Reducing Student Paralysis in English Conversation: Stressing Polite Requests and Simple Functions

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The new Monbusho's guidelines of 1994, stressing oral communication practice in high school English classes, has been in effect for two years. According to Goold, Madeley and Carter (1993), "the purpose is especially to try to encourage positive oral communication."[1] As usual, there is little dissent among language teachers for such practical goals. But the means by which we achieve them is not easily agreed upon, and the abstract, catch-all phrases such as "positive oral communication" leave room (fortunately) for interpretation. With so many apparent and real needs, the foreign language teacher in most Japanese universities faces the challenge of deciding what to concentrate on in 12-15 class meetings. But careful review and analysis of classroom discourse in a "typical" English class of first and second-year university students will reveal obvious problem areas that cannot be ignored. Further Monbusho guidelines for the oral communication classes state that students are expected to express themselves "simply, spontaneously and appropriately…" and "are expected to question and seek clarification when a speaker is unclear."[2] This paper will focus on two important "problem areas" as they relate to the guidelines just stated: The first problem area is the inability of first and second year

university students in Japan to make, and understand, "polite requests." The second problem area is their inability to use appropriate conversation -sustaining functions when conversation breaks down due to their own non -comprehension, or a lack of knowledge of appropriate responses.

The Inability to Make Polite Requests

One problem area can be vividly illustrated through the following true event that occurred during a conversation class of second-year engineering students at a national university : A student approached the teacher at the front of the room, noticeably nervousness. After much giggling and backward looks to his peers, he twice began to say something, but stopped. Again, he redirected his gaze upon the teacher, hesitated, and finally blurted, "Toilet ! " Obviously, this student needed to use the men's room. Quickly. The teacher replied "I am NOT a toilet !" Student : "No, no, I want toilet ! " Teacher : "Oh, you want a toilet ? " Student (obviously relieved at his apparent success) : "Yes. Yes." The teacher told him to wait a moment, left the room momentarily, and returned acting like he was carrying a heavy toilet. Teacher (feigning handing heavy toilet to student) : "Here is your toilet." Student : "No ! No !" On other occasions, students who haven't received a handout have come forward, gone through the same gyrations, backward glances, and false starts, and ended up simply pointing at the stack of handouts on the lectern. When pressed to verbalize their request, the students gave answers such as "Paper," "Paper, please," "Give me paper," or "Please give me paper." To make matters worse, their body language was poor and voice quality was flat.

Why Stress Polite Requests ?

Requests—making requests, and having requests made to you—is one of the most basic communicative activities. Thus, Japanese students' inabilities with these functions should not be ignored. For if they make

such mistakes as those mentioned above, and as will be detailed later in this paper (research findings are also presented later), when traveling abroad or dealing with a foreigner in English, they—at best—only risk embarrassing themselves. Worse than that, but still not necessarily serious, is the likelihood that communication will not be achieved. But worse could easily happen, especially abroad : their nonpolite speech and/or manner could be interpreted as rudeness. Rudeness, or the perception of rudeness, normally elicits hurt feelings, negative impressions, and sometimes a kind of verbal counter-attack from the "victim." If this happens, our Japanese student is likely to incur hurt feelings, and leave thinking (for example) "Gee, Americans ! What jerks ! "

It is also important for our students to comprehend when polite requests are made to them. Whether it's at a five-star hotel, airline check -in counter, or Mac Donald's drive through window, they are likely to hear questions phrased in a polite manner, such as "Would you like (something to drink ?/anything else···) ? " "May I have (your credit card/address···?)" etc. Students unfamiliar with the polite request forms usually fixate on the word "like" and think that they are being asked "What do you like ?"

POLITE REQUESTS DEFINED : Polite requests have been defined for the purposes of this study as : The forms that take "would, could, can, may," etc. Specifically : "Would/Could/Can you ____," "Would you like ____," "Would you like to ____," (I) would like ____," (I) would like to ____," "May I have ____." Because of their rather direct nature, the following types of questions were not considered "polite" for the purposes of this study : "Give me ____," please," "Please give me ____," "I want ____," please," "Please (do) ____," etc. Simply saying "please" was not considered suffcient to make a request "polite," although its use was not discouraged. It is a valuable word in any situation. Additionally, students were

reminded that, regardless of what they say, their body language and tone of voice carries greater meaning and subtly than the words they speak.

The Inability to Use Basic Self-Help Functions

The lack of responsiveness by Japanese students is usually attributed to shyness, apathy and learned behavior. Certainly these are very strong elements in Japanese students' unwillingness/inability to speak up in class. College-age Japanese students (especially low-level) cannot realistically be expected to easily overcome their shyness, or to quickly be re-enculturated in the ways of second-language classroom behavior and learning. However, there is another factor that contributes to non-responsiveness—one which is well within the scope of a student's ability to change : they simply do not know appropriate responses for certain non-comprehension situations. Most likely, the students have had little or no coaching or practice in responding correctly in different situations where non-comprehension exists. Consider the following actual cases : Case #1 : I asked a student, "Is your father demanding ?" Answer : "I don't know." Case #2 : I asked, "What is your mother's personality like ?" Answer : "I don't know." Case #3 : I assigned an in-class writing task. After 15 minutes, one student still had a blank paper. I asked, "Why aren't you doing the assignment ?" Answer : "I don't know." Case 4 : I asked a student to write my family name (which he knew) on the blackboard. Standing with chalk in hand, he said : "I don't know teachers name." I reminded him that my name was Mr. Murphy. "But I don't know…name", he said. Case 5 : "Murphy. What is *hoshi,* in English ?" I said that I did not know. He then drew a picture of a star on the paper. "This !" Case 6 : "What means *yochien* in English ?"

The above examples show student's inabilities to use basic question and response patterns when they do not understand the speaker, or when they

do not know how to say something in English.

Why stress self-help functions ?

Conversations with low-level students fail for three basic reasons : (1) the students cannot understand certain words or phrases used by the speaker *and they do not tell the speaker what it is that they do not understand,* (2) when they do not know how to respond, *they do not say that they do not know how to respond,* and (3) when they want to know what something is called, what something means, or how to say or spell something in English, *they do not know what to say in such cases.* If they would and/or could, tell the listener specifically what it is that they do not understand, better communication could be achieved. It is important for students to be taught how to specify what it is that they do not understand. Some examples of how to do this will be given later in this paper.

Low-level students should not be excused from both learning and using in the classroom what I call "self-help functions." These are the various questions and responses that are needed to overcome the frequent and typical non-comprehension problems in L2 conversations. Such problems include not knowing how to respond when they (a) do not understand all or most of the native speaker's speech (b) do not understand particular words or phrases, (c) want to know the meaning of particular words (d) do not know how to say or do something in English, (e) want to communicate to the native speaker what it is that they do not know (f) not knowing the difference between "I don't know" and "I don't understand." When a Japanese student encounters such a situation, their tendency is to quit the conversation, usually by diverting their eyes and saying nothing. Some teachers tolerate this. They should not. These non-comprehension situations are basic to any L2 conversation. To allow students to retreat into their "shyness," or to simply state "I don't understand" in any or all

situations is unfair to the students. It is the same as a swimming instructor allowing a student who is afraid of the water to simply observe the lesson from poolside. Such an instructor could be accused of a deraliction of duty.

Research Methodology and Results

I tested students' abilities in the area of polite requests and self-help functions on the first and last class meeting of the 1996 spring semester. The methodology and results follow:

The sample: Ten first-year engineering students at Ehime University and ten second-year English students at Shinonome Junior College.

Purpose: To determine students ability to use common polite-requests, and to use the structures: "I don't know how to ____," and "How do you ____?" in various situations.

Methodology: Students were chosen randomly on the first day of the class to take a speaking and writing test. One student at a time, they were handed 2-3 cards, one at a time. On each card was one of 10 simple, short, life-like situations, written in Japanese. (It was written in Japanese to assure that the students fully understood the situation. The situations were translated into Japanese by a trained translator.) Also on the card, students were instructed, in Japanese, to ask a specified question or to make a specified response in English. They were given five to seven seconds to make a response. Cue cards were provided to aid them in remembering verbs appropriate for each situation. This was to insure that a student did not fail only as a result of not knowing some vocabulary particular to the situation. Before the test began, this process was explained to the students so they knew what to expect. However, the situations themselves were not revealed. Also they were instructed to not reveal the contents of the test to the students waiting outside the room after they had taken the test. In this way, there was no chance for the contents of the test to be

leaked to those waiting to take the test.

On the last day of class, the same students took the same test, under the exact same conditions. *The students were told that the final exam would cover different material, so they did not prepare themselves for this material. This was to create, to the extent possible, conditions they will face in the real world (and also to match the conditions under which they took the pre-test) : sudden, unexpected situations that demand prompt, proper responses.*

POLITE REQUESTS RESULTS

	PRE-TEST			POST-TEST		
	Ehime Univ.	Junior College	Total	Ehime Univ.	Junior College	Total
Good	2	2	4	12	10	22
Passable	6	11	17	4	2	6
Failure	10	7	17	6	3	9

As the table above shows, most students were unable to make "good" requests (as defined earlier) politely on the first day of class. "Passable" means that they were able to communicate, but without good grammar or without using proper polite forms. On the day of the last class, after 12-14 classes which included consistent but periodic practice (techniques to be described later), and after having prepared for a different final exam, students nonetheless improved significantly. Examples of improvement can be seen by comparing pre-test and post-test responses :

Q1. "You're in a restaurant in New York. In English, ask the waiter to bring you a Cola."

Pre-test results :	Post-test results :
"Cola Please."	"May I have a cola ?"
"I want a cup of Cola."	"May I have a Cola ?"
"Cola please"	"I would like a Cola please."

Q2. "In the class, the teacher hands out some papers. But he accidentally forgets to give you a paper. Ask him to give you a paper."

Pre-test results :	Post-test results :
"Please give me a print."	"May I have a paper ?"
"Give me paper."	"May I have a paper ?"

Q3. "You work in a pizza delivery store. A customer calls on the telephone. He asks for a pizza to be delivered. Ask for her address."

Pre-test results :	Post-test results :
"Where is…"	"Would you tell me your address ?'
"Where do you live ?"	"Could you tell me your address ?"
Student C failed by saying nothing.	"Could you tell me your address ?"

Q4. "You work at the reception of a hotel. A customer asks to check in. Ask him if he wants a single or double-bed room."

Pre-test results :	Post-test results :
"Do you choose single or double ?"	"Would you like a single or double ?"
"Which do you like, single or double ?"	"Which size would you like ?"
"Which do you hope, single or double ?"	"Which size would you like, single or double ?

"HOW TO/HOW DO"TEST RESULTS

	PRE-TEST			POST-TEST		
	Ehime Univ.	Junior College	Total	Ehime Univ.	Junior College	Total
Good	2	10	12	21	17	38
Passable	7	4	11	0	3	3
Failure	11	6	17	1	1	2

(Note : Post-test figures are weighted for comparison purposes.)

Typical of the progress made, especially by Ehime University students, can be seen by the following example : in four different pre-test situations,

students could not use the "how do/how to" structure:

Q1: "Your foreigner friend asks you to teach him how to play *shogi*. But you do not know how to play. Tell him you don't know how to play *shogi*."

Pre-test results:	Post-test results:
"I can't play shogi."	"I don't know how to do it."
Student B failed by saying nothing.	"I don't know how to play."
Student C failed by saying nothing.	"I don't know how to play."

Q2. "Your father brought home a new computer. You want to use it, but you don't know how to turn it on. Ask your father how to turn on the computer."

Pre-test results:	Post-test results:
"Do you think how to use this?"	"Could you tell me how to turn on this computer?
"How does father use computer?"	"Do you know how to use this computer?"
Student C failed by saying nothing.	"How do you play the computer?"

Q3. "You work in a shop that repairs only Japanese-made watches. You do not know how to repair other kinds of watches. A customer asks you to repair his Swiss-made watch. Tell him that you don't know how to repair the Swiss-made watch."

Pre-test results:	Post-test results:
"I cannot repair this watch."	"I don't know how to repair this."
Student B failed by saying nothing.	"I don't know how to fix a Swiss watch."
Student C failed by saying nothing.	"I don't know how to replace a watch from Swiss."

Q4. "You are a British person living in Japan. You do not know how

to write Kanji. The British embassy person tells you to fill out an official document in kanji. Tell him that you do not know how to write in kanji."

Pre-test results :	Post-test results :
"I don't write kanji."	"I don't know how to write kanji."
"I can't write kanji."	"I don't know how to write kanji."
"I don't write kanji."	"I don't know how to write kanji."

Students should be taught the difference between "I can't" and "I don't know how to." The condition of "I can't" might be the result of many things : If one cannot turn on the t.v., perhaps one's mother forbade it, or something is wrong with the switch, or to do so might wake the sleeping baby, etc. "I don't know how to ____" means only one thing : one lacks the knowledge or ability to do it.

Other Important Self-Help Functions

Other basic functions, and the ability or inability to use them, often means the difference between a conversation collapsing, or continuing. Some of the functions include : "What does ____ mean ?" Many conversations fail because students cannot understand one word or phrase. For example, the question "Is your father kind ?" is usually answered "yes" or "no." But if one word in the question is changed—"Is your father *demanding* ?"—the response is either silence, or "I don't know", or "I don't understand." Students should be made to experience the situations in which they can use this function, as well as the benefits it leads to (increased understanding).

Another function is what can be referred to as the "call function." The student who was mentioned earlier—the one who had to draw a picture of a star and asked "What this ? In English ?"—represents another weakness in Japanese students' ability to handle noncomprehension situations. At

least this student had the creativity and will to pursue some kind of solution (drawing a picture). If taught this simple function, most other students could quickly develop the creativity and confidence as well. Students need to be taught the difference between "what does ___ mean?" and "what do you call (this/that/those)?" "what do you call the (noun) that (___)?" or "what are those (noun) that/with (___) called?" They should be reminded that, although the listener might be bilingual, and thus able to answer "How do you say (a Japanese word)?" in other situations the listener will likely be a foreigner who is not bilingual in Japanese and English.

Strategies and Techniques

This section offers some suggestions on how to present the material to the students over the course of a semester, as well as in a limited-time frame.

Many of these functions are not highly situation-specific (appropriate to a few, particular kinds of situations, e.g. stating a future intention, a self-introduction, stating a contrary opinion, etc). Rather, they have broad applications; they are used or needed in vast numbers of non-comprehension situations. While the low level student might have the luxury of preparing for a particular L2 situation, (e.g. for a self-introduction, asking a waiter for another cola), other non-comprehension situations will come quickly and unpredictably. The same is true for classroom settings. Teachers should exploit this natural occurrence in the classroom and use it to parallel real life as much as possible. And tell the students that you will do it, and you expect an appropriate response.

The important points to remember are to emphasize these functions from the first day of class, review often, and practice them in context.

EMPHASIS: It will require a strong, clear introduction in the first class, and repeated practice in the next few classes to get students to *fully*

understand what you expect of them in regards to using these functions weekly in the class. Students should be made to understand (not simply told) why these functions are worth learning. Good role plays and other materials can show how these functions can be used to salvage conversations that otherwise die, or barely get started. These role plays and materials should give the students a chance to manage non-comprehension situations. They should know that they will be expected to use these functions appropriately and spontaneously, week-to-week, in the class. *MATERIALS*: Clear, simple study sheets are indispensable. The "response sheet" that I use contains the basic responses most likely to be needed, with simple explanations explanation about when to use them: A second sheet contains polite request forms. A third sheet is a worksheet focusing on "call functions"—"What do you call that?" "What are those big animals called in English?" "I live in a small city called Matsuyama."

In the beginning of the semester, most students are dependent on these sheets. But by mid-semester, their success rate increases. Sometimes, during the class, they recognize a situation where they should use this form (or sometimes I have to prompt them by asking "Do you understand what 'X' means? No? Then, what should you ask?") they often say "What means 'X'?"

REVIEW/CONTEXT: Any material introduced to students, or reviewed, should be done in context. The best way is to "create" context is to pay attention for those situations in the class in which the student must use the function. Such moments come naturally, but unpredictably. It is also useful to practice these functions in context in role plays and pair work. The spur-of-the-moment strategy most effectively and directly combats students' natural tendency to give up when confronted with even a minimal non-comprehension situation.

TECHNIQUES : In the case of polite requests, pair work with "information-gap" games and dialogues is helpful. There is a vast array of resource material dedicated to this kind of communicative activity. But the goal should be to have students complete the tasks without the aid of notes or aides. One way to wean the students from dependence on a book or aides is to create situations or role plays in which they must use the target language without notes. Small visuals and realia can be used easily. For a game called "The Restaurant", some enlarged menus pasted around the room give students, in pairs, practice is basic polite requests (Student A requests : "May I have a cola, please ?" B confirms : "Would you like a large or small ?"). Or a game called "Travel Agency :" (A : "I'd like a ticket to Tokyo." B : "Would you like smoking or non-smoking ? Window or aisle seat ? One-way or round trip ?") These exercises are quick and easy review, believable and identifiable in the students' experiences. And they can be done without notes.

Conclusion

In any second language that one studies, one of the first lessons will be how to make requests politely. This paper did not address whether or not Japanese students learned the proper forms from the beginning of their English studies in junior high school. But based upon results, one can only conclude that they did not. The fact that one of the first communicative activities our students are likely to engage in English will likely be on the giving or receiving end of some kind of request, is it not imperative that we spend some time (it does not take much) to make sure they present themselves well, rather than crudely or rudely ? And is it not imperative that we make sure they are prepared to handle non-comprehension situations that surely await them in an L2 environment ? In addition to the many other useful, basic, conversation skills that we teach our students, let us not

overlook two of the most basic : the role of polite requests, and the need for appropriate responses in a non-comprehension situation.

Common Errors Japanese Students Make

Correct form :		Mistaken form :
Would you like…?	=	Do you like…?
Could you give me…?	=	May you give me…?
May I have…?		
I would like…	=	I would you like…
What does 'X' mean ?	=	What means 'X' ?
Once more please	=	One more, please

References

1. Goold, R., Madeley C., Carter N., (1993). *The New Monbusho Guidelines.* The Language Teacher. The Japanese Association for Language Teaching.
2. Ibid.