

A REPORT ON OUR SUMMER INTENSIVE PROGRAM IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Members of the English Phonetics Seminar at Miyazaki Municipal University in Japan have been conducting a summer intensive program each year since the year 2000. Various activities to improve the members' English listening, pronunciation, and reading skills have been adopted from various sources (e.g., [1], [3] and [4]) and we have been making modifications to our program each year. This report makes some practical suggestions for improving Japanese EFL learners' English skills based on our 7-year experience.

Keywords: team spirit, comfortable atmosphere, learner-centered.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report describes the kinds of intensive activities the members carried out to improve their English communicative skills during the summer vacation of 2006. The English Phonetics Seminar members at Miyazaki Municipal University in Japan have been conducting a summer intensive program on their own since the year 2000. The primary purpose for this program is to improve the members' English skills, as there exists very few opportunities to use English in the small city in which the university is located.

The activities originally used in 2000 were proposed by the seminar instructor, and they composed up-to-date techniques proposed by various sources (e.g., [4]) for improving ESL/EFL learners' English communicative skills. However, some of the members dropped out of the program due to (1) inability to sustain motivation, (2) conflict between members, and (3) lack of positive attitudes towards study. In other words, the instructor-directed program failed to have the members understand the importance of participation, of thinking critically, of respecting and learning from others, and of seeing that the responsibility for learning ultimately rests with the learners themselves.

As a result, from the following year on, the instructor decided to have the members create their own schedules for the program and had the members select the techniques themselves. This assignment of responsibility to the members helped the members sustain their motivation throughout the program. Since 2001, they have been planning and conducting a summer program each year through trial and error. Thus, our program has been customized based solely upon a learner-centered approach.

Based on several years of trials, the members have developed a suitable program by themselves, and have established a successful summer program to overcome the difficulties they had faced in previous years. As the structure of the program has been entirely agreed upon by all members, the outcome of the program was superb. Not only did their English pronunciation, listening and reading skills improved significantly during the program, they also succeeded in conjuring up a team spirit and in maintaining their motivation to improve their English skills throughout their college life.

This report introduces the techniques the members utilized during the summer program in 2006, and makes some practical suggestions for improving EFL learners' communicative skills.

2. STUDY PERIOD

The program began on August 1st and continued through up to September 24th. The participants studied English from 9 am to 6 pm every day. Except for four days from September 12th to 15th, the members attended the program daily including weekends. In addition, all the members used only English as a means of communication throughout the study sessions except for 5 to 10 minutes a day for reflections on daily activities.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITIES

The following summarizes their activities last summer. Some suggestions for better implementation are also described.

3.1. Activity types and descriptions

3.1.1. Listening (3 hours/day): Improve listening comprehension skill [6], [8]

Listening sections (consisting of four parts) of TOEIC preparation textbooks were used. The students focused on one part per day, and shadowing practice was done with the materials in Part I (or II) and paraphrasing practice was done with the materials in Part III (or IV). Shadowing practice continued until all the members were able to exactly shadow the materials.

3.1.2. Reading (1 hour/day): Develop rapid reading skills and expand grammatical knowledge [6], [8]

Reading sections (consisting of two parts) of TOEIC preparation textbooks were used. The time assigned for answering the material was 20 minutes for Part V and 10 minutes for Part VI. The amount of reading materials studied in each activity was based upon the members' capacity to digest and review the materials on their own at home.

3.1.3. Movie (2 hours/day): Improve listening comprehension skills by paying attention to how English is spoken by native English speakers and learn various useful conversational expressions

The DVD of the American sitcom "Ally McBeal" was selected. A group leader chose a scene in advance (lasting about one minute) which contained important lexical items and phonetic features. The activities were divided into two parts. During the first 60-minute session, they dictated content words. The members listened to the conversation carried out in the scene as many times as needed until all the members thoroughly understood the targeted features and were able to write them down from dictation. During the second 60-minute session, the members shadowed the conversation in pairs. They memorized the utterances and acted out the scene as if they were the actors. Then, they role-played their conversation in front of the other members.

It is important to choose a DVD movie which includes plenty of useful conversational expressions used daily, and the theme of the movie should be interesting enough to help learners sustain their motivation level.

They used the TV show *Ally McBeal* this time, as all of the members were big fans of the show. This favorable position assisted the members in improving their listening and speaking skills. In addition, since the setting is a law firm where the main character of the movie works, highly technical lexical items are used by the actors in the show. However, the items often used in the show reinforced the objective of learning highly technical lexical items treated in reading and newspaper activities because the words are used not only in writing but also in speech.

Since it is difficult for learners to pinpoint subtle phonetic features themselves, it was crucial to select the scenes which contained relatively easy-to-analyze phonetic features. In this way, the students could get much more satisfaction out of the study activity.

3.1.4. Speaking practice (1 hour/day): Focus on the usage rather than the use of the conversational expressions

A textbook which focused on learners' attainments of useful expressions was used [5]. Two types of conversation practice were done for this activity. As for the first type, the members memorized 5 to 10 short conversational expressions, practiced in pairs, and presented the learned expressions to the other members. For the second type, they worked in pairs, created their own situation in which the memorized expressions could be used, and finally, presented their skit to the others.

To help learners retain the learned expressions in their long-term memory, it was important to have the learners create their own original conversational situations. This in turn helped them not only memorize the expressions, but also understand how to use them in real situations.

3.1.5. Newspaper articles (1 hour/day): Expand both passive and active knowledge of diverse social issues in English and improve discussion skills

Before a session, an article chosen by a group leader was given to the other members in advance so that all the members had some time to review the article. During a session, they summarized the important points of the article and memorized them. The members engaged in several rounds of conversation, each of which had different time constraints (i.e., 3 minutes, 2 minutes, and 1

minute). This activity helped learners gain fluency in English.

Another activity done here was that one member began his/her summary, but before completing the summary, he/she selected one member to take over the presentation of the summary. The member selected had to come up with a logical follow-up to the summary made by the original member. This continued until all the members had taken part in the activity. This activity focused on fostering learners' rules of logic in English. Having done either of the activities mentioned above, the members discussed the article by presenting their views on the content.

It was important for the leader to carefully choose an article that is appropriate for the proficiency level of the members. In addition, the leader needed to maintain a comfortable environment for discussion. Team spirit must also be encouraged during discussion activities.

3.1.6. Vocabulary (1 hour/day): Expand learners' passive and active vocabulary knowledge [4]

Two types of vocabulary activities were carried out: (1) Pair work (i.e., test each other in pairs); and (2) group work. During the group work, each member selected two or three vocabulary items that were often found on the TOEIC and explained their usage using examples. The other members attempted to guess the meaning of the given words from the examples presented. Having confirmed the meaning and usage of the lexical items, participants tried to make jokes and puns using the words so that everyone could retain the new items in long-term memory.

Humor helped to create conditions conducive to learning. It helped the students relax, alleviated stress, and often made it easier for them to connect on a personal level. The presence of humor in a classroom was very beneficial. However, a comfortable atmosphere was a must for this activity because the jokes could be taken as offensive to others.

3.1.7. Mock Examination: Build self-confidence in taking the TOEIC test

This activity was done two weeks prior to the students taking the actual TOEIC test. The members spent a total of 10 hours answering questions on mock TOEIC tests. Test-taking skills were focused on here.

4. TEST ACHIEVEMENTS/PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO THE PROGRAM

The following table indicates the TOEIC scores of the participants.

Table 1: TOEIC scores: listening

participants	pre	post
1	350	450
2	265	390
3	410	450
4	220	390
5	190	400
6	335	480
7	420	495

The mean score went up by 123.6 points with the standard deviations of 90.18 and 43.47 for the pre-and-post test scores, respectively. The observed improvement was significant at the 99% confidence level ($p < 0.0068$, $F = 10.67$.) It is also important to note that one of the members received a perfect score (i.e., 495) for this section.

The following table indicates the results of the reading section of the TOEIC test.

Table 2: TOEIC scores: reading

subjects	pre	post
1	265	315
2	285	350
3	305	390
4	220	290
5	200	305
6	315	375
7	345	415

The mean score for this section went up by 72.1 points with the standard deviations of 52.02 and 47.00 for the pre-and-post test scores, respectively. The improvement was significant at the 95 % confidence level ($p < 0.0186$, $F = 7.41$.)

A questionnaire about the program was also formulated and handed out to the members during the last study session. The table below is a summary of the comments expressed by the members.

Table 4: Summary of the Comments

Important factors in improving English skills	%
Team work	100
Vocabulary expansion	83
Shadowing	83
Reading and grammar	33
Assignment of a group leader	33
English only policy	17

The members attributed team work as most important in improving their English skills. The primary reasons for our successful program can be summarized as follows:

1. Group members are not rivals but advisers, helpers, and sympathetic partners.
2. Group members openly discussed their opinions towards learning strategies and personal concerns for study.
3. Group members emphasized not hard work but enjoying each activity as much as possible.

As we experienced some conflict between the members the previous year, we decided to hold a daily meeting at the end of a day for 5 to 10 minutes in Japanese. During this meeting, all the members expressed their feelings about the activities they took part in that day, and reassured themselves of the importance of cooperation among the members.

Based on their comments, team spirit and a pleasant study atmosphere were the keys to successful L2 learning.

5. MODIFICATIONS MADE THIS TIME

We made several modifications to our program last year to make our program better fit to our needs.

Concerning vocabulary expansion activity, we divided the members into pairs and had the members test each other from their partner's notebook instead of working individually as was usually done before. Since the class members were tested during the activity, their individual learning styles assisted them in memorizing the lexical items they had studied. During the last two weeks of the program, the pair style was changed to group learning (i.e., all the members tested each other). We found the group learning method to be much more effective in vocabulary expansion and in sustaining our motivation to study.

Concerning shadowing, it was somewhat time-consuming and required learners to have patience and concentration. Thus, it would be extremely difficult for an individual learner to continue shadowing practice alone. We, therefore, highly recommend that Japanese L2 learners work with others so that any difficulty they might encounter can be overcome by the support system that a team work method provides them.

With regard to the assignment of a group leader to each activity, the primary aim of this method

was to assist all the members in conducting various activities smoothly. It is, however, important to note that the group leader also took a role as an organizer or mediator in the discussion activity. Moreover, the assignment of the leader helped to cultivate personal responsibility since the leader was responsible for planning and selecting appropriate materials for an activity.

6. CONCLUDING NOTE

There are many factors involved in developing our English skills. However, based upon our experience last year, we believe that group unity is one of the crucial elements of L2 learning. If there is a team spirit and a place to study, anyone can be motivated and improve their English skills. In addition, we firmly believe that motivation has a profound effect on Japanese learners' attainment of an advanced proficiency level of English.

Finally, we'd like to point out that the total time to exposure to English was approximately 450 hours. Although all the members except one had never been abroad, all the members were able to improve their listening and reading skills immensely in two months, and they even dreamt in English several times during the summer program - all without spending a penny.

We truly think that Japanese learners of English can improve their English skills on their own while living in Japan, provided that they have friends to work with and a place to study.

7. REFERENCES

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