The Effective Use of Interpretative Oral Reading in English Conversation Classes

Harumi Kurotani
(Kanagawa University)

Professor Edwin Reishchaeur once described English education in Japan as one of the very few things Japan has failed to modernize. What he was referring to mostly is the deplorable lack of attention to oral English skills. Very few Japanese students, even after years in English classes, can carry on even a minimal conversation in the language. Before international telephones and universal travel, such an inability might have been acceptable, but today it's indefensible.

Attempts are being made, however, to rectify the situation. Classes are still too large and primitive university entrance examinations still force junior and senior high school teachers to concentrate on details of grammar, but there's an increasing awareness of the importance of oral skills and most colleges now have "English Conversation Classes."

Most teachers of such courses, however, despite contriving any number of ingenious opportunities for their students to speak, generally achieve nothing more than an embarrassed silence. One reason for this may be that Japanese students simply don't know how to speak in English, because they haven't done it enough. They've read it, analyzed it, translated it, and copied it, but for the most part very few of them have ever used their mouths to say more than a few words in the language. But a more important reason may be that the "opportunities" students are being given are not the right ones. The following paper describes one approach that does seem to work—interpretative oral reading.

Interpretative oral reading is the dramatic reading aloud of specially selected materials. I would like to propose that such practice can serve as an excellent means of preparing students for real, free-flowing conversation in English.
I first discovered the power of interpretative oral reading while serving as the advisor to an English speaking club, whose members wanted to participate in a speech contest. I had them write out their speeches in English, which I then corrected. Then I had them read their speeches over and over again—hundreds of times—working step by step on pronunciation, intonation, articulation, stress, pausing, volume, vocal variety, speed, breathing, and so forth.

They worked on perfecting these speeches for almost three months, and achieved, at least in this one small corner of the language, near-native fluency. Moreover, even months after the speech contest, they were able to converse easily on the subject about which they had spoken.

One girl, for example, had spoken about her experience getting a driver's license. When I talked to her months later, she had no trouble answering questions about how much money she had spent getting her license, how many hours it had taken her, the scariest experience she had had, what the most difficult thing to learn was, what kind of car she had, why she wanted to learn to drive, and so on and so forth. And the same thing was true for all of the other girls who had participated in the speech contest. The process had helped them gain firm control of one area of the language and this had given them a well-deserved confidence.

Oral interpretative reading helps students in the same way. The material chosen solves the problem for students of what to say. It also serves to reduce the students' fear of making a mistake, because they always have something to refer to that is correct. This makes them much more willing to speak. And the approach then allows for extensive oral practice—even at home, with or without a partner or a teacher.

The choice of materials is extremely important. It is possible to use student-generated materials if the students' level is high enough. These have an intrinsic interest value. But it is often better for the teacher to develop materials at the right level that incorporate useful vocabulary, idioms, and grammar, and are otherwise specifically designed to meet the students' needs and interests. The following is an example.
MY BOYFRIEND

It's Friday, November 25th. It's a cold rainy day. It's about 6:30 in the evening.

I'm at home, because my boyfriend is coming to see me. I'm sitting in my favorite chair in the living room and reading the evening paper.

Sometimes I look out of the window to see if he is coming. But nobody is approaching the apartment. I look up at the dark sky and sigh.

Then I turn around and look at the clock on the wall. It's already 6:30. I sigh again.

He hasn't shown up yet. He hasn't called me, either. He said he would come at 5:30. An hour's already passed. What's happened to him?

I'm worried and a little angry. When he's late, he usually calls me and tells me why he's late and exactly what time he's coming. But today he hasn't called yet.

Did he have an accident? That's possible, because he always drives too fast.

Is he sick? That's also possible, because he usually drinks too much.

Did he get a new girlfriend? That's possible, too, because he often meets young women through his work . . .

Feeling miserable, frustrated, and still very worried, I pace back and forth in the living room. Suddenly I hear the telephone ring. I dash to the phone, pick up the receiver and say, "Hello."

There's no answer.

"Hello. Hello. Who is it?" I ask.

Still there's no answer.

I hang up the telephone and slowly go back to the chair.

Then I hear a loud knock at the door. I jump up and dash to the door. "Who's there?" I ask. But again there's no
answer.

I open the small peep-hole in the door and look outside.
I don’t see anyone. I close the peep-hole and think.
It must be him. He must be hiding somewhere, because he’s afraid I’m angry with him.
I slowly open the door. I look down. There’s my boyfriend lying on the ground in front of the door . . .

There were a number of considerations I used in writing this passage. My students were all women, so the topic of boyfriends and dating was intrinsically interesting to most of them. It was something that they often talked about, and, therefore, they could use the vocabulary and expressions in the story in their conversations in English. The necessary grammar was imbedded in the story and they learned it without realizing it, even without explanations. The passage also contained a variety of emotions and moods—happiness, sadness, worry, frustration, surprise, etc.—which gave the students opportunities to practice vocal variety, changes in speed, tone, volume, etc. Finally, the plot was sufficiently dramatic and mysterious to attract interest and maintain student attention over a long period.

After a passage has been chosen or written, the next step is to get the students to start reading it. It is not enough for them to simply read it passively. They must learn to read it expressively, to use the appropriate emotional quality of voice and the accompanying intonation and stress and volume, in all their variety. With sufficient practice, this kind of exercise dramatically improves the naturalness of everything the students say in English.

Students need a lot of guidance at first, of course. The first activity after the passage has been gone over for problems of vocabulary, punctuation, or grammar, is to have the students mark the pause places. The marking in the following example, as in any passage, reflects individual interpretation to a certain degree, and there are a number of other acceptable ways to do it.

MY BOYFRIEND

It’s Friday, / November 25th. / It’s a cold / rainy day. / It’s about 6:30 / in the evening. /
I'm at home, / because my boyfriend is coming to see me. / I'm sitting in my favorite chair / in the living room / and reading the evening paper. / Sometimes / I look out of the window / to see if he is coming. / But nobody is approaching the apartment. / I look up at the dark sky / and sigh. / Then I turn around / and look at the clock on the wall. / It's already 6:30. / I sigh again. / He hasn't shown up yet. / He hasn't called me, either. / He said he would come at 5:30. / An hour's already passed. / What's happened to him? / I'm worried / and a little angry. / When he's late, / he usually calls me / and tells me why he's late/ and exactly what time he's coming. / But today he hasn't called yet. / Did he have an accident? / That's possible, because he always drives too fast. / Is he sick? / That's also possible, / because he usually drinks too much. / Did he get a new girlfriend? / That's possible, too, / because he often meets young women through his work . . . / Feeling miserable, / frustrated, / and still very worried, / I pace back and forth in the living room. / Suddenly / I hear the telephone ring. / I dash to the phone, / pick up the receiver / and say, / "Hello." / There's no answer. / "Hello. / Hello. / Who is it?" / I ask. / Still / there's no answer. / I hang up the telephone / and slowly go back to the chair. / Then I hear a loud knock at the door. / I jump up / and dash to the door. / "Who's there?" / I ask. / But again / there's no answer. / I open the small peep-hole in the door / and look outside. / I don't see anyone. / I close the peep-hole / and think. / It must be him. / He must be hiding somewhere, / because
he's afraid I'm angry with him. /
I slowly open the door. / I look down. / There's my boyfriend / lying on the ground / in front of the door . . . /

Once the students know which words are grouped together and where it is natural to pause, they are basically ready to start practicing the passage. For this it is valuable for the teacher to record the passage once on a tape that each of the students can copy. For homework then, the students can be assigned to practice reading the passage after listening to the model. I ask them to read it ten times a day, every day for a week, and to record the 10th reading at the end of each day. I collect these recordings the following week.

At this point the students are familiar enough with the passage to be able to correct themselves easily when mistakes are pointed out to them. They are also more willing to accept criticism, because they are coming from a position of strength and have a great desire to perfect what they have already put so much work into.

This is the time, therefore, for work on breathing, intonation, stress, and various pronunciation and liaison problems. Another class could be used to focus on speed, expanding variety in the students' voices according to the mood of the moment, and building up the students' volume, which is a big problem with female Japanese students. Then there's eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, and all the other things that help to improve communication with an audience.

At this stage the students should be able to read the passage almost as well as a native speaker. Some of them will have memorized the passage, but it is generally not wise to force them to do so. Having the passage in hand provides great security and helps build the students' confidence. One added point, is that if all the students continue to hold on to their copies of the passage, students who are less capable will be more positive about themselves because everyone will appear to be at the same level. If some students are reciting from memory, those who can't will feel anxious and embarrassed and be much less willing to continue trying to speak and learn.

Once the students are able to read the passage with close-to-natural pro-
nunciation and flow, I initiate conversations with them in such a way that they can use the vocabulary, expressions, etc., that they have read so often in the passage. At first, it is always difficult for the students to realize that what they have learned is applicable to various conversational situations. So, as I ask them questions, I suggest—by pointing at the sentence in the passage—which expressions they should use in their answers. Gradually, the students begin to see on their own the connections between the questions and what they already know so well. At that point their fluency takes a big jump.

The following are two examples of possible conversations based on the passage. (T: Teacher  S: Student)

To a student whose friend is late

T: Hey, Yukiko, Michiko hasn't shown up yet this morning. Is she coming to class?
S: Yes, I think so. She said she would come at 9:15.
T: But it's already 9:30.
S: When she's late, she usually calls me and tells me why she is late and exactly what time she is coming to the class.
T: I wonder what happened to her. Did she have an accident?
S: That's possible, because she always drives too fast.
T: Really? Gee, I'm worried.
T: I'm worried, too.

To a student who was absent

T: What happened to you, Keiko? You were absent last week.
S: I was sick.
T: Why?
S: Because I ate too much.
T: Did you call me to tell me that you would be absent?
S: No, I didn't. But I told Takako that I was sick.

Besides the class activities described above, there are a number of other
things that can be done with the passages. These include having the students:

1. Replace "I" with "you," "he," "she," "they," etc., and read it again.
2. Summarize the passage in English.
3. Transcribe the passage as another student reads it.
4. Participate in discussions on the content of the passage and/or exchange opinions on "What if..." For example:

   Q: What would you do if your boyfriend was late for a date with you?

   A1: I wouldn't wait for him any longer than five minutes.
   A2: Oh, I would wait for him forever.

5. Continue the passage in the way that they would like or hate for it to develop.

The following are a few more suggestions for teachers:

1) Be judicious in the selection of materials. Choose things that most students will probably be interested in. Alternatively, set up problem situations that might actually occur.
2) Employ a variety of activities in the classroom and make the class flexible and enjoyable depending on the students' reactions.
3) Take a long term view of your students' progress. It takes a long time.
4) Don't correct pronunciation or other mistakes while the student is reading. Save corrections for the end, and work on only the five or six worst problems. If you are too rigid in making corrections, the students will become much more tense and will quickly become intimidated about saying anything in the language.
5) Don't turn oral reading into a comprehension task for the reader or the listeners at too early a time.
6) Don't show off your own English too often. Don't speak too much in the classroom. Have the students speak as much as possible instead. There is no need for you to practice in class. Your English is already good.
7) Finally, praise the students often and regularly, for even their smallest
The Data on the Improvement After 3 Months of Interpretative Oral Reading & Related Activities

A: excellent // B: good // C: fair // F: poor  (100 students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th></th>
<th>C</th>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>before</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress (Force)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed (Pitch)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intonation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Emotion</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocal Variety</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrasing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pausing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Contact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial Expression</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation to the Audience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational Skill</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening Comprehension</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension, Panic Released</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation Increased</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

improvements.

The table above shows how much improvement my students made after three months of interpretative oral reading and the related activities described before. The "after" figures represent the students' level after they had read the passage over more than 300 times and had completely memorized the most part of it.

A grade of A in a particular area was given to students whose reading of the passage approximated that of native speakers, at least in terms of the area
being considered. B was given to students whose readings were very natural but not quite native in quality in terms of the factor under consideration. C meant that the student was generally understandable, but that in this area there was still room for considerable improvement. F indicated that there was a serious problem that prevented the speaker from being understood.

The grades themselves, are not so important as the degree of improvement the students showed based on their work with oral interpretative reading. The biggest improvement was in the areas of intonation, fluency, vocal variety, and volume, all of which most students had very minimal scores in at the beginning of the semester. But in addition to these, the students made excellent progress in every other category as well. And this is true even beyond the technical aspects to general skills such as writing and listening comprehension and general conversational ability.

At the beginning of the course, for example, on the writing section of the placement examination given to the students to determine their level, few of them could write more than one or two very short sentences, or sentence fragments, and these were usually full of grievous errors. Toward the end of the course, however, when the students were asked to write a continuation of the passage, many wrote extensively, often making the passage more than twice as long as it had been originally. This shows, I believe, not only that the students were involved with the passage, but also that they could enjoy writing in English when they had a strong enough foundation from which to work. The sentences the students used were full of vocabulary and expressions from the passage, and grammatically, while not perfect by any means, were substantially correct.

As for listening comprehension, improvement was obvious. When I read the passage to the student for the first time, they could barely understand half of it. But after they had read and listened to the passage hundreds of times, they were able to understand 80~90% of the extended passages that the other students had written. Though this was possible to a certain degree, because each student used similar sentences and expressions as in the first passage and the situation that developed was understood from the beginning and could be easily imagined, the students were at least able to
understand the same words, expressions, and grammatical structures in novel formulations they had never heard before.

As mentioned before, the students’ ability to carry out a conversation was dramatically improved also, at least if the subject was basically limited to that of the passage. Not only were the students able to converse more easily on the topic, but they responded to questions more quickly, and their answers were often much longer and interesting. They seemed eager to use the vocabulary and expressions they had learned, and overall seemed anxious simply to speak more.

It is this last aspect that may have been the most important result of all. The students finished the course having overcome a substantial part of their shyness and nervousness about speaking English, and their fear of making mistakes. As they understood more and more of what other students and the teacher said, they became excited about the language and increasingly willing to speak the language. Finally, their understanding gave them a greater feeling of confidence than they had ever had before.

It is this confidence building that may do more than anything else to get Japanese students on the road to success in learning English. From my experience I have learned that interpretative oral reading is a powerful tool to help them get started.