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Teaching Oral Communication in the CALL Classroom

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Introduction

In this paper I will highlight some of my teaching experiences using Microsoft PowerPoint and the Internet to conduct three oral communication classes (440: Freshman English) in the Cybermedia Center. I will essentially follow a weekly diary format, highlighting the first four weeks of this ongoing class and detailing some specific exercises and assignments I have used during the class, commenting on both the successes and failures I have encountered. I hope this report will offer other teachers who may be planning similar classes a starting point from which to develop their own syllabuses. Although space is limited here, I have included some anecdotes and personal observations, and I also touch on some technical issues concerning the use of the equipment in the Cybermedia Center. Since this is the first time that I have taught these courses, the reader should be aware that in many cases I will be detailing my own mistakes and making suggestions as to how I might correct them when I teach the classes again next semester. In that sense, this is very much a learning experience for me. For teachers who are interested in using the Cybermedia Center in a somewhat non-traditional way that does not take advantage of skill-specific CALL software, I hope my experiences prove helpful to some degree.

Week 1

I consider the first meeting the most critical class period of the semester. This is my chance to lay a strong foundation upon which I will build for the remainder of the class sessions. During the first class, I explain to the students that although we are in a room full of computers, the class we are embarking on is not a computer course as such. My reasoning here is that the computer is a tool that will *help* us to communicate with each other, but it will *not* be the focus of our efforts. I believe that the importance of convincing the students of this point at the outset of the class cannot be overstated. To emphasize this, we did not use the computer at all during the first meeting of the class. I placed the students into the groups that I use to facilitate roll call and the students then introduced themselves to each other and learned the names and some basic introductory information about the other members of their group.

My next task was to explain to the students exactly *why* we were holding an oral communication class in a computer room. I believe that it is crucial to have the students “on board” with the idea that by using the computer and the Internet together, we will gain certain advantages that will help them overcome the infamous reticence that has become (sometimes unfairly) the trademark of Japanese students. Because most of the students have been studying English for approximately six years, I explained that in this class, my task was not to teach them about English, but to help them to learn how to access and use the English they already know. I also went into some detail about PowerPoint software and how it will facilitate the conversations we will be having in class. (Space does not permit inclusion of details about this lecture, but on this or any other issues herein I am happy to answer questions individually - please email me.) My rationale for using PowerPoint in conjunction with the Internet is that I believe these resources can help students overcome an inherent weakness they encounter when they attempt to hold second language conversations. In Japanese, the students can easily recount to each other the basic notions of ideas, articles, and experiences. In English, however, the cognitive burden of maintaining a non-formulaic connected discourse (even about a relatively familiar topic), while at the same time attempting to conduct the conversation in a second language, is simply too much. PowerPoint

compensates for these limitations by providing something of a crutch to support their communicative efforts, while the Internet, like a current and ever-changing textbook, provides an interesting and dynamic source to supply the content of their conversations.

The layout of the computer classroom itself is antithetical to an oral communication class – students must be guided to resist the strong magnetic pull exerted by the computer monitors. To this end, I thought that it was critical to establish, early on, an environment in which the students felt relaxed and comfortable focusing on each other in a way that opposed power of the computer to draw their attention away from their classmates. To try and overcome this inherent problem, I asked the students to complete a simple exercises that got them used to the idea that they would, for much of the class time, be facing and interacting with a person, and not a computer. I had the students swivel their chairs so that they were directly facing the person next to them. I then offered a simple topic to promote a short and undemanding conversation. They repeated this a few times with different partners until I felt they had overcome somewhat their resistance to leave the “security” of the computer. I explained that much more than facing the computer and turning their heads to their partners, face to face is a natural position for a good conversation. I tried to illustrate this point by conducting a “bad” conversation between an unresponsive computer and myself. The obvious conclusion being that a computer will never take part in a good conversation, no matter what you do. Again, all of this is meant to pry the students’ attention away from the computer. I found that throughout the course, this has been one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome. The computer monitor, like its cousin the television screen, can be a powerful tool, but it can also be an extremely difficult obstruction for teachers to overcome, so again, I believe it should be dealt with early and explicitly.

Week 2

At the beginning of this class period, I showed the students a PowerPoint presentation that I had prepared, which I called, *How Easy is PowerPoint?* The upshot of the presentation was that it had taken only a few minutes, from start to finish, to make. I wanted the students to understand that creating a presentation did not demand a long term commitment. I used a laptop connected to a wall projector, but I later stopped using this configuration as I found it more effective to present material using the middle screen that is located between each pair of computers. Using an English version of PowerPoint, I walked them through the creation of a basic slideshow. While doing this, I focused on the vocabulary necessary for us to communicate about the software and the computer in general. Words like *click*, *drag and drop*, and *cursor* were explained when necessary. Learning PowerPoint itself became a communicative English lesson. Since only the Japanese version of PowerPoint is available on the students’ computers, from this point on, all students were expected to use appropriate English vocabulary to phrase questions.

So that the students would have the opportunity to practice oral communication during this class period, I directed them to an exercise using the web site of the *New York Times Learning Network*. Each pair of students worked together, in English, to complete a five question handout about an on-line article from the *New York Times*. When the handouts had been completed, each student paired up with a different partner from another group that had completed the handout for a different article. The students then had conversations with each other, focusing on the articles they had explored. This type of exercise, partners working together to complete a task, then changing to converse using the information they had learned, forms the foundation of all the exercises in this class.

Week 3

For their first PowerPoint-based project, I asked the students to develop a presentation about themselves. I chose an autobiographical presentation because I thought that intimate knowledge of the topic (themselves) would allow them to focus on learning the basics of PowerPoint. Of course, I also thought that they would have access to plenty of content about which they would be very confident. When it came time to make their

presentations, I was sure that the students would be happy to talk about themselves. In all of the above assumptions I was drastically wrong. After setting them to the task, I walked around the room to check on their progress. At first I was a little surprised to see that some of them were getting off to a slow start. As I continued around, I was soon struck by the fact that none of them were making any progress beyond writing their names on the first slide! I asked some of the students what the problem was, but I did not get any answer that could help me account for the lack of progress. After about 15 minutes, I realized that I had a failing lesson plan. I did not know the precise nature of the problem, but plainly the task I had set the students to was not having the desired results.

When I realized that the students were unable or reluctant for some reason to complete the presentation, I immediately stopped them and asked them to delete the files they had been working on. My new idea, which I explained to them as it came to me, was to have them develop a presentation about their partners, instead of about themselves. In hindsight, this task suited the communicative premise of this class much better than the original exercise. In my enthusiasm to ensure that the students were challenged by the new software, and specifically not by the content of the presentation, I had unknowingly compromised my communicative goals for the class. The reasons for the failure of the autobiographical assignment are not relevant here, but the breakdown of the exercise caused me to reflect on it in a way that helped me discover that it was an ill-conceived assignment from the outset.

To provide an example of the new assignment, I created a sample presentation about one of my teaching assistants. I had the students watch on the center screen in real time as I put together a PowerPoint presentation modeled on the type of conversation I had in mind for the students. I asked the TA some basic questions about, for example, his hobbies, which happened to be rugby and photography. Along with some other basic information, I incorporated his responses into PowerPoint slides. I prepared one slide each for rugby and photography, and asked a series of questions about each hobby. As he answered, I typed a brief summary of the relevant information next to a bullet in the slide. After completing this basic information, I then made the presentation about the TA to the class, focusing on how I “knew” more information than was actually written on each slide. In addition to providing a template for the students to follow, this served to drive home the theme, which I have repeated countless times in class, that *the computer does not tell us what to say, it reminds us to say what we already know*.

With the new assignment in hand, the classroom suddenly sparked to life. Students unhesitatingly began to ask their partners a myriad of questions and started putting together coherent presentations. The difference in the energy level of the classroom was immediate and palpable. The students were communicating and engaged, and the teaching assistants and I were astonished with the changes brought on by a slight adjustment in the lesson plan. In the space of a few minutes, the class had gone from a disaster to a resounding success.

Week 4

The presentation that the students created about their partners during week 3 was the focus of this week’s conversation. The assignment was to present the PowerPoint slideshow about the partner *to* the partner. This exercise worked extremely well. The students conversed enthusiastically and the partners seemed very pleased to hear about themselves from a different perspective. I informed the students before they started that this was to be unlike a formal presentation in that interruptions, questions, and comments to the speaker during the presentation were to be encouraged, in other words, they were to treat this exercise as a normal, natural conversation, *not* a formal presentation. This “supported” conversation was guided and prompted by the information available on the computer screen, which triggered knowledge that was easily accessible to the students. The cognitive load on the students was thus reduced, which, combined with the relaxed environment, reduced stress, leading to an enjoyable and free flowing conversational experience for the students. The students were able to use the slideshow to remind them of what they had learned about their partners the week before, while the structure of the presentation guided them, but did not provide word for word dialogue. I believe that

this initial project fulfilled its goals of showing the students that they could develop the content of a presentation and employ the software to support a natural, unscripted conversation.

Since the first major project, which I gave to the students in week 5, will make use of the Internet, I devised an exercise to ascertain if the students were able to find basic information on the Internet and navigate the web in English. I held a casual competition to see which student was the fastest at finding some relatively obscure pieces of information using the Internet. For example, I asked them to locate the name and precise area of the smallest state in the United States, the exact height of the highest mountain in the world, today's yen/dollar exchange rate, and the name and height of the tallest American president ever assassinated. The students enjoyed this exercise, and unlike PowerPoint, which most students were unfamiliar with, I found their general ability with the Internet sufficient to proceed without much additional instruction. I did, however, insist that the students work only with English web sites, for example *yahoo.com* was permissible, while *yahoo.co.jp* was not. I also believe that it is vital to explain to the students that because they are investing their own time in an effort to improve their English skills, random web surfing in Japanese during class is unproductive and thus prohibited.

Some helpful technological features available to teachers at the Cybermedia Center are relevant here. It is possible to use the middle screen to model a student's work to the other students. An example of this feature in action was how, after its conclusion, all of the students were able to follow the route that the "winners" of the trivia contest had followed in conducting their searches. Another particularly useful feature is the ability to monitor individual computers. If a student is not on task or is experiencing some difficulties which they may not feel comfortable expressing, I can find them by monitoring their computer and then gently guiding them back on course.

Conclusion

This brief report details only the early stages of an ongoing and developing class, but as I mentioned above, I hope my experiences may provide some help and insight to others who may be designing their own classes. I believe that the Cybermedia Center offers a valuable forum to test and refine new approaches to English education. Additionally, I am convinced now more than ever that oral communication classes, freed from the often dull and uninspiring influence of many current textbooks, can be conducted in a way that drastically improves the communicative abilities of Osaka University students. Further discussion of any of the issues here is welcomed and I would also be happy to discuss the classes subsequent to those discussed here.

CALL 教室でのオーラル・コミュニケーション教育（要旨）

ティモシー・グールド（言語文化部英語教育講座）

はじめに

この論考では、マイクロソフト・パワーポイントとインターネットを利用した、1 回生向けのオーラル・コミュニケーション授業（英語 440）の実践例を紹介する。最初の 4 週間までの具体的な授業中の演習や課題を週ごとの日記風に記述しながら、授業の成功した点、うまく行かなかった点、授業中のエピソードや CALL 機材に関する技術的な点などについて述べる。今後このような授業を実施することを考えていらっしゃる先生方の参考になれば幸いである。

第 1 週目の授業

学期全体の授業を進める基盤作りという意味から、第 1 回目の授業は特に重要である。受講生に対して、この授業の主眼はコンピュータそのものではなく、コンピュータをコミュニケーションの道具として用いることである旨を強調して説明した。その上で、CALL 教室でオーラル・コミュニケーション授業を行う意義を述べ、パワーポイントと、その会話授業における有効性を解説した。パワーポイントはコミュニケーションの支えとなり、第 2 言語での会話に伴う認知上の負担を軽減する。インターネットも、絶えず変わり続ける最新のテキストとして会話の材料を提供してくれる。また、会話授業には適さない教室レイアウトのためもあり、CALL では受講生がコンピュータのみに集中してしまい、お互いのコミュニケーションが希薄になる恐れがあるが、これを防ぐため簡単な会話練習を導入し、対面して互いに話し合う会話の意識を醸成するよう努めた。

第 2 週目の授業

授業の始めに、「パワーポイントはどうに簡単？」と題したプレゼンテーションを学生に見せ、プレゼンテーション作成は長期間要するものではなく、わずか数分という短時間でもできることを示した。英語版のパワーポイント上で基本的なスライドショーの作成プロセスを見せ、パワーポイントやコンピュータを扱い、話題にする際に必要な基礎的な英語の語彙を教えた。また、実際に英語で会話をする機会を与えるため、インターネットの「ニューヨーク・タイムズ学習ネットワーク」からの記事を読み、質問用ハンドアウトを作り、それに基づいて会話をするペアワーク練習も実施した。

第 3 週目の授業

自分自身についてのプレゼンテーションを作成するという初めてのパワーポイント課題を与えた。良く知っている事柄について作業することで、パワーポイントの基本的操作を学ぶことに集中できると考えたからである。しかし、これはうまく行かなかった。理由は定かではないが、学生はほとんど作業を進めることができない。そこで急遽課題を変え、自分とペアを組んでいるパートナーについてのプレゼンテーションを作ることにした。後から気がついたことだが、こちらのほうがコミュニケーションという授業の目標により相応しい課題設定だった。例を示すため、このクラスの TA についてのプレゼンテーションを、実際に私が TA の一人に質問をしながら作成し、学生にはその一部始終をセンター画面で見てもらった。完成後プレゼンテーションも行った。この新しい課題のもとで、クラスは一気に活気づき、学生はパートナーに多数の質問をし、首尾一貫したプレゼンテーションを作り始めたのだ。ちょっとした授業方法の変更がもたらした効果の違いにあらためて驚かされた。

第4週目の授業

第3週目で作成したパートナーについてのプレゼンテーションを、実際にパートナーに向かって発表し、自由に質問やコメントを交換することで会話練習をさせた。コンピュータ画面からの情報に支えられ外国語を扱う認知上の負担が軽減されたこと、そしてリラックスした雰囲気によって、学生は自由闊達な会話を楽しむことができた。プレゼンテーションを作成し、それを支えとして使い自然な自由英会話が行えることを学生に示したことで、この第一段階のプロジェクトの目的は達成されたとと言えるだろう。また、この週の授業では、次の第5週目に行う本格的なパワーポイント課題の準備として、インターネットからの情報収集練習をさせた。英語のウェブサイトを使って、アメリカの最も小さな州はどれか？とか、世界最高峰の正確な高さは？などの情報を素早く集める練習を気楽な競争形式で行った。この際、サイバーメディアセンターの機器の中でも、センター画面は学生にサーチの見本を見せるのに有効であり、各端末をモニターする機能は個々の学生を指導する上で役にたった。

むすび

この報告は現在進行中かつ開発中の授業の初期段階を示したものであるが、他の先生方の参考になれば幸いである。サイバーメディアセンターには、英語教育の新しい方法を試し改善する貴重な議論の場を提供していただいた。付け加えれば、今こそオーラル・コミュニケーションのクラスを、阪大生のコミュニケーション能力を大幅に向上させる方法で教えることができる状況であると思う。この論考で展開した論点、そしてここでは紹介できなかった授業の後半部分についても皆さんとこれからさらに議論して行きたいと思う。