

Using Journal Writing to Help with Free Talking

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Silence. That is what I used to hear when I asked a question to the students in my first year high school English conversation class. Silence. That is what was heard when these students were “free talking” with each other in English. Silence...not always a good sound.

When I started teaching at Fukushima Kosen many years ago, I strove to find creative and interesting ways to get the students talking more in English to help them improve their oral English abilities. All were rather unsuccessful until approximately six years ago when I was introduced to a clever warm-up activity by a Japanese colleague. Initially it was not a perfect exercise, but with continual tweaking, I believe that I have designed a fun, yet educational, way to get my students interacting in English with more ease. This four-part activity, which is easily incorporated into any English conversation class regardless of the students’ proficiency levels, involves journal writing and free talking.

Prior to commencing this four-part activity, I inform the students that while their partner is speaking, they are to remain silent and instead actively listen to and remember what is being said in order to subsequently re-tell it to another student and then write it down. I also remind them of the importance of eye contact. For the first part of the activity, the students stand up, face their partners and begin talking freely, unconcerned with making grammar or vocabulary mistakes. I give them a topic to talk about, usually related to the theme of the class or the previous class, and then one student starts talking while their partner listens. After one minute they switch roles and repeat. After one cycle is done, the students switch partners and for the second part of the activity, the first student spends 30 seconds retelling what his/her first partner said and then the second student does the same. In part three, the students remain with their new partners and each one takes a turn talking for 1 minute repeating, and hopefully adding details and fluency to what they initially said. Finally, the students return to their seats and write down what they remember of what both partners said. Overall, this activity focuses on speaking, active listening, and writing.

At the beginning of each year, the students start with one minute talking and 30 seconds of repeating, and by the end of the year they work up to one minute 40 seconds of talking and 40 seconds of repeating. However, when I first started this activity I observed that many students struggled throughout the whole year to talk for the entire allotted time. I heard a lot of “umms” or silence. Even after I told the students not to worry about making mistakes and not using “proper” English, usually after 30-40 seconds the sound of the students’ voices became quieter and quieter. Before the activity started, I would give the students hints as to what they could talk about, and I would encourage them to talk about anything related to the topic. However, my scaffolding and support seemed to come to nothing, and I was at a loss as to what to do to encourage my students to just talk.

However, that all changed in February 2016 when I was introduced to a book that has helped immensely with this problem. *My High School Writing Journal* by Helene Jarmol Uchida has provided the learning support that my students needed.

This book is organized into six themes such as My Family, My School, Sport, Hobbies and Entertainment, and each theme has between 6 and 11 topics. For example, under the theme My School, topics include “My School”, “My Friends at

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School”, “My Favorite Subject”, “The Best School Trip”, all of which are relevant to the students’ lives and therefore easy for them to write and speak about. The topics are also diverse enough that they easily connect to what is being taught in class. For example, when I teach a unit on “The Family”, I can assign the corresponding units in the journal, such as “My Family, My Parents, Family Rules”, for the students to write about. In addition, there are enough journal entries to match the number of weeks that I spend on a particular subject.

In April 2016, I adjusted the warm-up activity to include journal writing. The students are given a journal topic to write about for homework with the instructions that they must fill the entire page and, if possible, to add extra pages to make it longer. In the following class, without referring to their journal (although before the class I often find the students rereading what they have written), the students talk about what they have written, using the aforementioned speaking, listening and writing warm-up pattern. What I have found is that the students are now very animated when they talk and that there is very little, if any, silence. Only if the student fails to come to class prepared does (s)he find talking for the allocated time difficult. Since the students have already written on the subject, they are then able to freely talk about it. Consequently, the students are becoming more successful in expressing themselves, demonstrating an increase in their oral fluency.

Furthermore, this activity has also benefited the students’ aural skills. Initially, there was a clear division between the students who wrote a lot about what their partner said to them and those who did not. It would appear that the students who wrote a lot started the year with a rather strong aptitude and higher English proficiency level than the students who wrote very little. However, as the year progressed, the gap between the amounts written by both groups became narrower and narrower. It would seem that the students became more interested in and adept at understanding what their partners said.

As the current and prevalent teaching philosophy with regards to journal writing is to use it to develop the students’ writing skills, recently I introduced dialogue journaling to this activity in the hopes of improving the students’ written abilities as well. So now the journal is used as a tool for not only improving the students oral communication skills (which is my primary goal), but also as a mode of written communication between the students and myself. As Kreeft Peyton (1993) stated, these types of journals “not only open new channels of communication, but they also provide natural contexts for language and literacy development.” Kreeft Peyton also argued that this dialogue journaling technique allows the teacher to learn more about his/her students while not hampering the free form of this writing technique. Any “markings” the teacher makes is in the form of comments about the content of what the students wrote rather than to correct any mistakes made. Tanner and Clement (1997) commented that “since the entries are not graded, the students can feel free to focus on the exploration and discovery process of writing and are less threatened if they make mistakes during their experimentation with the language” (p.113). It can be argued that since the teacher’s written responses to the students’ journal entries act as a model of correct language form and structure, the more exposure the students get of it, the better it will be for their writing skills.

Owing to the fact that although my 1st year class has 41 students in it, I only teach half of them on one day (Wednesdays) and the other half on a different day (Fridays). This allows me the time needed to respond to the students’ entries. If this were not the case and I taught all 41 students at one time, I would have to omit or adapt this part of the activity.

Since I have only just introduced dialogue journal writing to this activity, it is too early to determine what effect it has had on my students’ written abilities. However, as I have seen a great advancement in the students’ oral and aural skills with the introduction of the journal, I am also hoping to see an improvement in their written skills after a few months of dialogue writing. If successful, this activity would be a very quick and fun way to develop the “4 skills” of language acquisition - reading (what the teacher writes), writing (the journal entry, “conversation” with the teacher, what their partner spoke about), listening (to their partner) and speaking.

References

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Bio: Erika Watanabe is a Specially Appointed Associate Professor at the National Institute of Technology, Fukushima College. Her ultimate goal as an educator is to encourage her students to think outwardly. She believes that positive societal change will happen if we are able to empower the younger generation to be active in society, to be curious and ask questions, and to think about how they want the world, their country, their city to be.