Developing the Speaking Skill in Large Classes through Writing

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In this international age, the ability to speak English is more important than ever. Driven by the necessity of teaching speaking in large classes, I examined the mechanism of speaking and compared the advantages and disadvantages of both speaking and writing in learning languages, noticing the possibility of using writing as a substitute activity for speaking.

This paper introduces the idea of using writing to assist in the teaching of speaking and includes an outline of the lesson curriculum of an experimental study and its results, which lead us to believe that writing can be used to help students improve their speaking ability.

1. Introduction

To teach students to speak English—to speak it in a real sense, not just saying a simple salutation such as "Hi" or "Hello"—is not an easy task to do. Even in team teaching, the speaking time for each student is quite limited because of the large class size. In addition, some students cannot react quickly enough to meet an AET’s or an JTE’s expectation and fail to utter even a single word. This can become a common source of irritation for the teacher. Current methods of teaching speaking have been unable to provide positive results thus far.

There are several reasons for this—both inner and outer reasons. The primary inner reasons deal with the students' lack of (1) motivation or interest, (2) confidence in themselves or in the language, (3) lack of subject matter. The main outer reasons are (1) a large class size, and (2) teachers’ lack of confidence or ability in speaking. If these reasons are overcome, the speaking ability of the students would surely improve.

2. Writing What the Speaker Wishes To Speak

In expressing what one wishes to convey, one can either use written or spoken language. These sometimes overlap each other. The form used depends upon the person's type of
language consciousness (see Figure 1). In the normal case, spoken language comes out through the vocal cords starting from the consciousness for speaking, while written language comes out through the hands and fingers starting from his consciousness for writing. We call the former speaking activity and the latter writing activity.

Then what kind of activity will it be, if one starts from consciousness for speaking but uses one’s hands and fingers instead of vocal cords, and produces spoken form of language on a sheet of paper? Could it not also be categorized under speech mechanism and used as a pseudospeaking activity in teaching speaking?

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the mechanism of speaking and writing

There are notable differences in how speaking and writing activities are used in the traditional classroom.

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Table 1. Comparison of speaking and writing activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Advantage of writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time needed for a certain utterance</td>
<td>short</td>
<td>long</td>
<td>① Students are less self-conscious and less frustrated, for they do not need to react in a short time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students engaged in at the same time</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>② Every student can engage in the writing activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see the advantages of writing in Table 1 by comparing the two types of activities. The use of writing in speaking activity would enable students to utilize these advantages. Advantage ① would remove students' anxiety and help them to develop more confidence in the language. Advantage ② would remove the waste of each student's time from waiting for his turn to speak, and it makes writing particularly useful in a large class.

Therefore it can be suggested that if we write quickly what we want to say as if we were going to speak, it can be a pseudospeaking activity and effectively used in developing the speaking skill. "Quickly" means (1) not to be too slow for a student to fall into the consciousness that he is writing for composition, and (2) not to be too quick for a student to feel stress similar to that normally felt in speaking.

3. Experiment

3.1 Aim and Procedure

The purpose of this experiment was to test whether quick writing of our spoken form of the language can be effectively used as a pseudospeaking activity in the development of the speaking skill.

This was tested by devising a special learning method—learning to speak English by imagining certain situations. For each situation, students were given a detailed description so that they could individually imagine what is taking place and what needs to be said to handle the situation. Then they were asked to write down what they wanted to say.

What the students wrote was used for further studies of speaking in various ways, such as the students' presentation of their written work, pair work, improvised-play performances, and dialogue practice. These further studies concentrating on communication in English helped the students to shift their consciousness from writing to speaking and promote their linguistic activity for speaking.

3.2 Subjects

The participants in the study were 134 first-year students from three classes in regular course
at Takamatsu First High School, in Takamatsu, Kagawa. All had three years of previous English experience in junior high school. The experiment was conducted in spring, 1991, and its course consisted of ten 50-minute lessons.

3.3 Situations

A previous questionnaire showed the students to be most interested in traveling to English speaking countries; therefore the situations composed for this study were derived from hypothetical travel scenarios. For reference, their second and the third choices were living in English speaking countries and watching English movies in English.

For this experiment, ten situations were chosen as follows.

1. Checking-in at a hotel, and wishing to take a non-smoking room
2. Asking to change your hotel room
3. Wishing to go into the room and get your key and passport because you accidentally locked yourself out of your room
4. Asking the front desk about convenient dining
5. Asking the waiter to give you more time to decide your order
6. Mailing letters or postcards to Japan from the post office
7. Self-introduction
8. Having pictures taken and taking pictures with someone
9. Returning merchandise to a shop
10. Explaining your toothache to a dentist, and telling him not to pull the tooth

(NOTE: Asterisks mark those used for making dialogues, unmarked for monologues.)

The following is the example of the explanatory passage for the Situation 3 and its model answer.

Example 1  (Teacher’s Manual)

Situation: You’re on a school trip to the United States and staying at a hotel in San Francisco. It was only last night that you arrived in America, a country you had always hoped to visit. You spent the night at the hotel and just finished breakfast. You are going on a tour to Disneyland. Your bus is waiting in front of the hotel. Your classmates have already gone to the bus. The bus will leave in ten minutes.

You leave your room in a hurry but remember you’ve left your passport. You try to go back into the room but find the door locked. You realize that your key is inside the room. To make matters worse, you need to use the rest room.

What would you say to the clerk at the front desk of the hotel?

(NOTE: The situational description was given to the students in Japanese.)

Model Answer:

Excuse me. I’ve locked myself out and I need to get into my room to get my
passport. My room number is 213. (I'm in a hurry, because my bus is leaving for Disneyland in ten minutes.) Could you open the door for me, please? And one more thing. Could you tell me where the nearest rest room is?

3.4 Lesson Plan

Part 1: Each student is given a blank sheet of paper to write a monologue or a dialogue.

1. The teacher gives details of the situation (see Example 1). The students write how they would respond in that situation. Four to seven minutes is given for a monologue, and twice as much for a dialogue. (The time required for writing depends upon the relative difficulty of the situation, the level of the students' ability, and the progress of their work.)
   a) The students should feel free to respond in their own creative manner.
   b) They should also put stress on communication rather than the form or the grammar of the language, and unknown words should be expressed in other words that they know.

2. The students give oral presentations of what they have written to the class.

3. The teacher orally presents a model answer.

4. Dialogue practice
   The students may use what they have written only for reference.
   i) teacher vs. student
      The teacher plays the native speaker's role, sometimes cutting in on the student.
   ii) student pair work (playing roles)
   iii) student pair improvisation in front of the class

Part 2: The students are given a handout, such as Example 2 as feedback materials of what they have written or spoken.

Example 2  (Student Handouts)

Dialogue 3  I left my key in my room
Traveler : Excuse me. I have a problem. (I've locked myself out.)
           I left my key and passport in my room.
Clerk : What is your room number?
Traveler : My room number is 213.
Clerk : All right. I'll have someone take care of it right away.
Traveler : Thank you. Well, I'd like to use the rest room first.
           Could you tell me where the nearest rest room is?
Clerk : Sure. It's at the end of this hall, on the left side.

Talk-and-Listen Cards
Traveler: What is your room number?
Clerk: All right. I'll have someone take care of it right away.
Traveler: Clerk: Sure. It's at the end of this hall, on the left side.

Traveler: Excuse me. I have a problem. (I've locked myself out.)
Clerk: I left my key and passport in my room.
Traveler: My room number is 213.
Clerk: Traveler: Thank you. Well, I'd like to use the rest room first.
Could you tell me where the nearest rest room is?

1. Study using a dialogue (see Example 2)
   i) teacher's explanation of the dialogue
   ii) teacher's model reading
   iii) student repetition practice after teacher's reading
2. Study using talk-and-listen cards (see cards in Example 2)
   i) student pair work (playing roles)
      One has a card A, and the other has a card B. Each student's line is written on
      their card. Whenever they speak or listen, they must make eye contact with
      each other.
   ii) student presentation of their pair work to the class

4. Results

4.1 Through the Study

At the first stage of this experimental study, some students were confused but became more
comfortable as the study progressed.

The students responded in a variety of ways to the sample situations. Given the situation in
Example 1, for instance, some students asked the clerk to open the door to their rooms, some
asked him to let them use the master key, some asked him to get their keys and passports while
they were in the rest room, some chatted with him before solving their problem, some tried to
explain the situation by drawing pictures, and so forth. Every student wrote freely in the way they would speak in each given situation.

Throughout the lessons, the students were extremely active, engaged in various activities of learning speaking. Notably enough, some students were voluntarily correcting what they had written while listening to their friends' oral presentations or teacher's explanation about important words or phrases, or after they saw an example dialogue for each situation.

4.2 Through the Questionnaire

After completing the course, the students were given a questionnaire. Responses and analyses are presented in the following sections.

4.2.1 Enjoyment and Interest

Table 2 and Table 3 show that the students' enjoyment of learning English and interest in English increased through the experimental lessons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Enjoyment of learning English through this study</th>
<th>Table 3. Change in interest in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>response</td>
<td>number (percentage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very enjoyable</td>
<td>47 (35.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoyable</td>
<td>68 (50.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>9 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unenjoyable</td>
<td>9 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very unenjoyable</td>
<td>1 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Writing

As shown in Table 4, a larger number of the students responded that they could have written better English if they had had more time. This indicates that by varying the time allowed them to write what they want to say, we can draw out their latent ability to speak (by lengthening the time) as well as give them impetus to write more quickly (by shortening the time).

Table 5 shows that some ten percent of the students think in English when they write. The percentage is small but worthy of note, considering the case of customary composition of Japanese into English where no thinking in English will take place. Thinking in English can be the first but advanced step to speaking English.
Table 4. Ability to write better English if given more time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>response</th>
<th>number (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>much better</td>
<td>6 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly better</td>
<td>80 (59.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no change</td>
<td>46 (34.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly worse</td>
<td>1 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>much worse</td>
<td>1 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Language of the thought process when writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>response</th>
<th>number (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mostly in Japanese</td>
<td>58 (43.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more in Japanese</td>
<td>47 (35.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>even</td>
<td>16 (11.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more in English</td>
<td>7 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mostly in English</td>
<td>6 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.3 Speaking

Student interest in speaking English increased as shown in Table 6. Many of them thought that their speaking ability improved both through writing quickly what they wanted to say and through the study as indicated in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 6. Interest in speaking English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>response</th>
<th>number (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>considerably increased</td>
<td>20 (14.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly increased</td>
<td>51 (38.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no change</td>
<td>58 (43.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly decreased</td>
<td>3 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>considerably decreased</td>
<td>2 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Improvement of speaking ability through writing quickly what you want to say

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>response</th>
<th>number (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>considerably improved</td>
<td>5 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly improved</td>
<td>62 (46.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no change</td>
<td>65 (48.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly decreased</td>
<td>2 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>considerably decreased</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Improvement of speaking ability through the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>response</th>
<th>number (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>considerably improved</td>
<td>2 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly improved</td>
<td>63 (47.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no change</td>
<td>67 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly decreased</td>
<td>2 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>considerably decreased</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For reference, Figure 2 gives us the reasons that the students found speaking English difficult. The two top reasons were lack of confidence in English and the necessity of a quick reaction.

Confidence can be fostered through study and experience. It is clear from the results of this study that this teaching method could also foster confidence. Writing what one wants to say lessens the necessity of the quick reaction normally required in speaking and can be a good training method to prepare students for the demands of actual conversation.

**Figure 2.** Reasons for difficulty in speaking English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Priority of Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>140</td>
<td>1. fear toward foreigners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130</td>
<td>2. necessity of quick reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120</td>
<td>3. shyness toward foreigners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110</td>
<td>4. shyness of speaking in public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>5. lack of confidence in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>6. the other reasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusion

In this experimental study, the students were given various situations from the subject of their most common interest; and they wrote freely using their own imaginations without being molded into certain formulas or being too sensitive about the grammar, words, or phrases of the language. Then they were engaged in various speaking activities. They greatly enjoyed the study and surprised me with their unique ideas and fertile imaginations.

The study demonstrated that writing what one wishes to speak quickly as if one were going to speak can be a pseudospeaking activity and effectively used in the development of the speaking skill. This method is particularly useful in large classes. The use of writing in place of
speaking and using appropriate dialogues can supplement teachers' ability and confidence in the classroom.

It can be concluded that appropriate use of writing will improve upon the traditional methods of teaching students to speak English in a large class and enhance the students' speaking skill.

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