

Developing Classroom Communicative Competence: the Key to Successful English Classes at the University Level

MURAHATA, Yoshiko

1. Introduction

In the recent flow toward achieving communication skills in English, teachers of English as a foreign language in Japan have been shifting from the traditional translation method to a so called 'communicative approach'. However, they often have to face a big barrier of students' silence in class. Students do not participate in communication activities as easily as we expect. How can we make an English class communicative? Students seem to have acquired specific class participation styles which are not expected in a communicative classroom. This paper argues that a communication-oriented English class will create a unique English speaking society, which is quite different from students' prior high school English classes. In that kind of society, students need to develop *classroom communicative competence* for active participation in class activities.

We will first sketch some premises and problems of my communication-oriented English classes. This will lead us to consider some traditional learning styles and communicative styles of Japanese. Next we will see how students' acquired class participation styles contradict my expectations in the communicative language class based on the result of a questionnaire given in two universities. Finally, we will discuss how an English class is and of itself a society where students need to be socialized and that they should acquire *classroom communicative competence*, with which students actively participate in classroom events.

2. Communication-Oriented Reading Class: Premises and Problems

2.1 Premises

Recent discussions of language teaching methodology have centered on a communicative approach which provides opportunities for learners to communicate in the target language, rather than to learn grammatical or linguistic rules (Ellis, 1994: 571). It should be emphasized here that 'communicative' activities do not always mean only oral practice for the development of skills of speaking and listening. Reading and writing can be communicative, once they are recognized as personal interactions between readers and writers by means of written forms of language (Breen, 1985: 61; Murahata, 1996: 139-143). We could make reading an interactive activity in order for successful language acquisition to take place (for further discussion on communication-oriented reading class, see Murahata 1996; Rivers, 1981: 259-85; and Wallace, 1992).

I have taught communication-oriented reading classes for two years at the university level. We use only English in class, though the 'communicative approach' does not always mean 'direct method' (Malamah-Thomas, 1987: 71). This is to get students to realize that

'studying English' does not mean 'translating it into Japanese' and 'understanding English through Japanese.' Furthermore, students are encouraged to use English in the hope that they will be able to read directly from written texts without replacing them with Japanese.

Reading can be communicative at three stages in a lesson; the pre-reading, the while-reading, and the post-reading stages. At the pre-reading stage, students are led to construct a schema of what they are going to read. They are introduced to key words and phrases or asked questions concerning the topic, which would help them retrieve their prior knowledge and personal experiences relevant to it. The second stage, the while-reading stage, includes from checking meanings of phrases and sentences to searching for the main idea of the whole passage, or sometimes to inferring the writer's intention. The final stage is for post-reading. After we read a certain passage, as consolidation of a lesson, we complete a summary which holds some blanks to be filled with key words or important parts of the passage, or write a summary or comments at a later time in a year course. If the reading is active enough to provoke an interaction with the writer, the students, as successful readers, will naturally want to respond to what they read (for details of class activities see Murahata (1996)).

Throughout the three stages, communicative activities are pursued based on two concepts. One is that there should be as many chances for interactions as possible in class. Most of the interactions have an IRE (an initiation act of a teacher, a response act of a student, and an evaluation act of a teacher) pattern (Johnson, 1995: 9). The other concept is that everyone is encouraged to speak or write in their own words not by copying or reading phrases from the textbook. This is because written texts are usually different from spoken texts and they are full of expressions and words which students would never use when they actually communicate. This would give them chance to retrieve their linguistic knowledge for actual use in a real context. I explain these concepts at the beginning of the course and tell them that we learn how to use English only by using it.

2.2 Problems

These two concepts should surely create a certain English speaking community. However, contrary to my expectations, class participation is not successfully activated in two different ways.

It is true that expressing one's ideas in a foreign language is never easy, but this is the only way for students to practice their use of it. However, students actually do not try to take the chance. Any voluntary questions, answers and opinions from students are certainly welcomed anytime during the whole class instruction. Picking up any kind of utterance, I try to involve the student in conversation, so that they feel their English is approved and understood. Also, I seldom correct their English in front of the class as long as I understand, so that they would not feel embarrassed. I often rephrase students' opinions to check my understanding, which is also useful for the others to understand.

Few students try to use even question forms listed around the beginning of the course, such as:

What does 'language variety' mean?

How do you pronounce s-h-e-i-l-a?

I don't understand the first sentence in the second paragraph.

Will you explain the sentence structure of the third sentence?

Which is the main verb of the fourth sentence?

These sentences are easy enough for university students to use in class. They do not have to be afraid of making mistakes. Still, there is a lot of silence.

The second problem, which is a consequence of the first problem, is that in almost all the cases it is the instructor who initiates and controls the communication by asking many questions, as often seen in a number of excerpts from foreign or second language classrooms (Johnson, 1995; Musumeci, 1996). On the contrary, however, to break the typical classroom interaction pattern of IRE, which keeps the teacher's dominant status, students are expected to start asking questions and initiate the conversation. Even though I ask many questions to elicit some English response from students, I alone continue to talk by rephrasing the questions, simplifying them, and adding more explanation. After a long speech by the instructor is typically a brief right answer. Students do not realize that asking a question is a very useful way to open a conversation and keep it going, as in a natural setting.

Why don't they try to use the expressions listed above and ask questions to communicate in English? Don't they have anything to ask? Are they worried about asking a stupid question? Didn't they read the passage at all at home? In order to answer some of these questions, next we will see some descriptions from literature concerning English classes and communicative styles typically found among Japanese.

2.3 Social Aspects of English Classes in Japan

Japanese students are widely recognized as shy and passive in class. As often said students would not respond as much as teachers expect in communicative or conversational English classes in Japan (Helgesen, 1993). It is stated that one of the features of Japanese learners' behavior in the classroom is "a grateful acceptance of what is taught and keeping silent except when explicitly asked to speak" (Scollon & Scollon, 1990 as cited by Johnson, 1995: 54). Also, an account is given that "Japanese students tend to dislike a person who stands out and violates the unity of a class. Native-speaking English teachers often encounter tremendous resistance from Japanese students as they attempt to implement more interactive styles of communication in EFL classrooms" (Wordell, 1985 as cited by Johnson, 1995: 54). These descriptions seem to conform to some aspects of my English classes. Students will somehow put their ideas into English if they are forced to, but rarely speak up voluntarily.

We can find other descriptions about communicative styles in Japanese society. Clancy (1986: 216) writes that in Japan "interpersonal communication heavily relies upon intuition and empathy," and that "conformity to group norms can be seen as an essential aspect of communicative style". She continues to explain that Japanese people do not express their thoughts and feelings explicitly but only show them indirectly enough for others

to imagine and understand. Also it is pointed out that the Japanese language has various content-appropriate formulas to which everyone can suit their feelings. There is no need to invent personal and individualized verbal expressions. Her descriptions partly explain why students are not good at asking questions and instead keep silent. They would not depend on their own language to make their ideas clear and explicit but rather depend on other people to infer them.

Naturally we all acquire certain ways of communication and behavior which reflect social norms and values as we grow. Thus students have acquired some expected ways of behaving and communicating both in the Japanese society and at school. This means that for the six years of English learning at high school they have adjusted their class participation styles to the classes they have had. If they seem less active in a communicative English class they are taking now, it may be because their acquired class participation styles deviate from the class norms.

Keeping both the present classroom situations and the social background of students' class participation styles in mind, in order to understand the problems in my class better, a questionnaire was given to students. The questions were mainly on students' attitudes toward asking questions in a content-based English class because that seems to cause the problems. Students were also asked what kind of English classes they have taken both in university and in high school, and how often they have had or have a chance to use English as a means of communication.

3. Students' Class Participation Styles in English Class

3.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was composed originally in Japanese so that it would be easier for the students to complete. The results were translated into English as shown in Table 1 to 5. All of the questions were in multiple-choice form and so all the students had to do was to circle the number of the description which they thought most closely expressed their ideas. For some of the questions they were free to choose more than two choices.

The questionnaire was conducted around the beginning of December in two classes in each of University A (UA) and University B (UB) where I teach. The four classes all consist of non-English majors and most of them are freshmen and sophomores. The results from the two classes in each university do not show significant differences between them, so the tables hold only two columns for the two universities. The number of the participants in UA is 50, and in UB 82. The numbers without the parentheses show the crude numbers of the students and the numbers in the parentheses show the percentages.

3.2 Hypotheses

Before giving a questionnaire I made the following five hypotheses about the students' class participation styles in English classrooms and their use of English.

1. Students' class participation styles acquired while attending high school were quite passive, so they are not used to asking questions in class and they have some

difficulty making questions in the first place.

2. They do not want to ask questions because they do not want to stand out.
3. They think asking questions show their ignorance and lack of preparation, so they feel uncomfortable revealing these to the class. This means they do not realize the positive aspects of asking questions.
4. They do not ask questions because they do not have anything to ask. This is because they have not read the passage before attending the class, so they are not ready yet to make questions as the instructor expects.
5. Most of the students have not used English as a means of communication in real communicative settings, so they are not used to using it for actual communication.

3.3 Results of the Questionnaire

Table 1 shows that more than half of the students (64.0% in UA and 70.7% in UB) are taking or have taken an English course taught using only English besides my class, and that those English classes are not always conversation classes but some are content-based classes. The instructor may be a Japanese or a native speaker of English, and UB has more of the latter case. In UA, more students are taught a content-based English class using English by a Japanese instructor, while in UB more students tend to take an English conversation class taught by a native speaker of English. This is simply because their curricula are different.

This means that we can not say that they are totally unfamiliar with the classroom atmosphere where only English is used as a means of learning and communication. The rest of the 18 and 24 students in respective universities, however, are taking such a class for the first time, where they use only English whatever they do in class.

Table 2 reveals some quite interesting phases of students' attitudes toward asking questions. More than half of the students in both universities have asked a question in English in class. The rest (46.0% in UA and 29.2% in UB) have not asked any question for

Table 1 Kinds of University English Classes Taken by Students

Question	Choices	University A (n=50)		University B (n=82)	
		n	%	n	%
1. Have you had a course taught in English besides this course?	Yes	32	64.0	58	70.7
	No	18	36.0	24	29.3
2. What kind of class? (out of Yes's in Q.1)(You may choose more than two answers.)	conversation	15	46.9	34	58.6
	literature reading	3	9.4	2	3.4
	general reading	16	50.0	11	19.0
	cross cultural	2	6.3	10	17.2
	listening	0	0.0	4	6.9
	other	2	6.3	4	6.9
3. The instructor was ?(out of Yes's in Q.1)(You may choose more than two answers.)	Japanese	22	68.8	16	27.6
	Native speaker	13	40.6	53	91.4
	team teaching	0	0.0	1	1.7

Table 2
Students' Attitude toward Asking Questions in University English Classes

Question	Choices	University A(n=50)		University B(n=82)	
		n	%	n	%
4. Have you asked a question in English in class?	Yes	26	52.0	57	69.5
	No	23	46.0	24	29.2
	No answer	1	2.0	1	1.2
5. What kind of questions do you want to ask in class? (You may choose more than two answers.)	on meaning of words and phrases	23	46.0	31	37.8
	on sentence structure	15	30.0	26	31.7
	on content of the passage	26	52.0	34	41.5
	on class activities	12	24.0	29	35.4
	on expressions	25	50.0	53	64.6
	to check understanding	12	24.0	27	32.9
	should not ask at all	0	0.0	1	1.2
	should ask after the class if any	0	0.0	1	1.2
	other	2	4.0	1	1.2
	no answer	0	0.0	1	1.2
6. What does 'asking questions' mean to you? (You may choose more than two answers.)	lack of understanding	3	6.0	1	1.2
	good preparation for the lesson	14	28.0	28	34.1
	showing positive attitude to class	40	80.0	64	78.0
	hesitate because not many ask	19	38.0	33	40.2
	good practice	12	24.0	13	15.9
	some questions are too basic to ask	0	0.0	10	12.2
	bad attitude in class	0	0.0	0	0.0
	other	0	0.0	1	1.2
	no answer	0	0.0	1	1.2
7. What makes it difficult to ask questions in English in class? (You may choose more than two answers.)	not used to asking	28	56.0	46	56.1
	not knowing how to say	38	76.0	50	61.0
	shyness	8	16.0	23	28.0
	showing poor preparation	1	2.0	0	0.0
	not in class but in group or in person	17	34.0	33	40.2
	too easy questions to ask	5	10.0	14	17.0
	being not prepared well	7	14.0	14	17.0
	other	0	0.0	2	2.4

at least nine months or for more than that. This, however, does not mean that they have nothing to ask. Students in both universities replied that what they would like to ask most is about the content in the written passage and the expression of how to express their ideas. About one third of the students (24.0% in UA and 32.9% in UB) would like to check their understanding by asking questions. Almost no students regard asking questions as an unexpected attitude in class.

Many of the students (80.0% in UA and 78.0% in UB) think "asking a question shows a positive attitude to a lesson," but at the same time more than one third of them (38% in UA

Table 3
Ways of Using English and Asking Questions in Junior and Senior High School English Classes

Question	Choices	University A (n=50)		University B (n=82)	
		n	%	n	%
8. How did you use English in class? (You can choose more than two answers.)	Easy English all through the class	5	10.0	5	6.1
	Used only for greetings	33	66.0	37	45.1
	Used for Q & A about what is written	4	8.0	7	8.5
	Sometimes had a team teaching	12	24.0	11	13.4
	Not used but translation and grammar explanation were given	31	62.0	64	78.0
	Other	1	2.0	3	3.6
9. How did you ask a question in class? (You can choose more than two answers.)	Comparatively free to ask a question	10	20.0	11	13.4
	Not enough time to ask a question	13	26.0	14	17.0
	Questions mean poor preparation for class	0	0.0	1	1.2
	Students said nothing until called on	42	84.0	60	73.2
	Teachers did not ask ideas from students	6	12.0	12	14.6
	Other	2	4.0	3	3.6
	No answer	0	0.0	0	0.0

Table 4
Frequency of Students' Use of English in and out of Junior and Senior High English Classes

Question	Choices	University A (n=50)		University B (n=82)	
		n	%	n	%
10. Did you use English to express your own ideas and opinions in class?	Quite often	1	2.0	3	3.6
	Sometimes	17	34.0	19	23.2
	Seldom	18	36.0	40	48.8
	None at all	13	26.0	14	17.1
11. Did you use English to express your own ideas and opinions out of class?	Quite often	1	2.0	8	9.8
	Sometimes	10	20.0	16	19.5
	Seldom	18	36.0	26	31.7
	None at all	21	42.0	31	37.8

and 40.2% in UB) hesitate because not many students actually do ask questions. Unexpectedly, there are not many students (24.0% in UA and 15.9% in UB) who regard asking a question as good practice to use English in an actual situation, which would offer them a very good chance of practical use. Here again almost no students choose descriptions which hold negative aspects of asking questions. They do not think that questions mean ignorance or lack of preparation, or that they should not ask questions because it would interfere class procedure.

What most makes asking a question difficult seems to be that they do not know how

Table 5
Students' Exposure to English at Present and in High School Days

Question	Choices	University A(n=50)		University B(n=82)	
		n	%	n	%
12. Do you have any chance to use English out of the class now? (You can choose more than two answers.)	Attended conversation school abroad for a short time	0	0.0	5	6.1
	In seminar or club activities	5	10.0	13	15.9
	Studying privately for STEP or TOEFL at home	2	4.0	23	28.0
	Have a chance to talk with friends from abroad	1	2.0	9	10.8
	Write to a pen pal abroad	1	2.0	2	2.4
	Had a trip to abroad	1	2.0	4	4.9
	None at all	37	74.0	46	56.1
	Other	4	8.0	4	4.9
13. Did you have any chance to use English out of the class in high school days? (You can choose more than two answers.)	Attended school abroad as an exchange student	1	2.0	5	6.1
	Lived abroad	0	0.0	1	1.2
	In club activities	1	2.0	4	4.8
	Attended juku or conversation school	14	28.0	21	25.6
	Studied privately for STEP or conversation at home	13	26.0	26	31.7
	Offered a homestay for people from abroad	1	2.0	4	4.8
	Wrote to a pen pal abroad	4	8.0	6	7.3
	None at all	23	46.0	41	50.0
Other	5	10.0	3	3.6	

to express their ideas in English (76.0% in UA and 61.0% in UB). It is not because they do not prepare well for the lesson, as I had hypothesized. This matches the result of Question 5; that they would like to ask how to say phrases in English. About one third of the students (34.0% in UA and 40.0% in UB) would rather ask questions during group work when an instructor walks around the class. Also, they feel it difficult because they are not used to asking a question in class in the first place. This tendency is supported by the results of the following questions about their English classes in high school.

It is very interesting to find out what kind of English classes the students had in high school. They admit they received mostly (62.0% in UA and 78.0% in UB) Japanese translation and grammatical explanation. Most of the students (84.0% in UA and 73.2% in UB) point out that "students do not speak until teachers call on them." Some even choose the description that "teachers did not ask for students' ideas and opinions." These results describe how students are used to taking passive English classes translating English into

Japanese and being explained grammatical points without asking questions voluntarily.

Looking at Table 4, one can find how often the students have used English in real communicative settings in and out of the class, and whether they get any chance to have English exposure outside the class. In high school more than half of the students (62.0% in UA and 65.9% in UB) seldom or did not at all use English for real communication. Thus I have often seen students at a loss as to how to answer an easy question such as, “Why were you late today?”

As for the question about their English exposure out of the class, Table 5 shows that during high school days nearly half of them studied privately for STEP at home or attended English conversation school or juku after school. Exchanging letters with a pen pal is a very good chance for high school students to be exposed to real English, but only ten altogether had. Nearly half of the students from each university (46.0% in UA and 50.0% in UB) had no exposure to English out of the class. When they go to university, the exposure to English out of the class becomes even less. 74.0% in UA and 56.1% in UB have no exposure to English.

Thus among the five hypotheses in 3.2, 1 and 5 were verified. It was found that 2 is not a strong reason for inactive participation in classroom activities. 3 and 4 were disproved.

4. Discussion: Classroom Communicative Competence

An English classroom provides a certain communication context, whether it is a communication-oriented class or a grammar-translation-oriented class. And learners in the class will acquire certain class participation styles suitable for the class, just as every member of a society will develop and “acquire learned ways of talking and communicating that reflect the sociocultural values of their social and/or cultural group” (Johnson, 1995: 63). Because students have attended grammar-translation-oriented English classes for six years in high school without asking questions and without using English as a means of communication, they must have acquired some appropriate ways to participate in that kind of classes. If students seem less active than expected in a communicative-oriented English class, it is because their acquired learning styles and their learned ways of using English do not conform to the patterns of classroom procedure that exist in the new class but have not existed in their prior classes.

Given this sociological perspective, we can now clearly see that students’ acquired class participation styles are causing the problems cited above: that they do not try to use English and express their opinions and that they do not try to initiate a conversation by asking a question. Because a communicative English class is a new society to them, they have to learn new styles of class participation. Here I would like to introduce the term “*classroom communicative competence*”, which is defined as “the competence to participate in classroom activities successfully and to become communicatively competent” in class (Wilkinson, 1982 cited by Johnson, 1995: 7). *Communicative classroom competence* is very close to

what I referred to in this paper as “classroom participation styles.” But Johnson (1995) describes the class participation competence more clearly as “the knowledge and competencies that second language students need in order to participate in, learn from, and acquire a second language in the classroom” (p. 160). Students should know what are appropriate and expected behaviors there in order to participate in events of a new society and to learn from it.

As described so far, any communication-oriented English class in Japan creates a very unique English speaking society which is completely different from the usual high school English classes and our every day life outside the class. Especially this becomes evident when the instructor is Japanese, where English is used as a means of communication even though we all know that everyone in the class is a Japanese native speaker and they feel there is no need to use any foreign language to communicate with one another except for the only genuine purpose of learning it. In this communication society, where participants come to learn a foreign language, it is not appropriate if they only passively attend without saying anything and expect others to understand them. For successful second language acquisition to take place, it is often insisted that interaction is an essential factor (Aoki, 1990: 131; Brown, 1994b: 41; Gass and Varonis, 1994; Pica, 1987). Thus students enrolled in a communicative English class have to learn how to be communicatively competent and participate in the classroom activities which will provide plenty of interactive opportunities using English.

Classroom communicative competence becomes even more crucial if we consider another fact that creates the uniqueness of the English speaking classroom. Returning to the questionnaire, that more than half of the students (74.0% in UA and 56.1% in UB) have no exposure to English outside the class also warrants attention. It means that the students will have a chance to communicate using English only when they attend the class. They are not studying English in class in order to get prepared for actual use of it out of the class, but rather they should be encouraged to study out of the class to use it in the class. Thus to those students, to acquire classroom communicative competence in a communicative English class directly means to learn English itself.

If they are not sure how to put their ideas into English there should be continual assistance and assessment in person. Because it seems they feel more comfortable to speak in small groups, then more group work or pair work to interact with group members and partner is preferable. Each student has to be encouraged to use some formulaic expressions and to expand upon these to initiate topics, state opinions and request information in their own words. Thus they would be given opportunities to have direct and immediate negotiation more attentively for meaningful communication with one another over repeated trials and failures. This is exactly what Brown (1994a: 81) insists for communicative classes.

Some may argue that group work facilitates the use of Japanese language among students. But some studies show positive effects of student-student interactions (Johnson, 1995: 111-128) and group work surely offers more opportunities of face-to-face interactions between the instructor and students because it will give the instructor time to walk around

the class so that she can directly assist more students. Thus students can learn how to cooperate more with the instructor and with other group members. If you look at the following excerpts during group work in my class, you will see how Student A and the instructor (I) work together in [A], and how Student C helps Student B answer the instructor in [B].

- [A] A: It means that we...should....*ryouhou kouryoshite* (in Japanese) ...
I: (looking at C) No no no. In English. We should ... 'consider'?
A: Yes, yes, 'consider' ...
Q: Why don't you use 'not only...but also...'
A: Ah, O.K. It means that we should consider not only contents but also
er..... non...nonverbal signals.
- [B] I: O.K. Can you tell me what is written in this section?
B: ..er..... (looking puzzled)
I: (changing the question, slowly) What is written in this section?
B: er...er.... English is important.
I: Yeah. OK. That's right. But why?
B: Because...er....
C:Because many people use English.
I: Yes, many people use English. But...er...do they speak English in the same way?
C: No. English has many varieties.

[A] shows how the instructor can give verbal scaffolds to lead the student to use his learned words and phrases (for more example of this kind of instruction see Johnson, 1995: 74-79). [B] is an example of a good contribution by students using their own words. If they continue this kind of communication, they will have plenty of interactions to acquire classroom communicative competence. This is what they would never learn during the whole class instruction or individual work.

The examples above show only conversations initiated by the instructor. In the following excerpt the conversation is started by a student during group work.

- [C] D: (raises his hand to show he has a question.)
I: O.K. I'm coming (going to his group). What?
D: er..Yes. The student who is going to ...er... explain today's part ..er ... is absent today. What shall we do?
I: Well, in that case,

This obviously deviates from the IRE pattern and shows a natural communication setting of

an English-speaking society where everything should be said in English. The student needed to know what his group should do because the key person for that day's activity was absent from the class. In an English-speaking class, this kind of interaction of asking for extra instruction would happen, and this is what students should also learn.

It is true that the instructor's questions, her explanation, her paralinguistic cues of voice tone, facial expressions, gestures and stance, and the way she accepts students' questions and answers, all show what kind of classroom communicative competence is expected in class. It is, however, affirmed only and after by attempts at communication by the students. Therefore, instructors are required to recognize the norms which govern the classroom participation and make them explicit to the students along with the purpose of classroom activities.

5. Conclusion

The results of the questionnaire highlight both negative and positive aspects of students' attitudes toward learning English. Their learned ways of attending English classes are quite incompatible with a communicative-oriented English class. However, the results also reveal that students would like to ask questions and would like to learn how to put their ideas into English. We should keep these in mind and try to provide situations where students can maximize their linguistic and interactional competence.

The results led us to a sociological perspective of attending class. It was argued that a communicative-English class provides a unique English speaking society where students are supposed to learn how to communicate in the class, to acquire classroom communicative competence. In order for this to happen, both students and the instructor should know the communicative purpose of the classroom, the importance of interactions in English, and what kind of interactions can be possible among class participants. This is essential because "what resides within teachers and their students (who they are, what they know, and how they act, and interact) shapes how they will communicate with one another in second language classrooms" (Johnson, 1995: 7). Even if there is a big gap between students' class participation styles and our expectation, we ought to have them take a chance and use their English. This is what the language classroom is for, and what the learners come to the class for, if the ultimate goal of language learning is "to communicate with others freely in the target language" (Rivers and Temperley, 1978: 3) and if it is our purpose of teaching English in Japan.

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