The Saitama Journal of Language Teaching

Activities & Techniques

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Editor

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Brad Semans

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From the Editor

Welcome to the eighth issue of Saitama Journal of Language Teaching. Only one Saitama JALT Omiya Chapter member has elected to share this issue.

Sanae Oda-Sheehan suggests a novel approach to providing students with more chances to use English in their daily lives with her self-talking activity

With this issue, SJLT Chief Editor of 8 years says goodbye to Japan and the SJLT publication. Since SJLT's conception, Ruth Kambartel has been the professional heart and mind of the publication working to ensure that the publication met its goals. We will miss her and thank her for her years of exemplary leadership and guidance.

As an arm of the Saitama JALT chapter (formerly Omiya JALT) the Saitama Journal of Language teaching has provided an opportunity for members of the language teaching community to collaborate and learn from one another. Its authors and editors have gained valuable professional experience and hope that all readers of the journal have benefited from the work each individual has done.

But nothing stays the same and as Saitama JALT and JALT on the whole continue to evolve the chapter has made the decision to suspend the journal until the energies and interests of our local membership can once again be focused on giving to the journal the amount of attention it deserves. If, as a member or prospective member, you are interested in being involved with the Saitama JALT chapter of JALT please contact us through our website at:

http://saitamajalt.weebly.com/contact.html

Brad Semans
SJLT Associate Editor

Why not self-talk? An innovative approach to improve speaking

Sanae Oda-Sheehan
Saitama JALT
sheehan@nifty.com

Introduction

Many Japanese high school students study English in an examination-focused environment while wishing to improve their oral communicative skills. Students may well feel frustrated having only limited time and resources to practice speaking, let alone opportunities to speak English with native speakers. However, it is important that they should be reminded that speaking practice could still take place even without interlocutors, if they adopt the art of talking to themselves. Such self-talk can be a very powerful tool to practice speaking in their spare time, encouraging learners to use themselves as a resource without depending on external factors, as I discovered when I was in high school learning English.

This self-talk technique, unfortunately, does not seem to have been discussed extensively in an EFL context, and my findings so far are mainly based on my own teaching and learning experiences. Nevertheless, they could suggest some insights toward possible development in EFL speaking.

Self-talk activities and students' feedback

The learners who participated in this program were highly motivated high school students planning to study at overseas colleges. Due to the demanding school curriculum, this program was conducted outside the classroom as an extracurricular activity, and the students, eager to improve their oral communicative skills, willingly agreed to take on the extra work and provided weekly feedback.

In order to get students accustomed to the concept of self-talk, several activities were initially introduced including talking about the following:

    (1) Views during commuting time

    (2) Scenes from TV shows or movies

    (3) Familiar topics such as daily activities and aspects of Japanese culture

(1) Views during commuting time

The participants initially chose the activity of talking about views from the train and tried it for one week, but their feedback was negative because using innervoice in a moving vehicle caused many

of them motion-sickness. For the second week, they practiced describing views in a stationary position during their commuting time, but it was still too difficult for them to concentrate on speaking. Although self-talk practice during commuting seemed to be a very time-efficient and ideal solution, the participants realized that there were too many distractions to practice in public.

(2) Scenes from TV shows or movies

The students then decided to practice describing scenes from TV shows because they thought it would be easier to talk aloud in private at home. I welcomed their choice because the activity would allow more time for practice. However, when I tried to support their proactive approach and suggested they choose shows to suit their own interest, they said they would need examples and more guidance in their selection. Therefore, I created a list of shows they should look for on YouTube and suggested they follow the steps below:

    1) Watch the shows as many times as you like.

    2) Pause a scene to describe it out loud, adding your own comments.

They enjoyed both watching the shows and talking about the scenes, but felt they were spending too much time wondering what to describe.

(3) Familiar topics such as daily activities and aspects of Japanese culture

In order to speed up the practice planning, I recommended talking about familiar topics because, by focusing on familiar subjects such as their own life or culture, the students should need less time for processing the contents, thereby allowing more time for linguistic and communicative aspects. As they plan to study abroad in the near future, introducing Japanese culture appeared to be an appropriate approach, and in particular, presenting Japanese folk tales such as *Momotaro (Peach Boy)* or *Kaguyahime (Bamboo Princess)* could be an excellent practice opportunity with contents providing a certain level of complexity and volume which could be adjusted depending on each learner's level. Therefore, I suggested that students should choose their favorite stories and perform in front of two types of imaginary audiences – one with Japanese people and the other with non-Japanese – and compare how they would feel while speaking.

Their feedback was mainly positive, although some of the students still had difficulty imagining an audience. Many of them indicated that they preferred having a non-Japanese audience, but could not explain why they felt that way. I surmised that the reason they felt more comfortable with a non-Japanese audience might be related to their anxiety about making mistakes in details such as who Momotaro went to the battle with or whether Kaguyahime returned to the moon or Mars in front of a Japanese audience who would likely be more familiar with the topic. As anxiety is an

acknowledged feature of language learning and anxious learners are less likely to do well in speaking (Allwright and Bailey, 1991), eliminating such anxiety should help students concentrate on their speech production and expedite the process, and above all, help them enjoy the learning experience through enhancing their identity and cultural capital.

For future studies

After these activities, I sensed some significant changes in the participants' attitude toward speaking, specifically concerning their willingness and enthusiasm to speak up during the class. In addition to possible improvement of their speech, which should be further studied quantitatively and qualitatively in future research, there seem to be remarkable advantages in these self-talk techniques, such as raising learning motivation, utilizing authentic learning materials, and promoting learners' imagination and creativity. Most importantly, the students seem to have realized the significance of exploring various ways of learning; some of those who initially laughed at my suggestions of talking to themselves and having imaginary audiences did report afterwards that they were surprised to find themselves enjoying the experience.

There are, of course, some limitations of this self-talk technique. Speaking is fundamentally a people-focused interactive task (Hughes, 2002), but the activities tried in this program lack the aspects of spontaneous interaction with interlocutors. Nevertheless, given that many learners struggle even generating initial conversation, self-talk could still be a good start to practice speaking, and future methods should be designed to promote ways to integrate self-talk with interactive activities.

Also, as learning to speak in an EFL environment involves an extensive amount of self-practice outside the classroom, it is essential that learners should take an active role so that they will assume responsibility over the learning process (Scharle and Szabó, 2000). Despite my effort to encourage their proactive participation, however, the students were still hesitant to volunteer their ideas and suggestions during the program. I realized that their passive learning style was more deeply-rooted than I had expected, and future activities should be devised to further inspire them to take charge of their own learning while the teacher would assume the role of facilitator.

The participants are now aware that it is a weak excuse to say, "I can't practice speaking because I have no one to talk to." By using themselves as a resource and taking ownership of their own learning, they know they could enjoy learning regardless of external elements, which I strongly believe is the most powerful outcome of the self-talk technique.

References

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Biographical background

Sanae Oda-Sheehan works as an EFL teacher in Saitama City and also as a communication consultant for US academic societies working with Japanese organizations. She holds an MA (TESOL) from Teachers College Columbia University, and her research interests are communicative task effectiveness, pragmatics, and teacher education.