Overcoming Challenges in Teaching and Assessing Oral Communication

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For students attending university fresh from high school, the beginning of the academic year is a mixture of anxiety, cautiousness, curiosity, exhilaration, and newfound freedoms. Students track their teachers' every movement and are excited about the next stage of their academic lives. However, teaching oral communication at this critical juncture in the lives of these young people is challenging. To overcome these challenges, the English Department at Dokkyo University runs a course titled Comprehensive English I (hereafter, CEI) that is described in the university's *Guidelines for English courses 2015–2016* as:

This one-term twice-a-week required class for first-year students develops the range of English language skills (with an emphasis on oral communication) by applying practical communication strategies to help build on those linguistic skills learned by students in high school.

Overall Objectives

1. To give students maximum opportunities to communicate
2. To build student confidence in interpersonal communication
3. To develop the basic study skills needed to successfully carry out their four years of English study at this institution (English Language Education Curriculum Development Committee, 2014, p. 5)

The first two objectives will be focused upon in this research note.

This research note identifies the challenges faced in teaching two CEI courses in the spring semester of the academic year 2015–2016 and describes the pragmatic teaching methods, techniques and assessment that were experimented with by the writer, a native-speaker of English, as he attempted to overcome the challenges and achieve the course objectives listed above.

The first section looks at the challenges experienced in CEI when first-year students transition from learning linguistic skills in high school to applying linguistic skills at Dokkyo University. The second section looks at how these challenges were overcome and how the course objectives were achieved through the application of pragmatic teaching methods, techniques, and assessment.

It is possible to get all students in a classroom consistently co-constructing in English with a positive degree of confidence.

Challenges in CEI

There are many challenges in courses that emphasize oral communication, for example, accommodating different backgrounds and experiences in English, selecting content and pedagogy to meet student needs, and maintaining motivation. However, the biggest challenges in the two spring semester CEI courses for the academic year 2015–2016 were as follows:

- Getting each student actively engaged and socially co-constructing conversations in English for most of each lesson. In my experience, if a student is given the opportunity to fade away from the attention of the class and the teacher (e.g., by hiding behind a textbook), the student will habitually begin to disengage from the lessons.

- Developing student confidence to experiment with his/her English tool-set, with other students and the teacher, in a reasonably comfortable environment. This needs to be handled with great care because unpleasant experiences within the classroom can be detrimental to student confidence for the entire course.

- Helping students develop an active linguistic filter by learning from mistakes (where mistakes may be able to be corrected by the students themselves) and errors (where mistakes require teacher intervention and possibly an explanation) (Edge cited in Harmer, 2007). This is necessary for a change in linguistic behavior to occur as well as accepting that it is okay to make mistakes/errors and learn from them. Essentially this is how the human brain is constructed to learn, as will be discussed later in the research note.

The main challenges in CEI of getting all students co-constructing in English, developing student confidence and developing an active linguistic filter for mistakes/errors were overcome with some simple, yet effective, pedagogy.

A description of the pragmatic teaching methods, techniques and assessment applied in the two CEI courses will show how the challenges above were met and how the course objectives were achieved. Some of the teaching methods and techniques were adapted from the Oral Communication courses developed by Professor Rick Moe at Komazawa University, Tokyo.

The case for randomness

In the very first CEI lesson students were assigned a class number, which was their number for the entire course. A deck of cards with the class numbers on them (e.g., 1–25 for 25 students) was shuffled and used for the random pairing of students. Once all the cards were laid out in

two columns, allocating pairs was simply a matter of rotating one column when changing pairs. This ensured that pairs were randomly allocated throughout the course. Random selection provided students the opportunity to experience a variety of input and communication styles from most, if not all, of their classmates during the course. This technique alone partially addressed the first challenge above: *Getting every single student actively engaged and socially co-constructing conversations in English for most of each lesson*; and the first course objective: *To give students maximum opportunities to communicate*. Applying this technique consistently in the lesson format described below demonstrates how this random selection fully addressed the first challenge and objective.

CEI first weekly lessons

Everyday topics and task-based conversations were focused upon throughout the course rather than just free conversation. Each week a new topic and task were given (e.g., Topic: Travel; Task: Describing places and experiences). These lessons focused on practicing talking about the topic and achieving the task with limited mistake/error correction from the teacher. Table 1–1 outlines the lesson format.

In these lessons, students were free to experiment with their English tool-set during the Share and Practice stages outlined in Table 1-1, without interruption for mistake/error correction, which created substantial opportunity to communicate with other students in a comfortable environment; therefore, addressing the first challenge above: *Getting every single student actively engaged and socially co-constructing conversations in English for most of each lesson*; the second challenge above: *Developing student confidence to experiment with his/her English tool-set, with other students ..., in a reasonably comfortable environment*; the first course objective: *To give students maximum opportunities to communicate*; and the second course objective: *To build student confidence in interpersonal communication*. Even though students did not need to worry about accuracy

Table 1–1. CEI first weekly lesson format.

Topic: Travel Task: Describing places and experiences			
Time (approximately)	**Stage**	**Configuration**	**Description**
10 minutes	Warm-up	All students	
10 minutes	Share	Random pairs sitting (all pairs at the same time)	Students shared their ideas about the topic. In the week before this lesson, students were given homework to write down three facts, opinions, questions, and pieces of task-based language about the topic (a total of 12 ideas).
10 minutes	Brainstorm	All students	Students wrote one fact, opinion, question or piece of task-based language on the board (i.e., 24 students = 24 ideas written on the board) and the teacher made any necessary corrections.
30 minutes	Practice	Random pairs standing (all pairs at the same time)	Students conversed about the topic and practiced achieving the task. Pairs were changed often using the class numbers described above.
30 minutes	Assessment: task	Random pairs standing (one pair at a time)	A random pair was selected to stand in front of the class and teacher and demonstrate that they could achieve the task within 1 minute. If the task was achieved, the students received 1 point. The rest of the class watched the pair's conversation. Another random pair was selected and the process was repeated until all students had been assessed.

or interruption during these lessons, they still needed to achieve the task during the Assessment stage to receive 1 point.

CEI second weekly lessons

These lessons focused on accuracy, self-correction, peer correction and teacher correction. The lesson topic and task were the same as in the first weekly lesson above (e.g., Topic: Travel; Task: Describing places and experiences). Table 1–2 outlines the lesson format.

Table 1–2. CEI second weekly lesson format.

Topic: Travel **Task:** Describing places and experiences			
Time (approximately)	**Stage**	**Configuration**	**Description**
10 minutes	Warm-up	All students	
20 minutes	Practice	Random pairs standing (all pairs at the same time)	Students conversed about the topic and practiced self-correction and peer correction. Pairs were changed often using the class numbers described above.
60 minutes	Assessment: accuracy	Random pairs standing (one pair at a time)	A random pair was selected to stand in front of the class and teacher. If the students had a mistake/error-free conversation for 1 minute without any unnatural pauses, mispronunciation or Japanese, they received 1 point. However, if any mistake/error went undetected by the pair, the teacher stopped the conversation, identified the mistake/error, allowed the mistaken student the opportunity to self-correct or else

			the teacher corrected the mistake/error, then the pair sat down and a new pair was assessed. The rest of the class watched each pair's conversation.

In the Assessment stage outlined in Table 1–2, there were two student–student rounds then one student–teacher round. The same conditions applied in all rounds, so each student had three opportunities to try and receive 1 point, as shown in Table 1–3.

Table 1–3. CEI second weekly lesson assessment for accuracy.

Round	Assessment Format	Time Limit	Accuracy
1	Student–Student (random pair)	1 minute	
2	Student–Student (random pair)	1 minute	Any round, mistake/error-free conversation = 1 point
3	Student (all students)–Teacher	1 minute	

One student could only receive 1 point in each accuracy lesson (i.e., if a student was able to have mistake/error-free conversations in rounds 1, 2 and 3, s/he still only received 1 point). In these lessons students became active in filtering mistakes/errors for themselves and their partners with the aid of teacher intervention; therefore, addressing the third challenge above: *Developing an active linguistic filter in students by learning from mistakes/errors.*

More on assessment

The 1-point system for assessment was adopted to reduce stress on the students. It was designed with accumulation of achievement in mind rather than penalizing or grading quality of work. The task assessment

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in the first weekly lesson was a hybrid of a points system and competency-based assessment. The reason behind this is that a score out of 100, which was converted into a letter grade, is still required by the university and assessment during lessons is simpler for the teacher to determine whether a task has been competently achieved or not in the conversation (i.e., 1 point = competent or the task was achieved and 0 points = not yet competent or the task was not achieved). In addition, the 1 point for the accuracy assessment in the second weekly lesson was actually worth 2 points due to the difficulty involved in achieving it, as shown in the course syllabus (e.g., 1 semester has 30 lessons consisting of $15 \times$ CEI first weekly lessons for tasks = 15 points or 15% and $15 \times$ CEI second weekly lessons for accuracy = 15 points $\times 2 = 30$ points or 30%).

Standing and talking in front of other people is a scary thing

For students unfamiliar with standing and talking in front of other people, it can be very intimidating. Although, the assessment above may appear as though it puts students in an intimidating position, it is actually a very effective technique that develops confidence and ensures that students socially co-construct in English throughout each lesson. In my experience, most individual students do not want to appear incapable in front of others and also do not want to let their partner down, so there is a strong motivational factor at play during these tasks. Also, after repeatedly standing in front of others and talking for an extended period of time throughout the course, students became conditioned to co-constructing in English with, and in front of, others, which in turn developed confidence; therefore, addressing the second challenge above: *Developing student confidence to experiment with his/her English tool-set, with other students and the teacher, in a reasonably comfortable environment*; and the second course objective: *To build student confidence in interpersonal communication*. Put simply, there was nowhere for students to hide in the course.

Mistake/error-free conversations for 1 minute

Mistake/error-free conversations for 1 minute and longer were possible. One of the objectives in the course was to develop self-correction (i.e., an active linguistic filter), which, in my opinion, is unlikely to develop independently without intervention. Self-correction was able to be developed when peer correction and teacher correction were applied. Dr. John J. Madina, the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Brain rules: 12 principles for surviving and thriving at work, home, and school*, is a developmental molecular biologist who is fascinated with how the mind reacts to and organizes information. He believes, "Babies are the model of how we learn—not by passive reaction to the environment but by active testing through observation, hypothesis, experiment, and conclusion" (Madina, 2009, p. 280). I strongly agree with Madina's beliefs, which also underpin the design of the CEI course as set out below:

Observation: watching and listening to student–student pairs and student–teacher pairs co-construct conversations in English.
Hypothesis: identifying beliefs in the English tool-set learned before university.
Experiment: testing the English tool-set beliefs learned before university during the Share, Practice and Assessment stages of the lessons.
Conclusion: identifying mistakes/errors and changing behavior.

Furthermore, Vyvyan Evans, a Professor of Linguistics at Bangor University in Wales, acknowledges that language acquisition requires "painstaking trial and error," (Evans, 2014) which is what was required to address the third challenge above: *Developing an active linguistic filter in students by learning from mistakes/errors.*

Future direction

The teaching methods, techniques and assessment described in this research note are still in the experimental stage and have by no means been proven to be effective at Dokkyo University. Data needs to be collected from the two CEI courses in the form of student results and questionnaires to gain an insight into the designed pedagogy's effectiveness. From lesson observations, the general reception from the students was positive. All students were actively co-constructing in English throughout both lessons each week, and students seemed satisfied with providing personal input for each lesson. It was also noticeable that the confidence level of students in both courses increased compared with that at the beginning of the courses. Students were also noticeably becoming more aware of their own mistakes/errors and of those of their partners. These are all positive signs.

By using simple methods, techniques and assessment, underpinned by a model of how we learn, it was possible to overcome the challenges faced in CEI and achieve the course objectives.

The challenges in CEI of getting all students co-constructing in English, developing confidence and developing an active linguistic filter could be overcome while also achieving the course objectives of maximizing student talk-time and developing confidence in interpersonal communication. The twice-weekly CEI lessons were designed to overcome teaching challenges and achieve the course objectives by using a lesson format that allowed for student experimentation that was observed by all classroom participants and was assessed by the teacher. Recognizing how we learn is a social concept that remains applicable to adult English education.

All students can co-construct in English with other students and the teacher, making the learning process a positive experience.

Perhaps concentrating more on designing courses based on *how* we learn rather than *what* we learn should be at the forefront of oral com-

munication. In my opinion, true oral communication (i.e., real-time conversation without a textbook) is not something you can grade like a written examination because it is often dynamic, complex and unpredictable. Therefore, we need to look at ways of how to deal with real conversations in the classroom. I hope the CEI course presented in this research note provides stimulation for further ideas and discussion at Dokkyo University.

References

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