

Integrating the Roles of Speaker and Listener in EFL Communication

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(Accepted 22 July 2010)

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1. Introduction

The EFL classroom is a microcosm of real world relationships where socio-cultural etiquette and unspoken rhythms of behavior shape the social interactions between learners. If speaker etiquette is understood and conversational rhythm capitalized upon, then victory of a sort can be guaranteed for those learners wishing to improve their conversational fluency. The Japanese martial arts can be referred to as one science to aid us in understanding the dynamics of confrontation and thus predicting the effects of “language” encounters for the EFL learner.

In Japan, over hundreds of years, and through thousands of engagements, certain principles have been perfected for seizing opportunities to control an opponent’s movements in military encounters. These movements refer not only to the physical, but also to the state of one’s mind. Sun Tzu, a famous Chinese general and strategist who’s phil-

osophical writings had a profound effect on Japanese military tactics wrote a treatise on the art of war. In it, Sun Tzu explains that knowing oneself only guarantees victory 50 % of the time, however, knowing oneself and one’s opponent will guarantee victory 100 % of the time. Historically, victors, equipped with self-knowledge, who have been able to anticipate their opponent’s rhythm, have been able to defeat their enemies. Such martial principles have application for human endeavors other than military origin, in this case EFL learning, because in a broad sense, there are similarities between the two. The EFL classroom has become the theatre for battle, the players are the learners, and the objective is conversational dominance. Through developing self-knowledge and seizing upon their partner’s rhythm, EFL learners can take control of a conversation to increase the rate of conversational flow and effect greater fluency.

In the oral English classroom, the communicative process between students can be looked on as a sequential series of 3 main events that occur when one speaker initiates verbal contact with another speaker. Each one of these events provides a unique window of opportunity for the student to take control and direct the flow of conversation towards a topic that they are familiar with. Directing the conversation towards familiar topics confer advantages in terms of motivation, intrinsic interest, fluency, and student confidence. However, to receive these benefits the student must first be made aware of their own learning process.

Meta-cognition, or the development of “self-knowledge” is one requisite tool that Japanese

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EFL students can use to enhance their oral fluency. In the communicative English classroom in Japan, students for the most part are passive learners. That is to say, the lack of initiative shown in conversational strategies points to a failure in student meta-cognitive awareness. This awareness encompasses an understanding of the student's own role in conversation, the stages of opportunity in conversation progression, as well as strategies they could use to bring about successful conversational outcomes, i.e. increased conversational fluency.

For a conversation to be considered "fluent" there must be a smooth integration between the roles of listener and speaker. Sometimes the listener will play a passive role in the conversation, and sometimes the listener will become active, coaxing more information from the speaker. The listener may also change roles and vice versa, by becoming the speaker and taking charge of the flow of information within a conversation. How 'active' the listener or speaker becomes is determined by two variables: (1) the situational context, and (2) speaker culture.

(1) Situational context

If both speaker and listener are aware of the context of the conversation, then their roles and the requisite language needed for conversation will fall naturally into place. For example, imagine a scenario where student (A) is informing student (B) of the bad news that their favorite uncle has passed away. In this case, student (A) will play an active role by communicating the bad news, and student (B) will play the role of a passive listener, occasionally inserting short words to show their sympathy such as: "I'm sorry", "that's too bad", "oh no!!" etc.. It would not make sense for student (B) to wrest control of the conversation away from student (A) and start talking about "the wonderful weekend he or she had at Disneyland" if he or she were aware of student (A)'s unfortunate predicament.

However, in a happier situation, where student (A) is informing student (B) of the wonderful camping trip that he or she experienced over Golden week, e.g. "I had an excellent camping

trip to the beach over Golden week." then it could be expected that student (B) would become more active by asking many follow-up questions to extract additional information about student (A)'s enjoyable experience, e.g. "Really? **Where** did you go?" "**Who** did you go with?" "**Did** you go swimming?" "**How** was the beach?" "**Why** did you go there?" etc.

'Dialogues' incorporating 'real' life experiences of the student are an important tool the teacher can use to make classroom language acquisition relevant and useful for the students in the real world. They also raise the student's awareness of how the situational context influences both the language and the level of speaker/listener activity in a conversation.

(2) Speaker culture

The second variable affecting the flow of conversation between the two speakers is "speaker culture." Since this is a nebulous concept, this paper will only be concerned with one facet of speaker culture, that is, the differing attitudes towards small talk and silence in Japan and the West, and how this impacts on conversational fluency. In the West, silence is usually avoided when speakers come into close physical contact with others because a lack of verbal communication is itself a negative statement, which communicates disinterest. Everyday conversation, even if it is about inconsequential matters, is used as a bridge between people who are in close physical contact to open communication channels, maintain harmonious relations, or, in the case of first time contact, find a middle ground that acceptably puts both parties in neutral territory, ripe for developing short-term to medium-term relationships. 'Small-talk' in the West communicates friendship and empathy.

On the other hand, Japanese people feel quite comfortable with silence. In Japan, it is not unusual for action taken by individuals to be based on intuition and body language over verbose justifications. The Japanese regard overly verbal communication as an excuse for procrastination, whereas decisive action is often accompanied by silence. For the Japanese, people

that have “the gift of the gab” the stereotypical Westerner for example, may be looked down upon as being simple. Many Japanese would agree with the saying “silence is golden while speech is silver.” This is in contrast to the West, where speech is considered golden.

Silence is used as a powerful and flexible communicative tool in Japan. Japanese silence can be divided up into 3 categories: negative silence, neutral silence and positive silence. “Negative silence” is used as tool for alienation. The lack of communication communicates the disapproval of one or more parties. “Positive silence” on the other hand, is the type of silence that bonds people together. Both parties understand each other so well that communication is not necessary. This silence is supportive. Finally, “neutral silence” is a kind of silence that may be used as a sign of respect for the speaker, to show that a person is considering all options, or to maintain harmony within the group. This is the type of silence that is most often found lurking in the communicative classroom at university level, where students wish to avoid disrupting their group or standing out from their peers. From the Japanese perspective, this kind of silence creates a positive working group atmosphere. However, from the perspective of the EFL teacher, it brings the machinery of the communicative classroom to a halt.

It is imperative for the native English teacher to consider carefully the type of silence that the Japanese student is communicating in their classroom and introduce explicit cognitive strategies targeting the student, to bring back the balance between speaker and listener in pair-work conversation practice.

Three conversation strategies that should be brought to the attention of the Japanese EFL student wishing to boost their fluency are “*Go no Sen*, *Sen no Sen*, and *Sen sen no Sen*.” As the Japanese words communicate, opportunities to increase conversational fluency can be found at three stages in the conversation: after the initial language encounter, during the encounter, and the time immediately before the encounter.

2. The Three Jewels

- (1) *Go no Sen* 後の先
(Replying to a query)
- (2) *Sen no Sen* 先の先
(Seizing control of the conversation)
- (3) *Sen sen no Sen* 先々の先
(Initiating a conversation)

(1) *Go no Sen* 後の先 (Replying to a query)

“*Go no Sen*” literally means to provide a counter after the initial engagement has already taken place. The window of opportunity lies in the “spontaneity” of this counter response to an applied stimulus. In the context of the English conversation classroom, this practice entails simply offering an immediate verbal response to a language encounter after another speaker has already started the conversation. Although this sounds like a simple practice, it is much harder for the student than it first seems, especially in prolonged conversation. This is because when the speaker is talking, the listener must pick up on and exploit the conversation’s rhythm. Failure to predict the correct rhythm will leave the conversation sounding disjointed and strange. For example, consider two friends, person (A) and (B) who are talking about their weekend. In the first case, the conversation will sound ‘unnatural’ because the speaker’s rhythm hasn’t been understood; whereas in the second case, the conversation will sound more “natural” because the listener has introduced “fillers” as well as “follow-up questions” to lubricate it and hence maintain its rhythm.

Example 1. An unnatural conversation without “fillers”

- (A) I went to Jozankei yesterday.
 (B) (Passive silence)
 (A) I visited an Onsen.
 (B) (Passive silence)
 (A) The food there was great.
 (B) Did you see that new T.V. show last night?

Example 2. A natural conversation with “fillers”

& “follow-up questions”

- (A) I went to Jozankei yesterday.
 (B) **Really? What did you do there?**
 (A) I visited an *Onsen*.
 (B) **Cool. I love Onsens.** How was the food?
 (A) The food there was great.
 (B) **By the way, changing the subject,** did you see that new T.V. show last night?

In example 2, the two strategies used by person (B) the listener, which made the conversation sound more natural, were the use of “fillers” and “follow-up questions.” For the beginner EFL student, a repertoire of conversation fillers that could be taught for use in informal situations amongst friends could include words such as:

Really?
Wow?
Cool?
Oh yeah?
Yeah?
Uhuh?
No? You're joking?
Serious?

These words lubricate the conversation by encouraging the speaker to continue telling their story. Although they are not much noticed in a natural sounding conversation, as they are fillers, their absence is decidedly conspicuous, as illustrated in *example 1*. A conversation without such fillers sounds harsh and disjointed.

The second technique that the listener can use to promote a smoothly flowing conversation is the use of “follow-up questions.” The formulation of these questions poses a big challenge for the listener, as they have to concentrate on two prongs of the conversation: the conversational contents, as well as the sentence structure. Asking for more details shows the listener’s interest in the conversation. It also encourages the speaker to “open up” and talk more about their personal experiences. Regrettably, Japanese university level English students regularly avoid these conversation extenders for 3 main reasons:

The first reason is caused by the difficulty students have in extracting the conversational details due to weak listening skills. Extraction of information in a conversation is hampered by different pronunciation of the key vowel sounds “A, I, U, E, and O”, when compared with English. The “*katakana-ization*” of many Western words that modern Japanese has borrowed and then *Japanized* further complicates this problem. The resulting word or phrase, even though it is based on English, sounds entirely different in Japanese, to the original English sound. Hence, the English words that have been adopted by the Japanese language will still have an alien quality about them if the Japanese student tries to utilize them in English conversation practice.

The second reason is a specifically cultural one, that is to say, long pauses on part of the listener occur partly because in Japan it is considered disrespectful to interrupt the speaker while they are talking. In a verbal exchange between two Japanese people, the listener’s quiet courtesy allows the speaker time to communicate their ideas free from interruption so that “group harmony” is maintained.

The third reason is structural. Hesitation in the formulation of follow-up questions points to inadequate skills developed in the manipulation of grammar and verb tenses, especially in beginner through to the low intermediate level classes. Students who are at the lower range of English proficiency levels need to be directed to listen more for the structure/verb tense used in the speaker’s sentence so that they can offer an appropriately targeted response. Intermediate students on the other hand, need only be concerned with the contents of the speaker’s conversation since they are more structurally competent.

In order to extend the length and depth of student conversations “follow-up questions” must be taught immediately in the first few classes of the first semester, and then regularly revised throughout the oral communication course. Ongoing practice of these strategies will help the student to develop good communication habits.

For example, if the conversation partner using

follow-up questions is asking about an experience that happened in the past, then the structure of their follow up questions might look something like this:

- Who** did you?
What did you.....?
Where did you?
Why did you?
When did you

In the blank portion of the sentence the questioner could be directed to insert an appropriate verb in the present tense to match what happened in the speaker's story. This would stimulate further conversation on part of the speaker, and enable the listener to extract additional information about their partner's experience. Commonly used verbs to be considered by the questioner might include: go, do, return, come back, eat, drink, stay etc.

Consider the case whereby the speaker (A) is telling the listener (B) about their summer vacation:

- (A) I had a really great vacation.
 (B) Oh yeah. **Where did you go?**
 (A) I went to Shakotan. It's got such a beautiful sea there.
 (B) Really? **Who did you go with?**
 (A) Do you know John? I went with him and his brother.
 (B) Cool. **What did you guys do there?**
 (A) We went swimming, fishing and did a little sun baking.
 (B) **Why did you choose Shakotan?** I don't really know much about it.
 (A) Well, it's a famous sight seeing spot in Hokkaido. You can drive there.
 (B) So **when did you come back?**
 (A) We stayed there until yesterday.
 (B) Wow. You lucky dog. 3 weeks at Shakotan eh?

In the above example, the listener (B) was able to extract the following "key" points about (A)'s experience just by using follow-up questions:

Where A went: (The place visited, which was Shakotan)

What A did there: (The activities undertaken, which included swimming, fishing and sun baking)

Who A went with: (Person A's companion, who was John)

Why A went there: (The purpose of the trip, which was sightseeing)

When A returned: (The return date, which was yesterday)

How long A was there: (The duration of stay, which was for 3 weeks)

(2) *Sen no Sen* 先の先 (*Seizing control of the conversation*)

The "*Sen no Sen*" strategy describes a state of affairs where attacks from both parties in an encounter happen at once. Translated into the English classroom, two people will be speaking at once and trying to control the direction of a conversation by manipulating the conversation topic, or subject. When a conversation is already in progress, the EFL learner can initiate this strategy by either making a statement related to the conversation topic, or, by introducing some new information related to the topic to seize control of the conversation. This new information may incorporate the speaker's own experiences and/or knowledge. It could be "sensational" to grab the other speaker's attention, or, it may just re-direct the conversation away from a dead topic. Whichever the case, it provides opportunities for the conversation to evolve and involve both parties. If the language toolbox is opened, the following expressions that deal with 'reported speech' and 'asking of opinions' may be useful to extend the conversation:

e.g. "I heard that...(additional info.); they say that...(additional info.); did you know that...(additional info.); what do you think of (new topic); (new topic)... is excellent/great/good/terrible."

The following conversation illustrates how these extenders might be used:

Conversation (1)

- (A) I went to Jozankei yesterday.
 (B) **Oh yeah. There are a few hot springs there that are excellent!** Which ones did you go to?
 (A) I visited “Hoheikyo” hot spring. **It also has good food.**
 (B) Yes. The curry is great.
What do you think of the Nan bread?
 (A) You can't beat it.

Although person (A) started the conversation by discussing hot springs, person (B) was able to maintain its fluidity by incorporating their own experiences (the eating of local food) into the talk. The insertion of (B)'s personal experiences increased the breadth and depth of conversation because the additional information could be used to fuel further talk about familiar themes.

(3) *Sen sen no sen* 先々の先 (Initiating a conversation)

This strategy describes a state of affairs, where one party initiates a preemptive strike before the other party has had time to produce a counter. The striker gains advantage of the situation through surprise and better preparation.

In the English classroom this means taking the initiative by reading the context of the situation, intuitively understanding the other parties' background, and discussing a topic that has a high probability of interesting the other party. “*Sen sen no sen*” is different from “*Sen no Sen*” and “*Go no Sen*” because the speaker gains control of the conversation even before their partner has had a chance to speak. It could be looked on as a “preemptive” strike, because from the moment the conversation topic is introduced, the speaker has better control over the conversation than their partner. Good familiarity with the topic also means that the speaker will have a superior understanding of the related vocabulary. This will like a positive feedback loop, effect greater confidence and fluency.

However, for the speaker's “*sensen no sen*” strategy to succeed, it is vitally important that

they have an understanding of their partner's background (including interests), as well as an awareness of the situational context. A topic chosen that accurately reflects the partner's background and shared situational context will stand a greater chance of evoking a response from the partner and may evolve into a more fluent conversation.

For example, let's imagine 2 strangers that are regular music-goers are at a live rock concert, and by chance meet for the first time. As an “ice-breaking” exercise they both begin talking about the one thing that they have in common: music. Person (A) initiates the encounter by drawing person (B) into a discussion about shared interests, which leads to increased topic familiarity and hence conversational fluency on the part of both speakers.

- (A) **They say that this group is going to be the next hit on the charts.**
 (B) Really? Well, they are good! Who is the lead guitarist?
 (A) Oh that's Ned Kelly. **He really has an awesome guitar. What about you? Play the guitar?**
 (B) I can play a little on the acoustic. But, I prefer the piano.

On analysis, the following is happening in the conversation. First, person (A) establishes the topic (which is related to his/her immediate environment i.e. the rock concert), and then tries to find a connection between the topic and person (B)'s interests. Next, person (A) discovers that person (B) likes guitar music, but prefers to play the piano. If this conversation were to evolve further, then person (A) could ask follow-up questions about the piano music, or popular artists, to ensure that the thread of conversation, as well as conversational rhythm is maintained.

For example:

- (A) Really? Who is your favorite composer?
 I like listening to Mozart when I go driving...
 (B) I don't mind Mozart, but I prefer jazz piano.

It's more relaxing.

(A) Jazz? You have to listen to Kei Kobayashi then. He is a great jazz singer. The piano accompaniment is also pretty good.

Interestingly, in the above example the topic is quite fluid and has shifted from instrument to artist to genre and back to instrument again. However, because person (A) has concentrated on person (B)'s "real" interests, the conversation was able to continue to expand. Consequently, the intrinsic interest generated through topic familiarity by both parties would increase speaker motivation, confidence and fluency.

3. Conclusion

Any oral encounter may be broken up into three stages that present the learner with unique opportunities for gaining greater fluency. These three stages include: the time preceding the oral encounter, the start of the encounter, and during, or after the initial encounter. If students are made aware of these stages and the unique conversational possibilities they present, then they may be able to formulate and implement appropriate strategies to extend the conversation, take control of the topic and attain a degree of freedom to develop greater conversational fluency.

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Summary

Japanese EFL learners are faced with many hurdles to becoming proficient in foreign language communication. Two of the more serious hurdles are their inherent shyness when faced with an English communicative task, and a lack of communication strategies necessary to continue a conversation. By developing metacognitive awareness, EFL students can come to a better understanding of their role in communication, as well as the many opportunities for improving fluency that each stage in the conversation provides. Strategies that seize control of the conversation topic and actively integrate the roles of speaker and listener confer numerous advantages to the learner in terms of intrinsic interest, motivation, and speaker confidence, ultimately leading to improved conversational fluency.