Digital Enhancement of Language Learning: Students as Classroom Learning Resource*

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Harada, Yasunari, Mayumi Kawamura and Kanako Maebo. 2007. Digital Enhancement of Language Learning: Students as Classroom Learning Resource. *Linguistic Research* 24(1), 83-104. The first author has designed and implemented college English classes emphasizing face-to-face oral interactions within small groups of students in class, presupposing and expecting further cultivation of learners' ability to learn for themselves, by themselves and among themselves. In this paper, we discuss some of the pedagogical considerations behind those designs of class activities and touch upon a related project on digitally recording students' interactions. It is interesting to notice, in passing, how introduction of various recording devices into those language classes positively affect students' motivations and performances in their learning activities.

Keywords   peer review, peer evaluation, peer support for learning, face-to-face oral response, extensive reading, digital audio recording, digital video camera

1. Introduction

Japanese students are generally known for their poor proficiencies in English. Perception among the general public in Japan and among themselves is that their spoken proficiency is poorer than their written proficiency. The reality is that their overall proficiency is poor and their productive proficiency is poorer

than their receptive proficiency, reflecting different degrees among various skills to which students train themselves in preparation for university entrance examinations. Sample collection of scores for automated spoken test of English available at our request suggest that the average or overall proficiency in spoken English of Japanese college freshmen is lower than that of Italian or Taiwanese counterparts and much lower than that of 14-year-old Dutch occupational high school students[2]. Since getting better scores in the college entrance examinations is the greatest motivations for most of the high school students for studying English, they have no further focused motivation for learning English once they enter college, except some might be interested in getting higher TOEIC scores in preparation for employment applications for various companies and organizations toward their graduation. Given time and budget constraints, what college English teachers can hope to achieve in their English classes are limited, but ironically, societal demands for better English education at college are increasing. We believe we have come up with an interesting class activity designs which enable students to help each other learn English, improve their motivation for learning to speak and write in English in an active way, and cultivate positive attitude for personal interactions and face-to-face real-time communication. In this article, we try to give some brief overview of those class activities and how or why they work the way they do. Our greatest finding is that peer students in class are the greatest motivating factor in those interactive communication activities as listeners and readers and facilitators.

2. Background

Faculty at the undergraduate School of Law of Waseda University revised its entire curriculum for students entering in the school year of 2004-205 and

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[2] The scores, which were not intended for statistical comparison, were provided by Ordinate Corporation for a joint presentation at JACET in 2002 [1].

later.[3] One reason for this change was introduction of professional graduate law schools into Japanese universities as part of across-the-board legal reforms in the society. Waseda University decided to create a new graduate school for legal professionals, while maintaining the existing undergraduate school of law and academic graduate school of law. Accordingly, there were various changes, especially in the allocation of law experts to various schools, namely about one third of the legal experts formerly belonging to the undergraduate school of law and teaching at the academic graduate school at the same time moved entirely to the new professional graduate law school, while another third was to belong to both the existing schools and the new professional law school. Also, the new system for bringing up and selecting legal professionals necessitated reconsideration of the identity, objectives and curriculum of the undergraduate school of law. Quite independently, Waseda University had decided to establish a new undergraduate School of International Liberal Studies and seven out of eighteen English teaching faculty members formerly belonging to the undergraduate School of Law were to move to the new school as of April 2004 and none was going to be hired to replace them at that point. All these internal organizational changes were taking place[4] when reformulation of the educational goals and curriculum were proposed, discussed and decided on.

The new curriculum emphasized 'cultivation of international citizens with legal mind', whatever that might mean to different parties, with a result that languages were assigned four additional credits toward graduation. This translates into one additional 90-minute class for two semesters or two 90-minute classes for one semester and may not sound like a substantial improvement, but it actually was a rather significant decision because the credits required toward graduation in the legal subjects were substantially

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[3] Japanese school year begins on April first and ends on March 31st.

[4] Around the same time, the university authority proposed to reorganize faculty members belonging to undergraduate schools, graduate schools and research institutions into 'unified faculty' for management purposes. This proposal has implemented as of September 16th, 2005. In the mean while, a new school building for the undergraduate school of law was under construction since 2000 until it was completed in March 2005.

reduced. For students taking English as one of the two languages they study while at the undergraduate School of Law, our new requirement is that they take two English classes per week during the four semesters in the first and second years in the university plus one course of the 'tutorial English" offered at the Open Education Center of the university, which consists of rather intensive English sessions emphasizing oral and written fluency, with four students meeting twice a week with a tutor and writing follow-up scribbles online. Two other "traditional" English classes in the first year are automatically assigned, one class taught by a native English speaker and one class taught by a Japanese teacher. In the second year, students choose the classes they take, based on the class schedule, teacher and the syllabus.[5]

There were two additional considerations that have to be taken into perspective in order to properly understand the significance of this curricular reform. One thing is the overall national syllabus change stipulated by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Roughly speaking, Japanese national syllabi for elementary, junior high and senior high schools undergo minor changes every three years and somewhat greater changes every ten years. The new national syllabi implemented in elementary schools starting in the school year of 2002-2003 and junior and senior high schools starting in the school year of 2003-2003 introduced a number of major changes and is considered the greatest shift in the past half century or so. One of the major changes is introduction of "classes for comprehensive study," which is intended to handle issues like international understanding, environmental problems and other subject matters that do not fall under any particular existing subjects of Math, Language, Social Study and Science. One of the reasons it is called the class for comprehensive study is that it emphasized student-centered way of learning, in which students are to conduct survey on a topic, give presentations to the class and submit a written report. This approach was encouraged, not only in the "class for

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[5] The new English curriculum at the undergraduate school of law also emphasized productive skills, integrated tasks, group activity and self-learning, which are natural ingredients for successful college education. We cannot go into too much detail here.

comprehensive study" but also in traditional subjects of Math, Language, Social Study and Science. Another change was encouragement or promotion of use of computers and other ICT support in all subjects and this was expected to go hand-in-hand with the encouragement of student-centered activities. In senior high school, this lead to the introduction of a completely new subject of "Information Study" in which students are to study the scientific nature of information, learn how to use computers and network effectively, and acquire basic literacy including moral and ethical issues of ICT. This introduction of a completely new subject was one of the greatest changes in the post-WWII history of Japanese educational system, but some argue that it is questionable to what degree this change was successful.

Another development surrounding English language learning at the college level is planning and announcement of Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology on its Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities[6] on July 12th in 2002 and announcement for its follow-up Action Plan[7] on March 31st in 2003. There has always been private and public proposals to improve English education in Japan and Ministry of Education revised its national syllabus for junior and senior high schools at least every three years. In recent years, the emphasis has been on communicative competence, but the resulting proficiency among the high school graduates are far from satisfactory. One innovative aspect of the strategic and action plans, along with the idea to utilize third-party proficiency tests for evaluating students' achievements, was that it set various numerical targets. Students graduating from junior high schools and senior high schools are expected to obtain such and such scores in such and such tests. Teachers in those schools are expected to get certain scores on their own and the national and local governments are to offer various financial supports for teachers to achieve those goals. On the other hand, the plans remained somewhat vague

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[6] 2002/07/12: Strategic Plan to Cultivate "Japanese With English Abilities"
http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/2002/07/020901.htm

[7] 2003/03/31: Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"
http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm

as to the goals and objectives of college English education, partly because there were such diversity of proficiency among college learners of English and partly because the plans were formulated in section of the ministry which was responsible for the primary and secondary education.

One additional factor inside the university was an English language teaching working group report in the fall of 2001 submitted to the committee for coming up with a new generation "Grand Design" of the university. In the report, various proposals for improving English education at Waseda University were proposed so that the graduating students would be equipped with English "abilities with which they can engage in discussions." One of the specific implementation of this idea was Tutorial English courses offered at the Open Education Center as official subject since 2003. As mentioned above, this consists of rather intensive English sessions emphasizing oral and written fluency, with four students meeting twice a week with a tutor and writing follow-up scribbles online.

All these internal factors directly or indirectly impacted on our thinking when we discussed how to reform English language curriculum and how to realize the ideas behind those changes into specific class activities.   However, the new curriculum brought about significant changes in the way classes are conducted by further two factors.   One of those changes is in the student demographics. Examinees considering Waseda School of Law prefer Tokyo University. Their decisions are obvious, when they pass entrance examinations for both. Since most of the major universities with undergraduate schools of law set up professional law school, they had to reduce the number of students accepted at the undergraduate level in order to keep the student-to-faculty ration within government regulations. This change in the entrance student capacity was across the board, a student who might have had a marginal chance of getting accepted at Tokyo University knew he would not succeed even if he tried again. The changes in the examinees' thinking are complex and manifold, but as far as the school year of 2004-2005 are concerned, the students were distinctly much more motivated and focused than students in

former years. Another factor was related to the faculty demographics. After seven out of eighteen English teaching faculty moved to the newly established School of International Liberal Studies, five faculty members were to retire within five years and we were able to hire new faculty members to replace them. A new curriculum with existing teaching population ends up in old teaching methodology under new names but we were able to replace the teachers under the new curriculum. Although specific details of what I report below are aspects of my own teaching and class activities, the objectives and the general ideas are shared by most of my English teaching colleagues at School of Law, which is a major difference from just a few years ago.

2. Class Activities

2.1 Classes

Students entering School of Law in the school year of 2004-2005 and later have to obtain twenty credits in languages, ten for each of the two languages they choose from among English, German, French, Chinese, Korean, Italian and so on. Technically, English is not required but most students choose English and some other language. One credit in language courses translates into one 90-minute for one semester. In case they choose English as one of the two foreign languages they take, they are enrolled in two classes automatically, which means students do not have choice over the particular class they take. The two classes for the first semesters are called English Bridge-1-1 by a Japanese teacher and Bridge-1-2 by a native teacher. In the second semester of the first year, they are enrolled in English Gate-1 by a Japanese teacher and Gate-2 by a native teacher. When the curriculum reform was discussed, it was presupposed that Bridge and Gate classes are going to be separate, taught be different teachers. As things turned out, that involved too much paperwork and teaching the first year students for one year turned out much better than

just half yea, both for the teachers and for the students. For some historical reasons that now has become obscure, the additional tutorial English classes called English Bridge-2. This is an intensive English sessions for which the same group of four students meet twice a week, each time with a tutor. The "classes" or levels and the particular group of four students are assigned on the basis of WETec score, which is a customized version of CASEC, a computer-adaptive test of English proficiency in reading and listening comprehension. In the second year, for each of the spring and the fall semester, students have to take two English Theme classes based on the class schedule, the teacher, and the syllabus. Those who would like to take further intensive English lessons can choose to enroll in English Intensive Theme classes, which meet twice a week with the same teacher. Students in the third and fourth school year who would like to continue their study of English can choose to take English Advanced classes. Lastly, we also offer English classes whose credits are not counted toward graduation. These optional classes can be taken by students in any school year.

2.2 Students

The principal researcher teaches in general six English classes every semester. Three of those classes are Bridge-1-1 in the spring semester and Gate in the fall semester of the first year, with something like 20 to 30 students in each class randomly allocated based on the other foreign language they elected. As has been mentioned, students in the Bridge classes in the spring semester and Gate classes in the fall semester are for the most part the same, although there are a few additions or subtractions in the roster. English proficiency differ greatly among those students: with TOEIC scores, they range from less than 300 to more than 900 and with Versant for English scores they range from less than 30 to 80.[8] Two classes are Theme classes for the second year students. They choose the particular class they enroll in based on class

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[8] Further discussions of what TOEIC and Versant for English are and what those scores

schedule, syllabus, and other factors they think are important.[9] In the past several years, more than half of the students in those second-year classes were `repeaters`, or students who had taken the first-year classes taught by the principal researcher. Spring and fall classes are independently enrolled but in the past several years, students tend to be conservative in their choice of classes and teachers. The remaining one class is an "advanced" class for third- and fourth-year students. This is completely elective and only a handful of students are enrolled each semester. Overall, each semester the principal researcher is in charge of 80 to 90 first-year students, 40 to 70 second-year students and around a dozen of third- and fourth-year students. Many of the first-year students would be enrolled in the second-year classes the next year, and some of them go on to take the advanced classes.

As is mentioned in the previous subsection, English proficiency of students enrolled in those classes show fairly substantial diversity, as indicated by their TOEIC total scores with a standard error of measurement of 50 ranging from a little less than 300 and well over 900 or their Versant for English scores with a standard error of measurement of 2 ranging from a little less than 30 to its maximal 80 [10], partly reflecting their diverse experience of learning or exposure to English prior to entrance to university and partly reflecting their motivation or interest in learning English.

TOEIC is a standardized test of English proficiency test, relatively focusing on reading and listening comprehension, aimed to measure 'English for International Communication'. The test items are controlled by ETS, which also is in charge of TOEFL and other standardized tests. It has been around in Japan for more than 30 years and in recent years, it has widely been adopted

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might mean will follow in the following paragraphs.

[9] In fact, the greatest factor in those decisions traditionally has been the perceived ease with which the students would expect to get the necessary credits. Student groups compile and sell brochures at the beginning of the school year purportedly reporting difficulty/ease of various courses along with other information they think are important in choosing courses.

[10] Ordinate testing system internal gives scores ranging from 10 to 90 but the scores it reports to the test taker and/or the score keeper range from 20 to 80, any score below 20 reported as 20 and any score above 80 as 80.

in major companies for employment and promotion screening purposes.[11] Some universities in Japan waive students to enrol in obligatory English classes when a student has obtained a certain TOEIC and/ or TOEFL score. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has been strongly endorsing and encouraging high schools, colleges and graduate schools to adopt TOEIC, TOEFL and/or other standardized test for English in student recruitment, placement, credit assignment and graduation with ministry directives and in its Strategic and Action Plans to cultivate Japanese with English abilities. In recent years, the number of annual test takers for TOEIC is growing[12], most notably in Korea and in Japan. TOEIC recently changed its test composition somewhat, to accommodate expectations from industry and elsewhere. The new test has been administered in the `public` test in Japan and Korea since 2006 and is propagated to other regions and IP version starting 2007.[13] In the school year 2000-2001, 60 first-year students took TOEIC public test in September, with an average score of a little less than 500 and ranging from a little less than 300 to a little more than 950. In the school year of 2006-2007, 80 students took TOEIC public test in June with an average score of around 570. It is difficult to tell, however, what this different might or might no mean, since there are many interrelated variables and complicated issues surrounding this nominal difference. It is premature to think that the new curriculum turned out so effective that it resulted in the change in the average TOEIC score. In fact, we cannot compare the two average scores because the 2000 score is from those of the first-year students while the 2006 score is from the first-year students and the second-year students combined.[14] In fact any comparison is rather meaningless because the test data are obtained from students enrolled in the English classes taught

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[11] http://www.toeic.or.jp/toeic/pdf/data/katsuyo_2007.pdf (in Japanese).

[12] http://www.toeic.or.jp/toeic/pdf/about/transition1979_2006.pdf (in Japanese).

[13] http://www.toeic.or.jp/toeic/about/what/renewal.html (in Japanese).

[14] Readers outside Japan might think that the average score of the second-year students would be higher than that of the first-year students. Readers in Japan would suspect such is far from the fact. At this point, the authors do not have reliable data on this point regarding students currently enrolled in the undergraduate School of Law of Waseda University.

by the first author of this paper, and not all students applied for the test and not all students who applied for the test actually took the test. It is quite conceivable, although we do not have any substantial evidence to prove this point, that students in 2006 became more aware of the employment significance of TOEIC scores and those with lower confidence simply decided not to take the test while those with higher confidence actually took the test. In 2000, students may have been aware of such significance but as first-year students they might not have cared as much. Also, as suggested in an earlier section, we have slightly different demographic in the students entering the school, so that the average proficiency of English as measured by TOEIC might be better among students entering after 2004 than those who had entered before those changes. Also, as students in the second-year English classes choose the classes on their own, it may be that the students in those particular classes are slightly more proficient than the general average of the entire school.

The principal researcher has been utilizing Versant for English (a.k.a. PhonePass / SET-10) since the school year of 2000-2001. Versant for English is an automated spoken English proficiency test, delivered over the telephone and scored automatically using speech recognition engine developed based on native and non-native responses and scoring engine based on human ratings for non-native responses. Each test consists of a little less than 60 questions, combinatorially different taken from an item bank of a few thousand, and takes about 10 minutes to complete. Sub-cores on a scale of 20 to 80 are given for vocabulary, phrase structure, pronunciation, fluency, with a total score of 20 to 80 calculated on the basis of these four sub-scores. Freshman students in the target population most often get scores of 30-55 and those who a total higher than 55 usually have spent more than a few years outside the Japanese school system before they enter college.

2.3 Oral Interaction Practice and Other Class Activities

Each English class convene once in a week for 90 minutes in a computer cluster room. The numbers of students in those classes are in general less than or equal to 36, partly because of the curriculum design, namely optimal and maximal number of students per class, and partly because of facility constraints, namely the number of personal computers per classroom. [15] Because of the way the class activities are designed, when the number of students are too small such as less than ten, the student activities turned out not so vigorous, and when the number of students are too many, such as more than 30, organizing student activities becomes a little too difficult. For greater interactions among students, partly because of the way computers are arranged in those particular classrooms, it has become clear that 24 is the optimal number, although such considerations are rarely reflected in the actual enrolment process.

In order to keep the exposition relatively simple, we fill focus our attention on the first-year student classes for the time being. The students start showing up even before the previous class ends. By the time the class time starts, more than half of the students are seated, with their computers up and running. The first thing they do is to continue on their extensive reading exercise. Each week, we bring 200-300 graded readers, picture books, chapter books and juvenile stories to the classroom. Students can choose one, two, three or more of them, borrow them for the week, read them and return them the next week. They keep record of what they read, how many pages were read in how many hours on an excel file, and submit a copy of the file each week. Submitting a copy of the extensive reading record and their homework essay files take ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning of the class.

The main activity in those first-student classes are what we call "oral

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[15] In the School of Law building, there are three computer cluster rooms with 36 computers in two and 72 in the other. There are three other seminar/language classrooms where we can use up to 36 notebook computers. All classrooms in this building are networked and multi-media ready and most areas in the building are wireless accessible to the campus network.

response practice", where students are organized into groups of three according to the seating assigned each week differently based on the roster numbers. One of the three students in the group assumes the role of the questioner, another student assumes the role of the time-keeper and camera-operator, and the third the role of the respondent. For each other class, 10 questions are prepared by the teacher in charge, namely the first author of this report, and those questions are printed on an A4 size sheet of paper with micro-perforation so that they can be folded and cut readily into business card size pieces of paper.[16] The questioner picks up one of those 10 question cards and reads the question aloud to the respondent twice. The respondent has 10 seconds to think and formulate the answer and 45 seconds to speak whatever comes to the mind. The time-keeper prompts the respondent by saying "Start!" 10 seconds after the question is read for the second time and again "Stop!" 45 seconds later. The time-keeper is also in charge of the video camera.[17] After the response is given, the questioner and the time keeper scores the response based on a rubric given onto a peer-review sheet of the respondent. Then, the three students change the roles and go on to the next question. Each student in one group is expected to respond to at least three and possibly four questions. Usually, 20 to 25 minutes is devoted to this activity, although at the beginning of the school year, we have to allocate a lot more time because the students are not familiar with the procedures and the protocols and also rather at a loss how to handle various pieces of equipment. The first author started experimenting with this activity, almost by chance, in order to prepare his students for the last section of the automated spoken English test named differently as PhonePass / SET-10 / Versant for English over the past seven years. Earlier in the experimentation with the test, he

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[16] For reasons that may become natural obvious later, the same topic and the same set of questions are used in the second week, and a new topic and a new set of questions are introduced in the third week. Thus, in a semester with 11 to 14 class weeks, which is what we have, we go over six or seven topics and the same number of sets of questions.

[17] With a Ministry of Education Grant-in-Aid budget, we have been able to provide a digital hard-disk camera for each group of three students in class since October 2006. Before that, we provided one digital video camera with mini-DV storage and the students would pass this around among various groups.

found that very few students responded to the free-response questions at the end of the test. One reason might have been that students had difficulty understanding the question, which was read only once in the version of the test in 2000 but is now read twice in the more recent versions. Another reason might have been that students had difficulty constructing some response in English. But informal talks with the students confirmed that most of the students are not accustomed to situations where they are expected to respond to a question immediately and squarely, which is a very important factor in North-American way of communication. Thus, initially to get students accustomed to the last section of the test so that they can give some kind of response, he started introducing this activity into his classes. As it turned out, students liked this activity. In fact, students with lower spoken proficiency felt this was a difficult task but nonetheless found it enjoyable and also useful in making new friends in the class. Students who are otherwise shy and cannot initiate conversation with other student with whom s/he had no chance to talk to previously were place in a situation in which they have to express their ideas to various difficult but interesting questions. On the other hand, students with higher oral proficiency liked this activity also. Some hesitated to show their 'native-like' pronunciation they acquired during their extended stay at or exposure to an English-speaking environment, but as they learned that they can make friends with their Japanese peers using English, they regained their interests and confidence in the language, which was somewhat contrary to their experiences and expectations in their high school days.

Somewhat surprised by students' reactions, the first author started incorporating this "oral response practice" into all of his English classes. What he learned from the essays students submitted at the end of each semester reviewing their experiences in class and the responses to various questionnaires prompted him to introduce rotating seating assignment in class. For various paperwork purposes, he has assigned seats in a class based on roster numbers. When the students engage in "oral response practice" he tried to scramble students around so that the grouping would be different each time.

In order to maximize the effect with minimal confusion and time loss, he decided to change the seating assignment for each class. This is actually a hard choice because the number of students in a class is not fixed until a few weeks after the classes actually have begun. However, because of this rotating seating assignment, other group activities also make use of different groupings.

Although oral interactions are fun and motivating, it leaves relatively small tangible impact on students' knowledge of English unless the activity is combined or integrated into writing tasks. In fact, the "oral interaction practice" was intended as a warm-up exercise for writing practice. The first author initially started using computer cluster rooms for essay writing classes in the early 1990s with diverse degree of success. Although use of computers was effective in facilitating revision process among the teacher and the student, it did not evolve into self-revision or peer-revision. He was teaching only a dozen students but reviewing the first, the second and the third revisions tended to overwhelm him. On the other hand, if he did not insist on asking his students to give many revisions, students did not understand how to revise an essay. Another problem that posed itself was that students tended to spend half or one hour of 90 minutes just wondering and contemplating what to write after given a topic at the beginning of a class. They needed help in developing their ideas into some thread of thoughts. They needed to talk to someone. And "oral interaction practice" was just the right thing. In order to consolidate what students experienced in the "oral interaction practice" it is important to have them write about what they thought later, on the one hand, and it helps the students to talk about a topic among themselves before they start writing about it.

Integration is an important key word in the design of these class activities in the new curriculum. A key concept behind the design of the test construct for Versant for English is integrated tasks in the sense that for each test item, there is an instruction or a prompt which the test taker has to listen to and to understand and to respond to immediately by saying a few words. So for every item, the test taker listens and then speaks. In TOEFL iBT, more of the new

test items are of integrated tasks, in the sense that the test taker listens to a lecture or a conversation and responds orally or write an essay on the material that was presented. Otherwise, the test taker reads a passage and then either gives response orally or writes an essay on the topic. Traditionally, language classes emphasized cultivation of four skills, namely reading, listening, writing and speaking but obviously acquiring those skills separately does not contribute to real proficiency in the language. A language learner has to learn to integrate those skills and emphasis on this notion of integration has already changed the test. Now we have to change our classroom practice accordingly.

Thus, after we spend 20 or 25 minutes for the oral response practice, the students spend the remaining half hour or so writing an essay on the topic. The students can utilize what they actually said, but then they can develop their ideas anew. Sometimes, what other students said in response to some questions may help them develop their own ideas about the topic. At the beginning of the school year, most of the first-year student would have great difficulty coming up with a 300-word essay in 30 minutes. They can write a line or two but that is just about all they can do in the limited time. One reason is that they are not used to writing English essays using computers. Another reason is that they are not used to writing English essays at all. A third thing is that they are not used to writing a coherent text in any language. The students have to complete the essay by the next week and are told to bring six printed copies and the file of the essay they completed. In the next class, six students sitting in a row exchange their essays and review each others' essays. The students confide that they had to spend four to ten hours when they tried to come up with 300-word essays at the beginning of the school year. Toward the end of the first semester, however, most of those students who attend the classes and submitted the homework on schedule can write up an essay with 300 words or more in half hour or so.

In the second semester, those freshman students engage in small-group presentations after the oral interaction practice and before they start writing the essay. Students spend 10 to 15 minutes preparing PowerPoint slideshows

on the topic given for the day and then, among a group of three or four, give each other a one-minute presentation and ask each other questions on the way. This will further give then chances to think of things they may want to write in their essays and additionally, giving a one-minute presentation using PowerPoint would give them a chance to think how to organize their essays. Although many of the fist-year students do not have much experience in using PowerPoint, they soon get used to it and for those who have used it, learning how to use the outline feature is something new to them.

2.4 Collecting Versions of Essays, Slides and Spoken Utterances

In the spring classes, students spend 20-25 minutes for oral interaction practices of the day, and then they spend 30 minutes trying to come up with a 300-400 word essay on the topic. At this point, students submit a copy of the file of their essays. Most of the students cannot complete this task in the time given in class, and they would finish it as homework. In the next class, they are to bring the file of the essay thus completed and six printed copies. They submit a copy of the file and one of the six printed copies. (We do not need to collect the printed copies but students fail less to submit the file when they are asked to submit a hardcopy.) They exchange the printed essay among groups of six, review and evaluate each others' essay and come up with the final version by the third week. The tentative version written in 30 minutes, homework version and the final version are each submitted as computer files. Unfortunately, the revisions after peer review are scarce and scanty at the moment, and there should be ways to promote more stimulating reviews.

The activity and interactions during the oral interaction practice went far more effectively than expected but compared to essays that students write, which can be collected and stored on digital forms easily, oral interactions are ephemeral and will be lost as soon as they are produced. In order to keep track of what is going on, the first author started to contemplate on ways to make it possible to keep records of those activities. First, in the fiscal 2004-2005, he

was able to get Waseda University Grant for Special Research and built a digital audio recording device. Since the expected maximal number of students in those classes was 36, divided into groups of three, we were to expect at most 12 groups of students working at the same time. Since the format of the question and answer was designed in such a way that no substantial overlap was to occur between the end of the question and the beginning of the response, we presumed that one microphone per group should suffice, in order to record the question read twice in English and the response spontaneously given on the fly mostly in English with sporadic Japanese interjections and what not. These numbers are behind the designs of the digital audio recording equipment, with twelve input tracks, microphones and cables. In the fiscal 2005-2006, we received another Waseda University Grant for Special Research which enabled us to hire student assistants to help deploy the microphone cables in class before those classes and then retrieve them afterwards. In the spring of 2006, we got the Ministry of Education Grant-in-Aid, with which we were able to purchase enough digital hard-disk video cameras for each group of students to record themselves. In the fall classes, in stead of writing essays immediately after the oral interaction practice, students would spend 10 to 15 minutes preparing PowerPoint slides for a one-minute presentation to be conducted among groups of four to six. These presentations are recorded on the video cameras and the computer files are submitted.[18]

In the Theme classes for the second-year students, a greater emphasis is given on students' group activities in almost all aspects of study, in choosing a particular topic for discussion and presentation, in conducting document survey and summarization, in preparing for a joint presentation and writing up a joint research paper, an finally in submitting a joint activity report. In order to prepare students for those activities, some time is spent on oral response practice, especially toward the beginning of the semester, but a lot more time

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[18] A follow-up article on how these recordings are going on and how the data are being processed may appear in some future issue.

is spent on small-group presentations, where students give presentations to each other in a relatively small group of four to six, and on group-to-group presentations, where student groups exchange their ideas informally. We spend some time on the group presentations to the class, but as the number of students enrolled in the particular classes that the first author is in charge of tends to be more than 30, it is not always easy to keep the presentations in a lively and involving atmosphere. Those activities are also recorded with the digital audio recording device and the digital hard-disk video cameras and copies of the presentation files and summary and report files are submitted.

3. Students as Learning Resources: Findings after the Facts

As far as we can tell from the essays students submit at the end of each semester reflecting over their achievements and satisfactions of the class, the class activity designs are quite successful in changing the students' perceptions toward their English proficiency, the way they deal with the study of English, and how they view communication in general. In terms of English language capacity that can be measured by Versant for English, which is an automated test of spoken English delivered over the phone, we can identify at most very small overall improvements in the students spoken English proficiency. However, when we look at the students performance in writing, while most of the students can write something like a couple of lines and at most a hundred words in 30 minutes at the beginning of the school year, most of those who attended the classes and submitted the homework can write 300 or 400 words or more in the same amount of time at the end of the school year. Regarding the oral response, most of the students are simply stunned and cannot say anything when they are instructed to respond to questions at the beginning of the school year, but again, most can continue for 45 seconds at the end of the school year. Most of the students report that they can read through a book, easy or not so easy depending on their reading proficiency,

past experiences and motivation. Overall, the students are able to do what they are expected to do by the end of the school year. In this section, we would like to consider how this relative success came about and what this class has offered to the students: namely audience, or more specifically, readers for their essays and listeners to their oral utterance along with various recording devices.

When the principal researcher taught essay writing classes ten or more years ago, he was the only person who would read students essays. Now, students know that at least five of their peers are going to read their essays. It is not easy for them to come up with an essay with 300 or 400 words, especially in April and May, but some would spend four or five hours trying to produce something that would either impress or amuse their peer. Providing readers for the essay turned out a very important and effective means of having students spend many hours on their essays.

When high school students read a passage in the textbook aloud, they know that all their peer students and the teacher in the class have the same textbook and are looking at the same passage. They may concentrate on not making any errors but there is no reason why they want to be effective in conveying the meanings of the passage being read. On the other hand, when the students read the questions printed on a small piece of paper which the respondent is not allowed to look at, they gradually understand that unless they try to convey the meaning of the question, the other party is going to be at a loss what to say.

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