

Speech in the Language Classroom: A Weekly Class Activity, Not a Contest

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Many English language teachers at the secondary and tertiary levels in Japan recognize that making their lessons applicable to the lives of their students, personalizing their English lessons, is of utmost importance for motivation reasons. They also often see the beneficial, sometimes miraculous, results of students participating in speech contests (King, 2002; Nunn and Nunn, 2005; Bradley, 2006; Bury, Sellick, and Yamamoto, 2012) but are concerned about the negative characteristics such as the feelings of rejection when students do not win. This paper describes a curricular solution to the problem of providing all students, not just a few chosen ones, a speech-giving opportunity without the “agony of defeat.” An additional problem is overcoming the anxiety factor of speaking in front of an audience (Doyon, 2000). The solution is to incorporate speech-giving in English conversation or oral communication classes, first to small groups, and gradually to large audiences, in an activity called My Monologue. This paper describes such a program by giving detailed descriptions of how to teach and organize this speech giving activity on personal topics, also describing variations on the activity, an evaluation rubric, and an evaluation procedure.

Introduction

“Speech in language classrooms? Sure, we have a speech contest once a year. The best students participate.” Does this sound familiar? This case is not exactly rare, but not every institution with English language classes organizes or participates in speech contests. Although Bradley (2006, p. 255) states “The English speech contest is a traditional event held by junior high to tertiary institutions in Japan,” it is more prevalent at the secondary school level (junior high schools and high schools), and not so common at the tertiary level (junior colleges and universities).

Having students give speeches is a worthwhile activity in language classes. Why is this? Tremblay (cited in Axtell, 2012), in describing a good language lesson in his teacher training manual, states a good lesson is one where “there is adequate opportunity for the students to talk spontaneously about their own experiences

within the lesson . . . exploit what they say as a vital component of the lessons." Bradley (2006) speaks directly to this issue in her article "The students' voice, literally: Public speaking as a student-centered and interactive learning process," where she talks about the creating, practicing, and giving of speeches as one of the best activities for students to "speak their mind."

Most of the literature on speech in language classes is focused on the speech contest. Bury, Sellick, and Yamamoto (2012, p. 17) describe interschool speech contests at the secondary level, and list the benefits of such contests:

Entering a speech contest has many benefits for students, and incorporates the four English skills as the students write their own speeches, negotiate the topic and structure of the speech with their tutor, research their speeches independently, and then deliver the speech. It also provides the students with an opportunity to function in an autonomous context, further developing their confidence and empowering them to use English in a fulfilling and rewarding way.

They conclude that the English speech contest is good for the students' English ability and autonomy, helping them to be more confident and satisfied with their English use. In addition to their assertions, they present data from a questionnaire that shows that students also see these benefits, with most seeing the speech contest as improving their English ability and self-confidence.

Bradley (2006, p. 255) describes a tertiary level program incorporating an intra-school speech contest, and she states that the pedagogical value of speech contests is that they provide a forum where "the student's voice can, literally, be heard." Bradley (2006, pp. 255-256) quotes one participating university student as saying, "The only time I ever said what I really wanted to was in the speech contest" (pp. 255-256). In one sense, this is a great, positive comment, but in another sense it is a strong indictment of the English speaking curriculum. Bradley (2006) concludes, "For this student, making a speech was a tool for developing autonomy and critical thinking, both attributes of learner empowerment." (p. 256) She agrees with Bury, Sellick, and Yamamoto (2012) that speech contests encourage the development of learner autonomy, and she adds the benefit of the developing of critical thinking skills. Bradley (2006) goes on to say that speech contests have additional benefits of developing students' academic skills:

The speech process, as structured at Miyazaki International College, is a holistic tool for empowerment, entailing the four English skills and the ability to apply them autonomously to other English medium academic challenges, such as listening to lectures, making presentations or writing papers. It facilitates academic progress because the skills are learned in a nurturing affective climate. (p. 256)

This sounds like an excellent program, but it is referring to a speech coach tutoring a few select students. Bradley (2006, p. 256) quotes another student, commenting on the infectiousness of the speech-making bug: "I am a weak student, but my friend X was too. But after her speech, she changed and is confident and takes part in class now. If I can do that, I will join [the speech contest]." Students recognize the benefits of presenting speeches.

However, Bradley is not blind to problems with speech contests, and comes up with a list of problematic areas in the form of questions speech coaches may ask themselves: "How much should I give the student? What's the role of native/non-native pronunciation? Is competition beneficial? What if my tutees lose in a speech contest? Do speech activities highlight gender differences? If so, how do I deal with that?" (Bradley, 2006, p. 256). The most important of these questions for this paper are "Is competition beneficial? And what if my tutees lose in a speech contest?" in that they strike at the heart of the the problem with speech contests.

The central educational question is how can students reap the benefits of participating in speech contests without suffering the negative aspects of participating—especially the pressure to win and the consequences of losing? Bradley (2006), perhaps unknowingly, hints at a solution when commenting on her student's quote: “The speech had given her an intellectual opportunity beyond the regular curriculum, a notion I have come to share.” (p. 256). The solution is to have students write, practice, and present speeches not “beyond the regular curriculum,” but within it: make the activity of giving speeches part of the curriculum. This idea is not new: Nunn and Nunn (2005), King (2002), and Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) refer to speech as part of the curriculum. Nunn and Nunn (2005) give reasons why the giving of speeches in class is a good activity:

One reason why students often surprise us in their speech-making ability might be partly because they are not being asked to speak spontaneously. They have time to do detailed preparation. We have come to appreciate the fact that our initially 'reluctant' students, given time to prepare, seem to pay far more attention to detail than students who at first sight appear more ready to communicate and demonstrate abilities which are not revealed in other classroom activities.

They state that speech giving allows students time to think about what they want to say, time to prepare how to say it, and time to practice saying what is on their minds. The key word here is “time”: if students are not given time, Nunn and Nunn (2005) paint a painful, and perhaps all too familiar picture of what often occurs:

simply asking students to give a talk is often unlikely to produce anything except embarrassed mumbling at the front of the class. Careful preparation during the first weeks of the course is needed to encourage students to really commit themselves to expressing their own reality in a presentation.

What Nunn and Nunn (2005), King (2002), and Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) all propose is to make speech making a curricular activity, a part of the course so that all students, and not just a chosen few, can benefit from this activity. How to do this is suggested by Doyon (2000). In an investigation of the anxiety and shyness factors at work in a Japanese English classroom, Doyon (2000) states: “For example, pair-work may be very low on a scale of anxiety producing transactions, whereas giving a speech in front of the class might be very high.” The solution is to practice speech giving in the safety of a small group, and then progress to speech giving in front of the class or in front of a large audience. A detailed and extensive approach to speech giving in English conversation and oral communication classes in Japan which involve the students talking about their own lives in their own words is described here. This paper first describes the speech approach, then explains how to do the activity, next explores variations on the activity, and finally describes how to evaluate the activity.

The Speech Approach

Japanese students at secondary or tertiary levels typically study English conversation from a textbook. Each unit has a theme. The themes can often be related to the student's life, but in most textbooks are usually done as an afterthought, if at all. One English conversation textbook, *In My Life* (Kluge & Taylor, 2011), has as its basis a scrapbook created by students and has the giving of a speech based on the scrapbook as one of the two main activities of each unit, but this focus on speech giving is rare in a conversation book, if not unique. Here is a description of a speech activity that can be conducted to use speech as a regular class activity, relating the topic of the textbook or class to the students' lives, and working first in small groups and working up to speaking in front of the whole class. The activity is called My Monologue.

My Monologue Procedure

Here is how to do the My Monologue activity. The teacher finds a way to tie the theme of the textbook unit to the students' lives. For example, if the topic of the textbook unit is sports, the teacher can select any of the following topics (or other related topics):

- sports you did in high school/junior high school
- sports you do now
- sports you like to watch on TV
- sports you like to watch in the Olympics
- sports you want to try in the future
- sports you can do and sports you cannot do
- an athlete you like or respect

Students are given a topic related to the theme of the unit. They are asked to write a speech on the topic. They can write it freely or according to a model that can be written on the white board. One of the advantages of the teacher giving a model is that the teacher can direct the students to use new words, phrases, or structures learned in the unit. For example, if the unit teaches the structures “I used to _____, but now I _____.” and “I really enjoy _____.” the teacher can insert these phrases into the monologue, like this:

Hello everybody! Let me tell you about sports and me. When I was in junior high school I used to _____, but now I _____. My best memory doing _____ is _____. I really enjoy _____ because _____. I _____ times a _____. I usually _____ with _____. In the future I would like to try _____ because _____. Thank you.

The length and difficulty of the monologue can depend on the age and level of the students in the class. The students are given time in class to write their speech, so that the teacher can give assistance, and students can consult with their classmates. They then hand in their speech to be corrected by the teacher. (This can be graded.)

In the next class, the teacher returns the corrected monologues to the students and asks them to write a second draft of their speech, incorporating the suggested changes. This is so the students actually look at the suggested corrections, and then physically write the improved speech so they have a clean script to work from. In either that class or in the next class, students practice the monologue aloud by themselves

so that they can do it without the script. Before practicing their monologue, the teacher should explain the evaluation rubric so that students know what they will be graded on. One such rubric, devised by the author, is the SELLS technique, described in a section below. After the students finish practicing by themselves, they present their monologues to each other in groups of four. While students present their monologues, the other three members of the group practice backchanneling, as shown below:



Giving a speech to a small group in Toyohashi

Speaker	Audience
Hello everybody!	Hi!
Let me tell you about sports and me.	Okay!
When I was in junior high school I used to ____, but now I ____.	I see.
My best memory doing ____ is _____.	<u>Sounds fun _____!</u>
I really enjoy ____ because _____.	Great!
I _____ times a _____.	Wow!
I usually _____ with _____.	I see.
In the future I would like to try _____ because _____.	<u>Sounds cool _____!</u>
Thank you.	Thank you!
Are there any questions?	<i>(Ask questions)</i>
Are there any more questions? No? Thank you.	<i>(applauds)</i>

After the speaker finishes, the next speaker in the group gives her speech, and so on until each student in the group gives her speech. In this way, all students have experience giving a speech every two weeks or so.

Variations

The activity described above can be done with some variations, with the number of performers and size of the audience being the main variables: only a few students give speeches to the whole class, all students give speeches in front of the whole class one at a time, or all students give the speech one at a time to one student at a time. These variations are described below.

A Few Select Speeches in Front of Class

After the groups of four students are all finished giving their speeches, each group can be asked to choose one person from the group to perform in front of the class. For example, in a typical class of 24 students, that would mean six students would give a speech, usually 2-3 minutes long including question and answer periods. If there is not enough time for six speakers, the six selected students can do rock-scissors-paper in pairs to select three speakers to perform their speeches in front of the class.

All Students Give Speeches in Front of Class

After practice in their groups of four, all students could be asked to give their speech one at a time in front of the whole class. This can be done as an oral exam. It is good to give some time for students to practice either by themselves or with a partner on the performance/test day before having to perform in front of the whole class.

All Students Give Speeches to One Student at a Time

In the author's institution, once a semester all first-year students meet in a large classroom. They are seated facing a partner from another section of the course. One is designated as the speaker and one as the audience. Speakers are given four minutes to give their speech to their audience partner and to answer questions. After four minutes, all audience partners move to a new speaker and the whole procedure is repeated. This is done a number of times, and then the speaker and audience change roles and the whole procedure is repeated. The advantage of this variation is that students can speak to students they do not usually encounter in class, and all speakers get good practice repeating their speech and responding to different questions.

Evaluation

The following evaluation system can be used for the activity or any of the variations described above. The SELLS rubric for evaluating the speeches was developed for this activity. Students are told that they will be evaluated on what “sells” the message of the speech. Students are told before they practice the speech that they will be evaluated on the following SELLS criteria: S=Smooth (smooth delivery, means memorized well and practiced often.), E=Energy (performed in an energetic manner), L=Loud (speak in a loud enough voice so that everyone can hear), L=Look (look at everyone—eye contact), and S=Smile (smile at the audience throughout the speech). Using this rubric the teacher can evaluate students if each student gives a speech, as in an oral exam. Students can evaluate themselves by using their own digital camera or mobile phone video capability and ask a group member to record their speech. Students then watch their recorded speech, and using the rubric, can evaluate their own speech performance as homework. When students give their speech in front of the whole class, the audience can evaluate the students using the SELLS rubric on small pieces of paper. For all students to evaluate all other students would make them too busy to enjoy and participate in their classmates' speeches, so some kind of system where students only have to evaluate every fourth speaker works best. If teachers communicate the grades to the students (a good practice), they may want to wait until after collecting the students' self evaluations before giving their own so that the teacher's evaluation does not affect the student's self evaluation.

Conclusion

The My Monologue activity and the variations to the activity allow students to reap the benefits of speech on a regular basis, and to alleviate speech giving anxiety they practice their speeches first in small groups and then perform in front of the class. The speeches serve as a way for students to prepare and practice talking on the various topics of the unit, relating the topic to their own lives. These speeches can and should be used to segue into conversations on the topic. The students, after extensive practice and performance of a set speech, and after answering a variety of spontaneous questions, feel more confident and ready to engage in spontaneous conversation on the topic. This My Monologue speech activity turns a conversation class into a speech and conversation class where students gain practice in speaking in English about their lives. It allows students to gain confidence in speaking English in front of a group of people, and helps them to own their English. Students gain all the benefits of participating in a speech contest, but without experiencing the negative, demotivating emotions. All students can benefit.

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