

Title: Designing Lessons and Speaking Assessments for Greater Retention of Targeted Vocabulary and Grammatical Structures

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Abstract: Lesson design and assessment should work closely together. Assessments for learning should be done regularly at various intervals and previously targeted vocabulary and structures need to be reviewed for greater retention of the vocabulary and language. Infrequent usage of previously studied material leads to poor retrieval capabilities. This paper presents some methods for language retention through goal setting, practice, and role playing, and especially in the area of speaking for first year university students.

Memorizing and Eliciting Basic Questions and Answers

Speaking should be used as the initial means for learning a foreign language as the students will be more actively engaged in the learning and retention of English. Many Japanese students entering their first year of university have spent considerable time in the study of English, but rarely have applied their many years of study in the realm of speaking. In my teaching, I have attempted to create opportunities for students to practice speaking basic English in the classroom, initially using simple questions and statements needed to provide a functional level of autonomy of English. Such fundamental and basic questions relate to common classroom English, and include examples as requesting the spelling of a word, repeating a spoken word or any language related to Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills. However, the infrequency of spoken English in previous learning experiences requires such basic grammatical structures and phrases to be taught for many university students in Japan. Since such basic forms have been studied in the past, the foreign language teacher needs to mostly to re-present these words and phrases primarily focusing upon their spoken components.

As Nation (2009) points out the oral practice of such phrases creates an easier path to fluency. Using such phrases and requests gives students a degree of control, where students can utilize such words for their own purposes. For students, exercising a certain degree of control will increase motivation amongst.

When people believe they are in control, they tend to work harder and push themselves more. (Duhigg 2016)

Applied to language learning, this principle states the importance of teaching BICS to English

learners, and its necessity for providing a base for speaking, equipping them with the tools to learn the language; thus increasing the students competency and confidence. By teaching and encouraging questions in the early stages of university classes, an environment is created where knowledge is not only memorized, but transferred from memory to active usage. Correctly using these questions provides a pathway for future learning of spoken English.

Language Learning and Goal Setting

Developing measurable and achievable goals are paramount to effectively building retention for students when planning activities lessons. Due to the limited classroom time with students (90 minutes a week in a university classroom), reserving time for the production of the language is necessary. Therefore, goals need to be determined by the teacher, and then communicated to the students. Making students aware of their learning goals will cause students to focus their energy on the area of concentration where the hard work of memory needs to be applied. Duhigg stresses the importance of this type of goal that need to be set for greater productivity (2016).

He states that the danger of having goals that are too inadequately defined leads to a misdirection of energy and time resulting in lower achievement. The level of difficulty needs to be addressed. Simple goals requiring little effort render the goals as meaningless; whereas, a complicated goal may be perceived as insurmountable. Poorly communicated expectations for a conversation may result in misuse of the structures and poor application. In teaching, I have often made the mistake of poorly defining goals and speaking requirements, and found that students have misinterpreted the goal to mere memorization of a set of questions and answers. This leads to a failure to comprehend the proper language usage within context of both questions and answers. Comprehension of the meaning and the intention of language is required to counter such rigidity often found in rote-memorization. For instance, students participating in conversations about traveling experiences have often asked the question “How did you get there?”. This question is often elicited during a conversation about trips from Japan to countries as China, the United States from the archipelago of Japan, and some students do not consider the obvious answer is “by airplane”. This kind of error shows that many students perceive a set of questions as something to be practiced rather than communicated within a context. Such an approach to question memorization shows the absence of understanding the context of conversation, and questions are utilized only to meet the assumed expectations of the teacher. Having students understand the context of the conversation will assist them in selecting an appropriate, relevant question.

Goals and the activities that arise from such practice should be designed to be demanding, in that they need to challenge students to move beyond familiar language items. It is imperative not to overwhelm students with new material, but rather new material needs to be introduced and implemented incrementally, and then re-introduced at a later time. Learned material should be reviewed regularly for greater retention and for overall improvement. This should not be mistaken for just a simple repetition of last week's previously practiced drill. Rather, the repeated drill is modified with an additional component. For example, students may be challenged to perform the same activities previously practiced at faster paces than they were accustomed. A set of questions

about one's daily habits, once memorized, may be re-visited by students with the new goal which targets the perfecting of their enunciation or usage. Other speaking goals may be employed such as accent reduction which aims at discouraging the use of Katakana equivalents of English vocabulary, which students often initially utilize in their first attempts to speak English. This is a pervasive predicament found among many students as their former English education has not provided ample time for pronunciation practice, and students are largely unaware of their mispronunciations during speaking activities. Thus, being made aware of this tendency and the goal of accent reduction will produce language that sounds more natural and authentic. Students can also be encouraged to practice experimenting with facial expressions, gestures and body language, which enhances communication.

Time Limits

Further modification of goals can be assigned by having students quickly and efficiently eliciting questions and answers in timed drills. An example of such a task may be to elicit ten questions and answers in one minute's time. Presenting tasks with a time limitation will be very important to successfully participating in an activity or in the students' preparation for an assessment. The time limit adds to the level of difficulty for the student and makes the task more challenging. Once again, it is important to take note that time constraints should be realistic and provide students with the motivation for the successful completion of the task, and the students are responsible for making a deliberate and consistent effort. The infrequency of spoken English and authentic conversation makes a one-to-two-minute time limit to be sufficient in evaluating the targeted structures set by the instructor. This time limit although seemingly small provides a suitable challenge to students as many have never spoken English for this duration of time. A one-to-two-minute span is sufficient in measuring a sample of the targeted language structures.

It is also important to set time limits for the amount of time needed to practice for the assessment. Classroom time allotted for practice needs to be communicated and strictly kept by the teacher. Assigning a limited time for practice will place the student in a situation where they will need to practice the targeted language especially if an assessment is forthcoming. Thus, a conversation that will be assessed in a minute's time will be practiced multiple times during the course of the twenty minutes allotted for in-class practice.

Lowering Anxiety and Inhibition through Role Playing

In my previous papers, I researched about the language anxiety and test anxiety as problems that need to be addressed. Such negative affluences are inherent for the students undergoing speaking assessments (Ricart, 2014). Some strategies were proposed in the papers for relieving stress; however, I did not mention the use of drama and role playing as possible means for lowering anxiety.

Role playing and drama can be an effective tool for reducing language anxiety. The Dartmouth /Rassias Method (1980) employs the extensive use of dramatic techniques, which results in lower inhibitions and less anxiety for students. By using dramatic techniques as role

playing and having students take on personas, English practice can take on a playful atmosphere. During one activity, I was surprised one of my less motivated students actually humming as she was playing the role of a sales clerk pretending to look for a pair of shoes for a “customer”. Such a created and playful atmosphere for lowering inhibitions may lead students to a false perception of being non-academic. Students may take advantage of such “light-heartedness” in the classroom as leniency by the teacher; however, if assessments are timed and frequent such activities can be implemented that will occupy the psyche of the students and should dispel such lackadaisical attitudes. There are also emotional factors attributed to memorization and influence retention depending on upon how integrated the emotions are with the newly received language (Stevick, 1996).

Regarding classroom and time management, role playing as a classroom activity, can be short, easy to do, and success-oriented; in other words, they should be “fun” for the students to engage in and relatively challenging to get them right (Wilson, 2006). Simple conversations produced between students playing roles provide them with opportunities to experience the language in a set form and serves as a base to extend and make additions to the initial dialogue of specific roles.

Students know that the “drama” is not real when they take on a role or a persona, and will gradually know they can be take risks and be creative with such activities. For many activities, I let students know that it is okay to “lie”, which results in laughter from many students. This “lying” allows them to be creative and may also protect them from revealing private information which may be inappropriate for a classroom setting. Exaggerations, absurdities, and other products of the imagination can each have an active role in the language learning process. Role playing and drama reflect the motivational theory of enjoying the English language, and is another factor related to the success of activities.

Assessment and Feedback

All of these approaches to speaking need to be culminated in the form of assessments. The speaking improvements that will occur during timed practices and activities will be achieved if frequent assessments are in place. Students knowing that their speech will be assessed will tend to continue working on the specified language goal until it is done correctly; and thereby produce higher levels of achievement (Marzano, 2006).

Another crucial element to improvement is in productive feedback from the teacher. Marzano further explains that there is a correlation between the timing and the feedback. If feedback is postponed the effects will reduce achievement levels. Upon the reception of such feedback, students will employ strategies to improve speaking skills if it is understood that the practiced conversation will be applied to the final exam or if the connection is made to a future event. If regular assessments are administered with the understood objective of providing feedback rather than a final grade such learning and improvement can take place.

Stiggins, Arter, Chappius, and Chappius (2006) distinguish between these two forms of assessment which are “assessments of learning” and “assessments for learning”. The former evaluates the students' accumulated knowledge throughout the prescribed learning period, and primarily

takes the forms of year-end or final tests. Assessments for learning are administered during the learning process, not at the end of it. It assists both the teacher and students modify the process of acquiring knowledge. For the student, the results of the assessment need to be communicated to provide adequate feedback. This corrective feedback empowers the students by presenting the opportunity for correcting and perfecting their speaking skills; allowing them to reflect on their mistakes after assessments, and equipping them to make changes where needed.

This type of feedback has greater possibility for a higher rate of retention as well. During the assessment process, the mind is activated to produce the language, and gaps within language production are realized; thus creating mental space for feedback since the mind is actively seeking the language necessary to communicate the targeted goal. The corrective feedback provided by the teacher provides for a more effective, efficient, and a surer way to communicate for the student, and as the mind is desperately seeking this knowledge the probability of the language being retained is greater. This has been shown often in many of my classroom activities when providing corrections to students directly. Students are shown the error, asked to re-consider the reasons why the error was made, and are then provided with the correct word or phrase and its application. They are guided to understand where and sometimes why they made the error, and also are guided to the correct answer. This process causes them to reflect upon the targeted language, and how it is produced. Such useful knowledge regarding one's mistakes benefits students as they know that the final assessment has not yet occurred; and this feedback results in providing reasons for greater retention and attempts to master material as the expectation of future success is reinforced. Such feedback needs to be timely and within a short time span of the assessment itself (Stiggins,2006) .

As Stiggins and his colleagues point out, assessments for learning happen while learning is in process. Additionally, they also guide the teacher's methodology. These are the assessments that we conduct throughout teaching and learning to diagnose student needs, plan our next steps in instruction, provide students with feedback they can use to improve the quality of their work, and help students see and feel in control of their journey to success (2006).

Review and Retention

In light of the ideas and methods I have surveyed, I return to the beginning point of having goals placed before the student. As an English foreign language teacher, one of my primary goal is to develop the conversational skills of university students. This broad goal is measured in the weekly lesson goals of speaking English in the university. To have students continue in improving upon previously learned material, review is essential for long-term retention. By using spaced-retrieval methods, where students practice targeted material over expanded periods of time, retention has shown to be a more effective means to long-term memorization. Bury (2016) has noted that expanded spaced-retrieval memorization has shown greatest improvement than mass (concentrated) retrieval memorization, which in practice is highly focused but the duration is only for a short period of time. Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel have noted that although mass retrieval methods, such as cramming, "feels" effective, their research has shown that expanded-

spaced retrieval is the better of the two methods for long-term memory. Thus, teachers need to plan for review practice that will specifically challenge student on material that has been previously studied. Brown has shown that by spacing out the practice and making demands upon one's memory, the mind will work harder at recall attempts; thereby building better pathways to memorization of targeted material (2014).

Conclusion

It is important to bear in mind Steven Covey's work in the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* regarding the importance of beginning with the end in mind (1989). As EFL pedagogues, it is crucial, when considering the limited time that we have with our students that we need to decide the goals for them. In determining this, we will use our classroom time for efficiently and effectively and instill the language and qualities that we aspire for them to achieve. Students often get locked into the familiar practice of memorizing lists and being presented with a list of questions, many students will memorize the list without proper comprehending the application and the dynamics of conversation. For authentic communication to occur conversation strategies need to take place and deeper meaning of vocabulary and sentences need to be applied to the structures being targeted. This kind of error occurs due to a lack of experience with English conversation, and the false belief that mere memorization and mere eliciting is the expectation of the teacher. By keeping our specific and detailed goals in mind and being aware of the mistakes often made in our methodology, teachers will concentrate on such activities that will increase authentic speech and minimize the obstacles to it. On-going practice in the form of review and feedback given in assessments will result in increased retention, decreased anxiety, and enhanced learner autonomy as students will be empowered regarding their individual success in speaking English.

Future Research

Further study needs to be directed towards extended spaced retrieval and weekly lessons. A future research question will be the time span allowed within a week's time to determine, if it is an effective interval for developing expanded spaced retention. Another area that needs to be explored is making classes more meaningful through role playing, and authentic interaction. Related to this question is an exploration through role-playing and drama for lowering inhibitions while engaging in speaking activities.

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