学苑　No. 912　(49)～(62)（2016・10）

Teacher-Led Small Talk as a Class Warmer: Promises for TEFL

Arnel Francis Vera Morales

Abstract

In the period of continuous curricular crawl for TEFL in Japanese classrooms, there is a need to bring in worthwhile activities in a **Speaking** class, that focus much on student practice. A qualitative action research had been employed to present participants' responses to a "Teacher-led small talk" activity. The said activity was delivered for one school year to about 160 first-year, non-English major students in a women's university. Open-ended questionnaires and interviews for students and journals from teachers were used to disclose both their views and experiences. Data were extracted and themes were defined from the given questionnaires and interviews. Favorable findings have sprung up, such as: students building courage to speak, as embodied in increased volume of voice, making meaning and strategically expressing their thoughts with the target language. The activity has also demonstrated to be a good venue for peer learning and reviewing language structures learned. In addition, teachers find them as an igniting class warmer and a tolerant way for corrective feedback, and thus, allowing hesitant students to focus more on the ***use*** rather than ***form***.

Introduction

For more than two decades now, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Japan has been subjected to several implemental reorientation as per order of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Much of these "moves" in English language learning has been made to foster Japanese students' fluency and command of the language in hope of answering the growing global needs and demands. One of these changes was to bring in the initiating stage much earlier, from junior high school to Grade 3 of elementary school level. Truly, this shows that MEXT means business. It is seriously adopting ways in making English language a viable part of the curriculum.

Furthermore, Japan's English language curriculum streamed to some sporadic, untenable structural reforms in terms of teaching approach, from Content-Based Instruction (CBI) to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Kojima, 2003). MEXT advocated the change to make English lessons more student-centered and practical (MEXT, 2008). This change, however, created a mix-up between classroom strategies and the true goals of CLT. Many classroom teachers still have wrong notions about teaching English communicatively and that actual classroom practices deviate from the supposed CLT scheme as implemented by MEXT (Otani, 2013). Accordingly, much of these incongruities came from teachers' lack of CLT knowledge that resulted to fewer chances for language practice inside the classroom.

Lee (2014) believes that discrepancies between MEXT's changing ideology and the actual classroom teaching practices would still likely to continue if English proficiency for high school students delimits its scope to just succeeding in university entrance exams.

Grammar, as a language component, has been regarded by many teachers as essential in teaching high school students (Tsukamoto & Tsujioka, 2013). Mostly, English classes are conducted in Japanese and revolve around doing much translation from English to Japanese. English classes deal with intense grammar and vocabulary that is devoid of practice. That is, chances for practice inside the classroom is still far beyond sufficient to support grammar structures and vocabularies learned. Because of this, students carry out learning styles that rely mostly in translating directly to Japanese when listening to or reading English texts (Ano, 2006). On the contrary, teachers who adhere to Grammar-Translation method find them beneficial on both ends depending on how it is understood or used in the classrooms (Saitō, 2012). From among its EFL learning counterparts like China and Korea, percentage of English abilities for Japanese high school students emerged to be low. In 2015, high school English proficiency scores dismayed government's target of having 50 percent of high school graduates scoring at Eiken Grade 2 (*The Japan Times*, 2015). This data present an urge to further improve curriculum and realign teaching goals and approach.

Ano (2006) had pointed out that students who excel in grammar and listening tests, and with larger vocabulary size are those students that never translate to Japanese. Japanese high school students have a good set of vocabulary to start with. Conversationally, they can use 2,000 English words upon reaching senior high school. It is, therefore, reasonable to put these vocabularies in use. Ruegg (2007) emphasized not the number of words students know, but how often they are put in practical use. Apparently, this could mean that many of the words memorized by students are pointless considering that students do not have full understanding of their meaning and function in real life situations.

Japanese Students' Attitude towards Learning and Using English

Many believe that many factors why Japanese fail to succeed in honing an English skill are mostly due to their attitude towards the usage of English itself. Asakura (2013) had proven that a large number of Japanese students still find studying English unappealing. Isoda (2008, as cited by Iwamoto, 2010) noted that students do not willingly talk in classrooms because of the little experience they had in the past. This is a clear manifestation of a lack of confidence. According to Iwamoto (2010), students' anxiety and self-confidence subdued their willingness to speak and use English, and that many English classrooms do not offer opportunities for students to express themselves.

Tsuda (2003) stressed out strong reasons why Japanese students have negative attitudes towards learning, to include: perceiving English as difficult, disliking studying grammar, and believing English as not a necessary language for them. There is a clear indication why

students are hardly motivated in learning English in the classrooms. Asakura (2013) added that some reasons why students disliked English was because they had experienced shameful situations in the classrooms. Despite these notions about having to learn English, Tsuda (2003) added that many Japanese students still thought English should be a required subject in school and must be introduced much earlier in the curriculum. To sum it up, varied factors may have caused some Japanese students' apathy for learning English; most of it were generally impelled from outside influence or experience.

Small Talk as a Class Warmer

At times, a simple classroom greeting can be overlooked as a mere opening by most teachers fixated with the desire of accomplishing the instructional goals within the given time frame. For most EFL teachers, facing day-to-day scenarios can be very stressful with apprehensions of whether students can accomplish learning goals, ruminate on the grammar points presented and perform meaningful evaluative tasks at the end of the lesson. Most greetings die out after a quick "Good morning!" and responses that students make become involuntary, sometimes faint. Little do some of the teachers know that it could be the best phase of the classroom time learning.

Greetings or openings, that are primers in any classroom communicative acts, can be given more importance if used more intently in the desire to open up oneself and express, and get to know a person. First acts are seen as effective reach out to the person. In the classroom, first few minutes of instruction capture best students' attention and may be a "make or break" platform dictating students' instructional flow for reception.

Small talks have been integral in improving business and/or social relationships (Coupland, 2000 as cited by Luk, 2004). It is a way of getting ready and feeling at ease with each other before real proceedings of the meeting can take place. Similarly, in the classroom, both teachers and students can ease the teaching-learning anxiety that may spring up especially on first few meetings. Newman (2010) believes that by lowering students' nervousness through regular small talk practices in the classroom, success in language learning can be achieved. Other than just covering superficial and phatic interaction, small talks could engage students in a more meaningful interaction while establishing good relationship between teachers and students (González, G.A. et al., 2011). The purpose they would bring now wanes toward having more room for practice rather than the "getting-to-know-you-more" value it intends.

A more guided small talk has been thought of to make an effective talk-eliciting guide (see Appendix A). In this activity, the teacher does all the asking with the students trying to expand their talk. For the most part, students do wait for an 'initiator' to let them talk. Though it may seem deviatory from the usual small talk, it could bring out a lot of interesting facts about students' views and way of thinking.

Theoretical Lens

This research dwells on the occurrences of Long's Negotiation for Meaning hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis in a teacher-student talk. Long (1996) posited that interaction promotes L2 language proficiency. Through face-to-face discourse between an L2 user and L2 learner, interactional adjustments occur such as negotiating meaning and modifying output. Pica (1994, as cited by Foster & Ohta, 2005) further exemplified Long's beliefs that interactive classroom activities between teachers and students can best bring out learning as both try to convey information to one another, and reach mutual comprehension. Teachers may help students get through their intended messages through restating, clarifying and confirming. Furthermore, learners succeed in bringing out their messages as they help each other along the course of interaction.

The need for L2 learners to have viable opportunities to reinforce their learning allows them to further understand their actual level of the L2 comprehension. Swain and Lapkin (1995) posited that when learners use the L2 in a given situation they realize that what they want to say and what they can actually utter are different. Moreover, they added, that when L2 learners realize these gaps, they become aware of it and may be able to modify their output and thereby, learning something new in the language.

Methodology

Finding ways of maximizing student-talk time and imploring practical grounds for using the target language learned in the classroom were the primary reasons for putting in a "small talk" activity as part of every class meeting's instructional plan. Specifically, what impression it has on students and teachers was the primary concern of this study. Wanting to "prove" his teaching beliefs by doing a study, where everyone can have an active participation in a classroom practice being studied, brought out the idea to do a qualitative action research. The researcher believes that it is not only enough to realize that such pedagogical implementation works and/or how it works, but also to know what relative views and experiences it brings to students and teachers.

Action research, or practitioner research in education is a type of research that looks into how some pedagogical changes or its implementation could help solve existing lapses or problems in instruction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It involves both participants and researchers in bringing out views and opinions, thereby, verifying the conjectured improvements and revealing possible issues that come along with it.

Thus, this low-key research study that looks through both interpretivist and constructivist lenses came in as a well-fitting choice to bring about a viable phenomenon from both the practitioners' and participants' viewpoint. Learners and teachers as participants have their own subjective experiences from which their interpretations of the issues, as well

as meanings or beliefs, are constructed (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006, Blaikie, 1993, 2000, as cited by Flowers, 2009). This could pave way to anchor both teaching and learning practices and values about L2 learning.

This action research explored on both teachers' and students' experiences in the "Three-A talk" activity where students follow the pattern of Answer, Add and Add more as shown in Appendix A. This speaking practice had been employed for a whole school year to eight classes of non-English major university students in their first year. Students under study were all non-English majors, although they belong to the top one and two sections in the first year. Being in the top groups, actual levels range from low to middle intermediate.

The all-female participants were neither informed nor aware of the conduct of the study. The incorporation of the said activity was made part as a class warmer taking five to ten minutes for each meeting. The tasks were all part of the normal lesson plan and were not presented as being in any way different from other classroom activities. Two teachers (one, being the researcher) had implemented this speaking practice over a 20-week period in which time the students may have, at least, a 100-minute-exposure to the activity. Teachers took note of their observations and kept them in journals. At the end of the second semester, 80 students were picked randomly and given questionnaires and another set of 20 was subjected to a one-on-one interview in English and Japanese (see Appendix B).

The collected data were reported, sorted, translated (into English), then analyzed to bring out relevant themes that are noteworthy of pedagogical implications. Teacher journals were made reference to support claims of students, thus, strengthening them.

Results and Discussions

Students, at the end of the year, had a full-experience of the said speaking activity. Having experienced the change in themselves, their corroboration of their responses to questions in both questionnaires and interviews were at most part, well supported and reliable. Teachers, on the other hand, as both observers and participants, gave another dimension to the issues presented by the student participants. With the collation of both findings, interesting themes sprouted.

Way for Attuning the Learning Climate

There exists a remarkable comfort in starting a language class with a teacher-student talk. "Three-A talk", as it is called in the classroom, introduced a casual start for teachers to establish a warm connection with their students. A teacher participant remarked that:

> *"Having a little chat with students make it easier for me to lead into the lesson… the atmosphere becomes friendly… I don't have problems of getting their attention."*

Students would react differently. Some would find the small talk as a "push" in early

start of classes.

"I find it easy to switch to English-mode when we talk English at the very start of class."

"Jumping to lessons, sometimes, makes me feel unprepared. Listening to a good talk from my classmates relaxes me."

Comfortable environment leads to effective learning. Students believe that a good teacher-student communication lead to a more conducive learning environment (Glomo-Narzoles, 2013). Class openers are, therefore, salient in providing these. When there is trust between a teacher and students, instruction is usually established. Warmers such as a teacher-student talk release much of students' anxieties. It opens up their minds to express non-instructional, lighter topics. Luk (2004) stressed the importance of small talks in classrooms as a form meaningful student-teacher interaction in an anxiety-free context.

A Corrective Feedback Period for Speaking

Whether such classroom activity can promote a healthy feedback opportunity or not is not as significant as the real goal that it seeks. Many believe that doing corrections during speaking activities requires some careful considerations. Tsuda (2003) urged on focusing on students' fluency rather than accuracy when doing oral communicative practice inside the classroom. He pointed out that students lose interest in learning English once they build anxiety or fear over teachers correcting their mistakes.

One teacher participant indulges in 'recast' feedback style and sometimes ignores student's lapses with the intention of just bringing out a good talk.

"I've noticed that my students reacted to my correction positively. But I'm still careful not to do it with anxious speakers. Their uptake is good."

Asari (2012) believes that recast put students in less stressful way of realizing their mistakes and allows them to have more sensible outputs in talking inside the classrooms. Lyster and Ranta (1997, as cited by Miura & Ide, 2014) came up with several classifications for recast and uptake. Recasts are believed to be an implicit way of correcting speaker's errors by repeating student's answer in a grammatically correct way. Uptakes, on the other hand, refer to how students react to the correction. It is usually marked with the students repeating the phrase.

A few of the students asked made some positive reception for feedback.

"When the teacher repeats what I have just said, I realize I should say it in another way."

"I like it when the teacher points out my mistake… I try not to do it next time."

"I want to know my mistakes… Talking does give me a chance to correct myself."

Despite the varied opinions on whether recast is an effective form of CF (Corrective Feedback) or not, students as recipients, generally realize their errors, repair them and if not, acknowledge them with a "Yes" (Miura & Ide, 2014). Having these things to consider, correcting students during such activity offers an advantage.

A Venue for Peer Learning

Most of the student respondents expressed pleasure over hearing their classmates perform small talk. Primarily, they see it as a way of knowing how others do it and compare what they have heard to their actual potentials.

"I sometimes take cues from my classmates…."

"I try to remember some words they use and even write it down."

"It's interesting how my classmates are so eager to speak. It makes me more motivated."

It is evident that students, even if not directly involved with the activity, find it helpful and can learn from others. Some have found the urgency to keep abreast with their peer's level.

"Sometimes, I think I need to be as good speaker as my classmates… I will try next time."

Enhances Thinking and Metacognitive Skills

In performing such activity, teachers allow students to take their time before engaging in a talk. Some can take much time on listening to others that gave way for them to pre-empt the situation. Students did find this helpful.

"You have to think what to say in English that's why I can have a better performance when it's my turn."

"Some classmates are good in impromptu talks and I learn to figure out how I can do it myself."

Many have learned to think fast when responding. Some students expressed their satisfaction to how they have improved in terms of speed and accuracy in talking.

"You have to react quickly… It is very practical."

"After doing this activity, I can react to a question faster than before… I can come up with the English expressions faster."

Other students have tried to think about how they would go about the whole process-making use of their metacognitive skills.

"I focus on it (talk) and think what I am going to talk about."

"I sometimes reflect on what I have just done… I can do much better next time."

A Review for Previous Language Structures Learned

Teachers realize that having small talk or speaking activity could offer a good time for practicing some of the grammar points and language structures learned. For them, a once-a-week meeting is not sufficient to have more drill in oral communication.

"Today, I have implemented some functional assessment with my students on their weak grammar points. I tried to have them talk about how to prepare their favorite food. They made a good use of 'imperatives' and transitional words. Small talk has given it a natural course for practice."

Students also take a good lead for practice of the lessons they had previously learned in class. They admitted to having been reminded of its usage in natural conversation.

"I can remember which phrases and words to use when doing the small talk, even though I have learned them last week."

"When I talk with the teacher, I remember and practice what I have learned last time."

Enhances Strategic Competence for Speaking

At times, students in the midst of thinking for words to use, tend to resort to their natural skills of expressing them. Though at times, the expressions uttered may be far from the intended target grammar and vocabulary, creative thinking does help in pursuing communication. Teachers, as implementers, are the prime witness to such situations.

"When I called Yuki (not her real name) *today, I have noticed she gave me fresh sentences… I have not taught them this but the way I see it, she expressed her point."*

Students do realize the urgency to react fast and in doing so, sometimes forget the language pattern in focus. They instead convey their messages in their own way. As a result, they feel more satisfied with having done something they themselves did not expect.

"You have to think fast and sometimes, I come up with expressions on my own. I feel safe."

"I was able to think of a lot of new sentences. I use words that I am not sure if they're English words."

"I was able to learn expressions I don't know. I was able to discover a way to convey my idea clearly."

Canale and Swain (1980) define strategic competence as the ability of L2 learners to use other reference or seemingly close words or phrases to cover up communication breakdowns. Upon observation, students exhibited uncommon ways of expressing thoughts that can be

permissible in any L2 speaker-L2 learner discourse.

Prompts Students to Increase Volume of Voice

A lot of students have learned to speak in a loud voice when engaging in a teacher-student talk. This practice has been initiated by the teachers to allow students to rise and speak out their answers confidently and audibly. One teacher expressed his views on this:

> *"I let my students to speak out loud. I usually do this hand signal* (placing hands behind the ear) *and they realize that they can't be heard. And so they repeat what they've just said in a louder voice."*

Students, however, value this form of encouragement from teachers. They have adopted the habit and felt that they are doing the real deal of a "small talk".

> *"I have learned to speak in a loud voice. Before I was really very shy but after many "Three-A talks", I think I am not scared of speaking out loud even I commit mistakes."*

> *"I realized that I am speaking in a loud voice in English… It's amazing."*

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on this active enquiry, it is evident that having small talks may strengthen not only students' ability to handle naturally occurring conversations but also they boost their confidence and sharpen their responsive thinking. Classroom atmosphere becomes warmer, as students get accustomed to talking. The 'Three-A talk' activity also allows students to go through with previous language structures learned reinforcing comprehension of their meaning and use. Through encouragement and support, fresh sentences may even be heard from them, that could increase comprehensible output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995) and chances to use strategies (Long, 1996) in dealing with their intended discourse. Added to this line of positive position, the Three-A talk also increases students' voice level through teacher's initiation. They learn from their peers and may even strive to keep up their level in the aspects of oral performance.

Curricular reforms for English language teaching and learning in Japanese classrooms may continue to unfold but it would still take a slow hold before the goals can be truly met. It is good to note that more worthwhile activities are being strewn upon by determined teachers in the classrooms and not worrying about the number of vocabulary their students could muster. The important thing for teachers to think about is how instruction could be more "satisfying" for the learners, that is, creating activities that gear towards students eliciting more of the language in meaning and use.

Grammaring (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2008) must be taught, that is, integrating grammar into classroom practices as a meaningful whole instead of teaching them as a

separate component. Hence, the implicit teaching of rules may bring about communicative challenges for students that are anxiety-free and full of learning. Speaking practice in classrooms should regularly bring out meaningful and content-filled communication to keep students' curiosity and motivation to learn English.

Implications for Further Interactive Activities

Considering the fact that putting in an early speaking activity in an English classroom works to an advantage, teachers may bring out other possible ways for exploring more fitting strategies on student-teacher interaction. Pushing for more parallel activities on improving and maximizing student-talk time would best supplement such endeavor put on this research. Other possible small talk options would be for the students to start engaging talks among themselves, of course, with a guide from the teacher. Hesitant and unpracticed Japanese university students need all the "push" and that having them learned primarily from teachers would be easy to replicate.

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Appendix A
"Three-A Talk"

Activity Title: Three-A Talk: Answer, Add, Add More

Rationale

A teacher-led small talk as class warmers is salient and can be a vital element of classroom learning. Oftentimes, students wander about after the customary greeting of "Good morning"; they bring out their textbooks, writing materials and wait for the teacher's next instruction. So many things can sometimes smother their attention that we, teachers, may find it difficult to set the learning climate right at the very start. In Listening and Speaking classes, I have thought of an activity that targets most of our teaching goals and bring out surprising results.

Making use of the first 15 minutes of the class period and targeting four or five students, this activity encompasses a lot of advantages to include ways for: (1) attuning the learning climate, (2) practicing corrective feedback, (3) peer-learning, (4) increasing student thinking skills in the target language, (5) using strategic competence in expressing ideas, (6) boosting student's confidence in using the target language and (7) reviewing previous language structures learned.

Procedure

Step one: Teacher gives out a set of closed and open-ended questions (These may be either written on the board or flashed on the projector screen from a powerpoint). These questions may be simple small talk questions or questions covering up last meeting's language structure.

What do you do in your free time?
Do you like shopping?
Do you watch TV in your free time?

The teacher sets an example by doing it ALL by himself. "*What do you do in your free time?... I play golf* (showing the 'expand-gesture')... *I and my friends go to Yokohama to play golf* (doing another gesture)... *After playing golf, we go to an "Izakaya" and drink beer.*" Through this example, students may understand what the activity is all about. Teacher allows a minute or two for students to prepare and perhaps, figure out their answers.

Step two: Teacher calls out one student asks her one of these questions (teacher can alter the questions to give a fresh impression like "*How about you?...do you enjoy shopping, too?*"). Student answers (usually a short one). Teacher encourages the student to answer in a full sentence by doing the '***expand-gesture**'.

T: Do you like shopping?

S: Yes…. (Teacher waits for student to answer in a long sentence as he does the 'expand gesture')…. (If student struggles with answering, the teacher gives a follow-up question)

T: How often do you go shopping?

S: Two months…one time.

T: Oh, you mean… Once in two months?

S: Yes… once in two months.

T: Where do you go for shopping?

S: Shibuya… (teacher does the gesture again)… err, I go to Shibuya.

T: What do you do after shopping?

S: I go to Starbucks.

Step three: Teacher encourages the student to REPEAT everything she said by asking again the same question. Teacher guides students by leading her to points she must have missed.

T: OK, can you please say EVERYTHING you have just said one more time?… (teacher utters the same question)…Do you like shopping?

S: Yes, I like shopping… I go shopping once in two months. I go to Shibuya. I go to Starbucks after…

Step four: Teacher gives praise. Repeats the same procedure with another student.

Note: It is also important that teachers do a toned-down repair (correction) either (teacher) other-initiated; (teacher) other-repaired or (teacher) other-initiated; (student) self-repaired depending on the student attitude towards receiving corrections (Schegloff, 2007). Teachers may try to skip the correction and continue with the talk or 'sidestep' (Wong, 2005). If you feel like it may intimidate or give anxiety to a student, skipping the "correcting errors" part is advisable. It should be noted that closed-ended questions are ideal as start-up questions. Teachers may recast answers like "Yes, I do" if a student just answered a "Yes". This can help give students the idea that they need to answer in full sentences. An option would be to have this activity either in the middle or before the end of the class.

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***expand gesture** — With palms facing each other, move them apart making sure the student sees them.

Appendix B

Student Questionnaire:

1. Do you think the “Three-A talk” (3A’s) has helped improve your Speaking skills?
   3A’s はあなたのスピーキング力を高めるのに役立ちますか？

2. What do you like about 3A’s?
   3A’s についてあなたはどう思いますか？

3. Do you learn from others while you are listening?
   他の人が話すのを聞いている間他の人から学びますか？

4. Do you speak better now because of 3A’s?
   3A’s を続け効果があったと思いますか？

   Why or Why not?
   その理由を書いてください。

5. Do you want more of 3A’s in your future classes?
   今後のクラスでもっと 3A’s を続けたいですか？

Interview Guide Questions

1. How do you feel towards 3A’s?
2. Do you think it has helped you? If yes, how?
3. What don’t you like about 3A’s?
4. Do you think it should be continued in class?
5. What do you think your classmates think about 3A’s?

（アルネル・フランシス・ヴェラ・モラレス　　総合教育センター）