DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 848 FL 026 124

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TITLE	Positively Interdependent: Developing Oral Fluency via Task Design.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	10p.; In: Cooperative Learning. JALT Applied Materials; see FL 026 115.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accountability; Classroom Techniques; Communicative Competence (Languages); *Cooperative Learning; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; High Schools; *Language Fluency; *Oral Language; Reading Instruction; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Japan

ABSTRACT

Despite several years of English language instruction, most Japanese students remain unable to produce nor comprehend more than rudimentary English. In order to overcome this problem, students must be motivated to participate in tasks designed to get them to use English communicatively--a difficult task in a country where students typically remain silent, refusing to participate even when the task at hand is relatively easy. Research shows that the greatest impediment to participation is not motivation, but insecurity about the ability to speak English. Because fluency is a skill achieved only through practice, tasks effective in encouraging practice are essential if students are ever to develop the requisite confidence. To this end, the 4/3/2 technique--in which learners form pairs, are assigned the role of either speaker or listener, with the speakers then giving a four minute talk on a familiar topic, changing partners, and then giving the same talk to another person, with the allotted time for the talk progressively reduced from 4 to 3 to 2 minutes--was adapted to cooperative learning principles. The result is the Retell It! 3/2/1 technique, which takes the main features of 4/3/2 (focused communication, repetition, and pressure to perform at higher than normal level) and combines them with the cooperative learning arrangements of positive interdependence and personal accountability (which research shows are powerful motivators for Japanese students). Qualitative data from student evaluations and improved student fluency from Retell It! 3/2/1 demonstrate its success. Tasks to develop fluency can be strengthened by adding cooperative learning elements of positive interdependence and individual accountability, which are powerful motivators for Japanese students. (KFT)

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Chapter 9

ED 437 848

Positively Interdependent: Developing Oral Fluency via Task Design

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In 1993 the Japanese Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) began implementation of Oral Communication, the newest addition to the national English curriculum. Consisting of three sections, "A," a listening and speaking course, "B," a listening course, and "C," a public speaking course, Oral Communication aims to alleviate one of the greatest problems facing the national English curriculum—namely that despite six years of study, most students can neither produce nor comprehend more than rudimentary oral English. This is demonstrated in the curriculum guidelines published by the *Monbusho* in 1991, where Oral Communication A, B, and C all share one goal: to raise students to a level at which they can actively communicate using English.

Fluency building tasks are one way teachers can work towards achieving this goal. However, students must be willing to participate in these tasks. They must use English communicatively before fluency can be developed. Unfortunately, in many Japanese classrooms, it is not uncommon to find students remaining

Lee, G. (1999). Positively interdependent: Developing oral fluency via task design. In D. Kluge, S. McGuire, D. Johnson, & R. Johnson (Eds.), *JALT applied materials: Cooperative learning* (pp. 117-125). Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching.

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silent, refusing to participate even when the task at hand is relatively easy. This is not, however, due to a lack of motivation. The booming commercial industry catering to English education is strong evidence that many students in Japan are motivated to learn English. Indeed, according to some estimates, as much as thirty billion U.S. dollars are spent each year on English language education alone (Koike & Tanaka, 1995). In addition, a large section of most university entrance exams is devoted to English. This means that English is especially important for high school students who want to go on to university.

Why then do many students hesitate to participate in class? One reason may be they lack fluency and thus are insecure about their ability to use English. This idea is supported by the *General Survey of English Language Teaching in Japan*, an eleven-year nationwide study, which reports that 74.5% of all respondents felt that they were weak in speaking (Koike & Tanaka, 1995). This is not just limited to students. During roundtable discussions at an All Japan Private Teachers' Union research conference, teachers in one group reported feeling insecure about using English, especially in classrooms where they taught together with native speakers (Yoshino, 1998).

Fluency building tasks can help students feel more confident about their speaking. The ability to use language smoothly and easily is a skill, and can develop only through practice (Schmidt, 1992; Nation, 1994, 1995). The "4/3/2" technique (Maurice, 1983) is an example of a task that research suggests helps to develop oral fluency. However, it requires students to take part in extended and relatively unstructured speaking. For many Japanese high school students, this presents a challenge so daunting that they simply do not participate in the task.

The 4/3/2 Technique: A Way to Develop Fluency

The 4/3/2 technique was created by Maurice (1983) to help learners develop oral fluency. In 4/3/2, learners form pairs and are assigned the role of either "speaker" or "listener." The speakers give a four minute talk on a familiar topic. Then they change partners, giving the same talk to a different person. During the second delivery, however, the time is limited to only three minutes. Finally, they change partners again and try to deliver the same talk within two minutes. The goal is to give the same talk three times, each time speaking faster so as to finish within the allotted time. Arevart and Nation (1991) found that from the first delivery to the third, the rate of speaking significantly increased by just over eighteen words per minute while the number of hesitations significantly decreased from 17.5 hesitations in the first talk to 13.64 in the third.

What features of the 4/3/2 technique are responsible for these increases? Nation (1994, 1995) argues that for a task to encourage fluency development, it must let learners practice using fluent speech. But what is fluent speech? Nation

(1995) defines it as: 1) speech in real time; 2) speaking without much attention or effort; and 3) a skill. Note that because speaking fluently is seen as a skill, tasks which aim to develop fluency must push learners to perform more fluently than they are normally able.

The 4/3/2 technique contains all three of Nation's (1995) characteristics required for a fluency building task. First, because the listener changes each time, the focus of the activity is on the communication of a message. Second, each successive repetition of the talk makes the task easier. By the second delivery the speakers have determined the content, so they can focus on giving a faster, smoother talk. Finally, the decreasing time limit for each talk encourages students to perform at a level higher than they are normally able. The 4/3/2 technique is very challenging for most Japanese high school students. Some students refuse to even open their mouths and begin. They may claim to have nothing to say, or simply be too shy to try. Other students, sure that there is nothing to be learned by listening to another student talk, do not bother to pay attention to what their partner is saying. Finally, many students stop speaking after only one or two minutes during the first delivery of their talk, claiming to have said all they have to say. This means the pressure to speak faster on the two subsequent deliveries is lost, reducing the value as a fluency building task.

Cooperative Learning: A Way to Encourage Participation

Structuring fluency building tasks so as to contain characteristics of cooperative learning (CL) is one way teachers can try to encourage more participation in the classroom. Olsen and Kagan (1992, p. 8) define CL as any "group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others." According to this definition, the elements of positive interdependence and individual accountability are the defining features of cooperative learning in a groupwork situation.

Structuring positive interdependence into the design of tasks may be a particularly powerful way to encourage student participation in high school classrooms, as groups structured in this way are common in Japanese schools. In elementary and secondary schools, for instance, students are usually separated into different *kumi*, or homeroom classes, and each *kumi* is usually separated into smaller groups called a *han*. It is not uncommon for each *kumi* to have certain responsibilities, such as cleaning the classrooms, watering plants, and tidying up around the school. These responsibilities are then divided among the different *han*, and each individual in a *han* is assigned a specific job such as emptying the wastepaper baskets or washing the blackboard. When something is left undone, however, it is not

unusual for the entire *han* or *kumi* to be scolded, even though it may be the result of only one or two individuals. Students, then, are held responsible for both their own actions as well as the actions of the other members of their group. This means that groups structured with positive interdependence are an everyday part of early Japanese education.

Japanese students, therefore, are accustomed to working together and sharing responsibility for their actions with their classmates. For this reason, they may be more likely to participate in activities when they feel the sense of responsibility that comes with tasks structured with positive interdependence and individual accountability.

Putting It All Together: Making the Retell It! 3/2/1 Task

Retell It! 3/2/1 takes the main features of 4/3/2 — meaning focused communication, repetition, and pressure to perform at a higher than normal level — and combines them with the CL arrangements of positive interdependence and individual accountability. This creates a task that both encourages student participation and develops fluency.

Retell It! 3/2/1 requires two different texts, which should be short (generally between 200 to 400 words) and easy for the students to understand and discuss. It is important that the texts be kept simple because the goal of the activity is to develop fluency, not linguistic knowledge. Ideally, there should be no new words or grammar. (Examples of Retell It! 3/2/1, and a quiz are available upon request from the author.)

The procedure for Retell It! 3/2/1 is similar to 4/3/2, except that students, instead of coming up with a story on their own, have to retell the text given to them. In this sense it resembles the well known "Jigsaw technique." As with Jigsaw, at first glance the task seems complex. However, once students and teachers become accustomed to it, it runs smoothly and efficiently. This means it can be used with a wide variety of class sizes. I have successfully used it with classes as small as two and as large as fifty. Classroom procedure for Retell It! 3/2/1 can be broken down into six different steps.

Classroom Procedure for Retell It! 3/2/1

Step One. Separate the class into two groups. This can be done quickly and easily by having the students count off "one, two, one, two." Have all the "ones" move to one end of the classroom, and all the "twos" move to the other. Then give each group their part of the story.

Step Two. After the students have had several minutes to read their text, the teacher goes to each group and answers any questions that students have about it. At this point it is helpful to go over the main points of the text. If possible, the

teacher should give an example "retelling" to the students.

Step Three. Students return to their original seats and make a pair with someone who has read the other text. At this point the teacher should explain how students will move when they switch partners. It is helpful to draw a diagram on the blackboard to show students how to move. Allowing students to choose their own partners is a possible option; however, it is not recommended for two reasons. First, it requires significantly more time. Second, students who are poor at English will tend to be chosen last, and such an environment should be avoided.

Step Four. Group One becomes the first speakers, and Group Two becomes the listeners. The Group One students are given three minutes to retell their text. After three minutes they are told to stop speaking and switch partners according to the map on the blackboard. Then the same students try to retell their text again, this time in only two minutes. When time is up, they are told to stop talking and to switch partners again. This is the third and last time these students will retell their text. They must speak as quickly as possible, as they are only given one minute for the retelling. These three successive retellings with the continually declining time limit give Retell It! 3/2/1 its name.

Step Five. When Group One students finish their third retelling, they become the listeners and Group Two students become the speakers. No partner change is necessary for Group Two's first retelling. The exact same procedure described in step four continues, except that now when Group Two students switch partners, they go in the opposite direction in order to pair up with a new person. It is helpful if the teacher shows this on the blackboard diagram by drawing new arrows going in the opposite direction.

Step Six. After all the students have had a chance to retell their text three times and listen to a retelling of the other text three times, they return to their seats and are given a short, easy quiz covering both groups' texts.

Like 4/3/2, Retell It! 3/2/1 contains all the characteristics of a fluency building task. First, it is meaning focused because students are always talking to a new partner who will be tested on the material. Second, it is an experience task. This is accomplished in two different ways: the language in the texts is familiar and easy for the students, and the students repeat their retellings three times. Finally, the task encourages students to perform at a level higher than they are normally able. This is done by decreasing the amount of time allowed for each retelling. Students must speak faster each time if they want to complete their retelling. Note that this is made possible by the fact that they repeat their retelling three times and that the text is written in easy-to-understand English.

Unlike 4/3/2, however, Retell It! 3/2/1 structures positive interdependence and individual accountability into its design. Individual accountability is achieved because each student receives a grade on the short test at the end. Positive interdependence occurs because each group receives a different text, yet the test at the end contains questions covering both texts. This means students must

depend on their partner's explanation to get information about the other text. In other words, both speakers and listeners are motivated to do a good job because they share responsibility for each other's learning.

A Student-Based Evaluation of Retell It! 3/2/1

I have used Retell It! 3/2/1 extensively in both high school and university level classes in Japan. The evaluation reported here is from the first year I began to make and use Retell It! 3/2/1 tasks. I have chosen to report this evaluation and not a later one because I feel that the information that it reveals is relevant to teachers who will be using the technique in high school classrooms, especially those who are using it for the first time or who wish to create their own Retell It! 3/2/1 tasks.

Retell It 3/2/1 was used as a supplement to the designated Oral Communication (OC) textbook in a second year high school OC classroom at an all girls private high school in Tokyo. Like most OC courses, class met only once a week. The Retell It! 3/2/1 task was used between each lesson in the OC textbook, for a total of six times over the academic year. At the end of the academic year, students (N = 157) were given a short survey consisting of two open questions. The first asked students to give one or more "good points" about the Retell It! 3/2/1 technique. The second asked them to give one or more "bad points."

Table 1. *Categories of Good Points Raised by Students for Retell It! 3/2/1*

	Category	Number of Students	Percent of Students
1.	I became able to explain what I had read in English	39	19%
2.	It made me try to speak English	28	14%
3.	It helps you become a better reader	16	8%
4.	I was able to explain using my own words	15	7%
5.	The texts used in the activity were stories	14	7%
6.	It helps you become a better speaker	12	6%
7.	It was fun/interesting	11	5%
8.	You have to really understand what you read in order to explain it	10	5%
9.	The grammar and vocabulary were easy	9	4%
10.	It was good English practice	8	4%
11.	I became more used to English	6	3%
12.	I could speak to/listen to many people	5	2%
	Not able to be categorized	28	14%
	Total	201	98%

Note. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2. *Categories of Bad Points Raised by Students for Retell It! 3/2/1*

Category	Number of Students	Percent of Students
1. People used Japanese	43	23%
2. Explaining what you have read in English is difficult	30	16%
3. There was not enough time to finish explaining	19	10%
4. You give the same talk three times	15	8%
5. It was not fun/interesting	13	7%
6. People read the story to their partner	11	6%
7. Sometimes you cannot understand your partner or she cannot understand you	9	5%
8. If you do not understand in the beginning, the rest is impossible	7	4%
Not able to be categorized	41	22%
Total	188	101.00%

Note. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Students provided 201 good points. These broke down into 12 different categories, with approximately 14% which did not fit well into any category. Students also provided 188 bad points. These separated into 8 different categories, with approximately 22% being unable to be fit into any category. Tables 1 and 2 show these categories, as well as the number and percentage of students whose responses fit into each one.

These student comments provide a valuable look at some of the different features of Retell It! 3/2/1. That 28 students responded that a good point of the task was it made them use English (category 2) suggests the CL features of positive interdependence and individual accountability were doing their job to motivate students to participate. This was also reflected in category 7 of the bad points, where students remarked that sometimes they could not make their partner understand them, or that they could not understand their partner. This means that students felt pressure to understand what their partner was saying, as well as pressure to make their partner understand what they were saying. In other words, communicating was important to them.

However, in category 1 of the bad points, 43 students reported that Japanese was sometimes used during the activity. Furthermore, in category 6, students reported that people sometimes read their story to their partner instead of explaining it. There were two reasons reported for this. The first was that speaking in English was too hard, that they did not feel confident enough to tell their partner about what they had read in English. The second was that there was not enough time to finish explaining what they had read during the second and third retellings.

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Based on these responses, we can see that certain features of the task had unintended, negative effects. While the CL features of positive interdependence and individual accountability may have encouraged participation as implemented, they did not encourage the students to use English. Some students evidently regarded the test as the most important goal, and therefore chose to read their text aloud or use Japanese instead of English during the retellings. Likewise, the decreasing time limit, a feature supposed to encourage students to speak faster, to perform at a level higher than they are normally able, clearly encouraged some students to read aloud or use Japanese during the task.

The language used in the Retell It! 3/2/1 tasks was highly controlled. All vocabulary and grammar had been taught to the students by their third year of junior high school, which was two years before the task was given. Nevertheless, 43 students reported they used Japanese to retell the story, and 30 reported that explaining what they had read was very hard.

In cases like this, particularly where students have low fluency, it may be better to run Retell It! 3/2/1 the first few times without recording their grades on the short test at the end. While the test can still be used to increase motivation to participate, the teacher does not have to record the points. In doing so, teachers can make the task less stressful for students and encourage them to focus on one of the real goals of the task: becoming more skilled in using English. Extending the time allowed for each delivery may also help students who feel they don't have enough time.

One final point that emerged from the students' responses was that some obviously did not understand how the three successive retellings worked to develop fluency. This was reflected in category 4 of the bad points, where 15 students remarked that a bad aspect of the activity was that they gave the same talk three times. These students commented that "two times was enough," or "you get tired having to do the same talk three times." Had the teachers explained to the students more thoroughly the concept of fluency development, such comments probably would not have surfaced. The teachers could have explained, for instance, that an important goal was to speak faster and hesitate less with each successive retelling, and that this would be possible because of the three repetitions.

It is important that students understand how the activity works, for this can help them understand the value of what they are doing, hence increasing motivation to participate. Teachers who plan to use Retell It! 3/2/1 in their classrooms should be sure to explain what the goals are, and how they will work to improve the students' speaking ability.

Conclusion

In Japan, implementing tasks with features that develop fluency is one way to meet the curriculum goals for OC (oral communication) classes outlined by *Monbusho*. Such tasks can be strengthened by adding the CL elements of positive interdependence and individual accountability, which are powerful motivators for Japanese students.

Retell 3/2/1 is an example of a task which has been systematically designed. Its design includes features of the 4/3/2 technique, which work to increase fluency, as well as the CL elements of positive interdependence and individual accountability, which encourage active participation.

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