt and give guidance on how they could develop the discussion by altering this turn-taking dynamic. After making some comments and providing examples of how the students could alter this dynamic, for example, by asking questions and expanding on each other's ideas, the students resumed the discussion and were noticeably more interactive, changing their turn-taking dynamic to be less regimented, which allowed more building of ideas and collaboration in the discussion. Thus, immediate feedback may have been helpful for this group of Level III students as some research has suggested may be the case for lower level students (Shute, 2007).

### **Other Interventions**

As well as the feedback implemented above, there were two more significant attempts to improve students' communicative competency. As mentioned, students had commented that they believed improving their vocabulary could improve their discussions and a lack of vocabulary may have been one of the reasons why some students were reluctant to join the discussion which resulted in silent periods. Kita (2018) surveyed a group of students and found that 75% said they sometimes did not share their true opinions because they did not know how to express them in English whilst 81% said they could not express their ideas in discussions. The introduction of a vocabulary log seemed to help, as 88% of students mentioned that this tool had helped the students express their ideas. A similar tool was thus introduced to this group of students in Lesson 4 of the course. This tool gave students some phrases they could use to negotiate meaning and provided an opportunity to note down new vocabulary. Students were given time to practice using these phrases in pair tasks during Lessons 4 and 12, which in the EDC course focus on reviewing Communication Skills. In Lesson 4 students were given picture cards and had to describe the picture only using English. In Lesson 12 students were given a list of vocabulary related to the topic (crime and punishment) in English and Japanese and had to describe one word to their pair, again only using English. Students were highly successful in negotiating meaning during the task due to explicit instructions on how they could explain the pictures or words as well as explicit phrases to use when they could not guess the meaning from their partner's description. As stated above, feedback also often focused on phrases aimed at repairing breakdowns in understanding and reducing L1 use, such as "What do you mean?" and "Can you repeat that?" It was observed that L1 use decreased throughout the course in most students, and all students used some of these strategies during discussions at least once to repair breakdowns in communication.

However, two of the eight students in particular continued to use their L1 more than their peers. One other strategy, therefore, to improve communicative competence in discussions was to separate these students as it was observed that when they were in the same discussion group L1 use was frequent and also led to an increase in the other group members' L1 use. This separation of the two students seemed to have a positive effect as these students did not negatively affect the other group members. The other group members instead reduced the L1 use of the aforementioned two students. At times, some of the group members would urge them to use "no Japanese" which resulted in increased negotiations of meaning and enhanced their communicative competence.

Another intervention which aimed at increasing the use of follow-up questions was introduced in Lesson 6. In EDC, one of the staple activities is a 3/2/1 fluency activity, an adapted version of Maurice's (1983) 4/3/2 fluency activity. Whilst this activity has been shown to increase student fluency it seemed to be having an adverse effect on this group. This activity was usually used at the start of lessons and therefore seemed to have the effect of priming students to speak in monologues without any follow-up questions or changes in turn-taking. In order to address this,

in Lesson 6 the focus of the activity was changed and rather than encouraging students to talk as much as possible in a monologue before increasing their speaking speed, listeners were encouraged to ask follow-up questions. The timing was changed to 2/2/2 so listeners had the same amount of time to ask follow-up questions and after each round, rather than focusing on how much content the speaker had managed to repeat, the listeners were asked “How many extra questions did you ask?” At first, students struggled to come up with many follow-up questions and would often report they asked zero or one follow-up question in the two minutes but with repeated practice, by Lesson 13 they were asking at least three or four follow-up questions in each two-minute round. After the activity students were urged to continue this practice throughout the lesson which seemed to have a positive effect on the number of follow-up questions asked during discussions. This helped students expand their ideas in discussions.

## CONCLUSION

As noted, this group of students were chosen for a focused study as they displayed a number of practices which impeded progress in their English communication, such as frequent use of L1 to negotiate meaning, a lack of appropriate follow-up questions to allow speakers to expand their ideas, and a lack of eagerness to join discussions. By the end of the course the students were much more able to conduct smooth group discussions. There were fewer periods of silence, less L1 use, more negotiation of meaning and students seemed to enjoy the discussions more and be more interested in hearing other members’ opinions. Specific feedback led to more uptake and improved performance, such as in leading peer-to-peer questions which resulted in specific answers, clear examples of how students could fix communication breakdowns, and examples of questions students could use to develop ideas. Additionally, students became more interactive as the course progressed and showed more enjoyment during discussions, which may have been due to an improved atmosphere during the class or a natural progression as they became more accustomed to each other. It also seemed evident that consistently focusing on using English to negotiate meaning was helpful in the development of this group of students’ communicative competence.

This group of students also frequently expressed that they believed one of their main deficiencies was low vocabulary and thus introducing activities which focused on vocabulary development also seemed to aid the students. However, at the end of the course, not all of the students improved in their communication competence. In particular, two students’ use of L1 to resolve communication breakdowns and generally low motivation to learn English persisted. In the following year this group of students will have no mandatory English courses, but they do have the option of selecting some English courses. In the final lesson when asked whether they intended to select any of these courses for continued study, no students said they would continue. Thus, whilst there may have been some improvements in their communicative competence during the course, it is likely any such progress will quickly be eradicated by a lack of motivation for continued study and development. Future research may then focus on how to develop communicative competence in combination with improving student motivation.

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