

Is the four-skill language course sufficient?: A report on a specialized conversation course integrating fragmented learner language using discourse-markers at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

コミュニケーション能力育成は四技能コースで十分か？

-立命館アジア太平洋大学における

談話標識を使った言語の再構築に着目した会話コースの実践報告-

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of the communicative approach in the 1980's (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), it has become the orthodox view that to master grammatical forms and structures does not necessarily prepare language learners well enough to communicate with others in the TL. The current syllabi were then questioned and a major paradigm shift within the language education has been made from the structural and/or functional syllabus to a topic one where learners are supposedly motivated to learn vocabulary and grammar in order to express themselves appropriate to certain situations rather than a two stage of process of language presentation and contextualized practice. This shift makes sense in that motivation plays one of the vital roles in SLA, especially regarding the burden of vocabulary memorization in addition to grammar learning.

There are still a number of SL learners of Japanese who do not possess sufficient communicative competence despite having been living in Japan as well as learning the SL for more than a year. This highlights some disadvantages of the topic-based syllabus. The topic syllabus motivates learners to only learn the vocabulary and grammatical structures necessary to express their basic intended message. With the emphasis of the communicative approach on fluency and meaning over accuracy and forms, rather than a more traditional mastery of language, the learner's ability to make the transition from topic to topic is often hindered. In addition, though speaking is closely related to listening, the topic syllabus does not equally motivate learners to understand others, which leads to their being overwhelmed by the lexical and grammatical burden of comprehending those they are speaking to. This motivational gap between expressing oneself and understanding others can hinder learners from smooth progress in their TL proficiency.

Such specialized courses as reading, *kanji*, and business Japanese are well-established at universities in Japan. In line with this trend, The Japanese Language Program (JLP) at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) launched a specialized conversation course in the fall semester 2012, which accommodates those either in need of better communication skills or hoping to improve them further. While providing learners with various speaking activities, such as pair-work topic conversation, one of the characteristics of the brand-new course is to introduce discourse-markers to learners some of whose SL output is fragmented, in order that they can effectively connect previously learned forms and structures with, for instance, conjunctions and adverbial phrases to improve their organizational and pragmatic competences (Backman, 1990). This study, therefore, reports on how learners, including those with fragmented Japanese, have developed their communication skills, using discourse makers through collaborative

learning. The speaking-focused course also challenges the current use of placement tests to classify the linguistic level of learners into language classes with similar levels. Instead it puts in practice the notion that active social interaction with more able members (i.e., higher linguistic levels in this case), leads to better cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Using data from questionnaires conducted at the end of the semester, the study also assesses how a specialized course can successfully supplement the present four-skill language course.

## 2. CONVERSATION COURSE AT APU

### 2.1 COURSE REQUIREMENT & STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC

JLP at APU consists of four different level courses: Beginning (12 classes per week), Intermediate, High-Intermediate, and Advanced courses (4 classes per week each). The course requirement is to be above the Intermediate course. Japanese Project C (conversation course) was added to the series of Project courses with Project A (*kanji*) and Project B (a collaboration course with Kyoto Ristumeikan University) courses.

### 2.2 CLASS ACTIVITIES

The class met twice a week between October 2, 2012 and February, 1, 2013 with the functional/topic 10 chapter textbook, 『聞いて覚える話し方 日本語生中継 初中級編 2』 (*Kiite oboeru hanashikata Nihongo namachuukei Low-Intermediate 2*). The main reason for the choice of this textbook is that it deals with 10 different topics with useful expressions and short dialogues, plus listening CDs. With supplementary materials, such as filler practice and onomatopoeia, the 95-minute long class typically included a quiz at the beginning to make sure students prepared for the class by listening to the dialogues until they felt comfortable or had them memorizing the vocabulary in both the textbook's listening exercises and vocabulary quizzes. This was intended to bridge the linguistic gap among learners with various levels, as those with lower levels could listen as much as they wanted in advance. Pair or group speaking practice usually followed after a key vocabulary explanation activity usually among pairs with different linguistic levels, and a preview of important expressions by the instructor. The course covered the following speech topics: "Self-Introduction with One's Treasure", "The Most Memorable Trip", "What I Care About My Health", and "The News I'm Currently Interested in". The students also interviewed locals to get to know more about Beppu-City where both the students and the residents lived, and later presented their results.

### 2.3 FOCUS ON DISCOURSE MARKERS

Discourse markers are defined as a word or an expression which connects between what is being said and the wider context (Swan, 2005). Swan elaborates that they either connect a sentence to what comes before or after or they indicate the speaker's attitude to what s/he is saying. Functions can be classified into three broad relationship groups: (1) among (parts of) utterances, (2) between the speaker and the message, and (3) between the speaker and the hearer. They play an important role in the cohesion of dialogues. According to the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), language learners begin with word-level and then progress towards sentence-level and then paragraph-level. Most beginning-level learners are thus often behind in effective use of discourse markers.

After reviewing key formulaic expressions in each chapter, the course provided

the students with a basic dialogue worksheet (see appendix) which paired-students collaboratively rewrote more naturally with better choices of vocabulary and formulaic expressions as well as inserting discourse markers into the dialogue. This activity enabled them to look at the whole dialogue more objectively (otherwise, beginning level learners tend to pay attention only to 'each' sentence). The process in which they collaboratively tried to improve a basic dialogue into a better and more natural one, intended to help them improve their pragmatic and organizational competences.

#### 2.4 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Language placement tests are used to classify the linguistic level of learners into language classes with similar levels so that the instructors can teach a larger number of students at a time more effectively and efficiently. The wider the linguistic gap among them becomes, the harder for the teacher to manage more learners at the same time satisfactorily. On the other hand, pair or group work has been utilized in education (Storch, 2002), including language classroom in order to increase the amount of language input (McGroarty, 1993) as well as output (Long & Porter, 1985).

One of the ultimate goals for language education is to create not just learners but L2 users (Cook, 1999). Language learners are encouraged to use L2 outside the classroom and the mental as well as linguistic barrier between the classroom and the world beyond should thus be gradually broken down. The APU conversational course with various linguistic levels can be, so to speak, the bridge between the traditional classroom with similar levels produced by the placement test and the real world where active social interaction with more able members (i.e., higher linguistic levels in this case), can lead to better cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

In order to better activate such a course, several innovations were made to foster Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998) for each of the students as well as to induce collaborative learning through active interaction among all of them. First, instructor-led seating allocation was introduced so that each of the students almost always had a different partner(s) sitting next to them and was encouraged to exchange small pleasantries before class, with a gradual shift from the instructor's scaffolding at the beginning and then to students' mutual scaffolding in order to get to know each other better, leading to better group dynamics. The course also provided an individual consultation at the beginning of the semester to help each student define her/his own speaking goal(s) so that each of them was aware of what s/he had to focus on more during the fluency-focused speaking pair activities, (often unattended by the instructor), followed by a few follow-up meetings to ensure if each of them was making progress. The class then utilized pair/or group work where the students with different linguistic levels often paired up, for instance, on vocabulary explanation in L2 where a learner with higher L2 skills provided another weaker learner with more easily comprehensible inputs, containing, for example, redundancy and syntactic simplification, taken up by the latter through interaction such as negotiation of the meaning and clarification requests.

#### 2.5 COURSE ASSESSMENT

The course adopted dual evaluation methods to more comprehensively assess students' progress in their spoken Japanese with the instructor's objective evaluation for the speaking exams and students' peer review of the four speeches in addition to

evaluation by the instructor.

Mid-term and final speaking exams were administered in the middle and at the end of the semester respectively where students' paired interviews were adopted instead of the teacher-student interview format. Teacher-student interactions, especially at the beginning to intermediate level with fragmented Japanese, are often characterized as asymmetrical as the former potentially takes control in their conversation, however, the student-student format allows both learners to actively control a conversation as they have to cooperatively construct with more effective use of discourse markers.

The procedure of each exam was as follows: (1) a student pair was made with neither the same nationality nor the same (Japanese course) level in advance, (2) possible situational topics for the mid-term and the final exams respectively were announced, but the examinees did not know either which topics (three each out of five or nine respectively) and which role each of them had to play until the actual time of the exam so that they could not simply memorize their prepared scripts in order to maintain the validity of the exam, and (3) each examinee was evaluated comprehensively across 7 categories, such as discourse function and relation to situation and collocutor (see appendix). One of the exam topics was as follows:

Situation: Your friend is depressed (because s/he couldn't answer well some of the questions at a job interview). Speak to her/him. The role will be decided by the instructor.

状況：友達がアルバイトの面接の質問に上手に答えらなくて、少し落ち込んでいます。話しかけてください。どちらのパートをするかは先生が決めます。

As for the students' peer review, with the combination of the traditional teacher's evaluation, the method allows learners to be more aware of what they can and what they cannot do (or their present language proficiency) in their TL as they can transfer their peer-review to their own self-review and thus refine the accuracy of their self-assessment (Thomson, 2008). The dual evaluation methods allow the students to find out various areas for improvement as well as see their language proficiency more multilaterally.

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 METHODS OF THIS STUDY

The subjects for this study were 21 students enrolled in Fall Semester 2012 of Japanese Project C: Conversational Japanese, taught by the researcher of this study. The 21 students' demographic chart is as follows:

Table 1: Students' Demographic

Nationality	Chinese	Vietnamese	Korean	Taiwanese	Thai	Sri Lankan	Mongolian
# of Students	8	5	4	1	1	1	1
Language Level	Intermediate <sup>1</sup>		High-Intermediate		Advanced		Others
# of Students	2		12		4		3

A questionnaire (see appendix) was administered anonymously at the end of

<sup>1</sup> Only this level was already done by two students, who did not take any Japanese language course at the time of the course. Students were taking the other courses simultaneously.

the semester. All of the 21 subject’s responses were collected for analysis. Most of the questions were based on a Likert-type four-point scale, followed by comments to support those choices.

### 3.2 QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Overall, the results turned out to be generally positive and satisfactory as the answers regarding the individual progress in communication skills and the course itself show:

Table 2: Questionnaire Results

Q3	Do you think you have improved your speaking ability?			
	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
	74%	26%	0%	0%
Q5	How was the textbook?			
	very good	good	not good	bad
	38%	62%	0%	0%
Q6	How was the amount of homework and assignments?			
	too much	appropriate	not enough	too little
	9%	81%	5%	5%
Q7	How was the amount of speaking practice?			
	too much	appropriate	not enough	too little
	6%	82%	6%	6%

\* 3 out of 21 did not answer Q7.

As for Question 4 evaluating each activity, the most highly evaluated were as follows: speeches on self-introduction, trip, and health, and local people interview.

The communicative approach is intended to foster communication skills and thus tends to focus on meaning and fluency over accuracy. Therefore, the mastery of discourse markers is often not parallel in SLA. However, the individual consultation was conducted on a regular basis to help each student keep herself/himself aware of which areas to improve during the otherwise-meaning-and-fluency-focused speaking activities. Some students commented on this point:

*“[I] tried to use the vocabulary and formulaic expressions [I learned in class].”*

*“It was evident that each of us were taken care of by the instructor, which made me want to study more [in this course].”*

The information gap motivates learners to communicate with each other while the linguistic gap or Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky (1978), (i.e., the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what s/he can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a partner with better linguistic competence), therefore encourages them to help each other through collaborative interaction. Ohta (1995) also claims that not only a learner with weaker L2 skills but also a more advanced learner can benefit from interaction as learner strengths are

collaboratively joined. Some students also noted this:

*“When my partner didn’t understand what I said, [I] explained to her/him, which helped me improve my communication skills.”*

*“Due to the opportunity to talk with people with different levels, [I] have gained more various expressions and vocabulary.”*

It seemed that the type of pedagogical practices in this study, such as seating allocation and pair-group work activated ZPD favorably in combination with the discourse marker approach, dialogue-writing exercises, which facilitated most of the learners with fragmented Japanese to improve their pragmatic and organizational competences. In the framework of the OPI, a natural shift can be made from sentence level to paragraph level but with discourse markers which effectively connect sentences. Some students’ comments imply this point:

*“[I] learned vocabulary and grammar a lot, but not speaking and not natural, from the four-skill Japanese course, but [I] learned many ways of natural speaking.”*

*“[I was] told by Japanese friends that I began speaking Japanese naturally.”*

The students’ pair interview format was received favorably with 93% positive. It is widely accepted that the affective filter plays an important role in speaking, but unlike teacher-student conversation, students in peer pairs were more likely to collaboratively converse with each other. Some students also commented to support this point:

*“[I] felt more comfortable with my classmates rather than my teacher...”*

*“The exam style made me prepare more. I don’t know what to prepare if I speak to my teacher. Also, I become more nervous.”*

*“I couldn’t speak before but now I’m confident in speaking.”*

*“Now I can speak to Japanese people and [the conversation is] understandable.”*

There were, however, a few negative comments. One student commented *“Because my classmate spoke very good Japanese, I didn’t understand much of what my partner said.”* The instructor signaled the start and the end of each activity as well as quickly assigning each student to a different partner in the classroom. It seemed that the pair did not reach communication breakdown which they could then begin to repair partly because the activity ended unattended by the instructor. Also, another student commented regarding the students’ pair interview style, *“It is more effective to talk with the teacher.”* This perhaps shows that the student might have found the gap too wide and

was not ready to cooperate with some of her/his partners. Having different partners with various levels definitely provides learners with an opportunity to expand their cognitive horizon but also to challenge their affective one.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Although the results of the questionnaire were generally positive, the degree to which collaborative learning takes place may need to be further explored, for instance, linguistically, and also what factors may prevent it from activating learners' ZPD in the classroom. Although successful pair work takes place where learners' strengths are collaboratively joined (Ohta, 1995), the combination of pair partner for the exam may be of considerable concern as it may have an adverse effect on their performance, thus affecting fairness as this study observed cases of seemingly unsuccessful collaborative learning during the classroom activities.

Despite this, we nevertheless need to remember that L2 acquisition takes place socioculturally, considering the relationship between social interaction and language development. Indeed, this study demonstrates a possible bridge between the classroom and the real world with the possibility of L2 acquisition in the framework of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Newman & Holzman, 1993; Lantolf, 1994) where language development and social interaction are interwoven into a single fabric of human development. The traditional four-skill language course aims at developing every aspect of the FL/TL, however, due to various factors, including learner differences (Ellis, 1985) and the size of each class, such a language course may sometimes fail to facilitate all learners to improve their communicative competence. However, those with fragmented language are not necessarily behind other learners in all the four skills. They might be relatively behind in speaking and listening but perhaps better developed in reading and writing.

A topic syllabus motivates learners to express themselves more, but speaking is also closely related to listening. The gap between what one can express oneself and with others may create fragmented learning. However, this linguistic gap can perhaps be turned into a more-realistic social arena where much social interaction as attempted by the specialized course in this study. Using discourse markers in the framework of the OPI where learners can move from mostly sentence level up to a more sophisticated paragraph level, enables effective linguistic progress. Thus, it is hoped that the speaking-focused course as in this study may have the potential to supplement what the traditional four-skill course lacks.

#### 5. APPENDICES

##### 5.1 DISCOURSE MARKER WORKSHEET

日本語プロジェクト C 会話コース 第一課「出会い」

下の会話をもっと自然な日本語に変えなさい。

状況：大学の新学期が始まり、初めて取るコースの初日です。少し早めに教室に行きました。誰も知らないなので、ちょっと緊張しています。

A: ここ座ってもいいですか。

B: はい。

A: お名前は？

B: 山田です。どうぞよろしく。あなたは？

A: 私は田中です。どうぞよろしく。何年生ですか。

B: 今学期から二回生。田中さんは？

A: 私も！

B: このコース、難しいそうだね。

A: うん、先輩もそう言った。でも、専門の勉強のために取った方がいいって勧められて。

B: そう。

A: 山田さんはどうして？

B: 私は他に取りたいコースがあったけど、スケジュールが合わなくて、この時間帯に受けられるコースを探していたら、これが一番いいかなと思って。

A: そうなんだ。この授業が終わって、昼ご飯はどうするの。

B: 特に決めていないけど。

A: 一緒に食堂に行って、食べませんか。

B: いいね。

## 5.2 EXAM EVALUATION

会話試験採点表

名前： \_\_\_\_\_

/20

発音・流暢さ Pronunciation & fluency	<b>3</b> 全体的に明瞭で聞き取りやすく、適度なスピードで話せる。	<b>2</b> 部分的に不明瞭だが、理解に支障なく、多少ポーズがある。	<b>1</b> 不明瞭が目立ち、ポーズも多く、理解が難しい。		
語彙と内容 Vocabulary & content	<b>5</b> 話題内容に合わせ、多様な語彙を使用し、内容が豊富。	<b>4</b> 話題内容に合わせて、時々難しい表現を使い、内容も豊富。	<b>3</b> 基本的な語彙を中心に発話し、内容もほぼ十分。	<b>2</b> 基本的な語彙のみ使用し、内容も若干不十分。	<b>1</b> 語彙が少数に限られ、内容も不十分。
文法の正確さ Accuracy	<b>3</b> 殆ど間違いがなく、意味の理解を全く妨げない。	<b>2</b> 多少の間違ひがあるが、意味の理解を妨げない。	<b>1</b> 意味の理解を妨げるような誤用が目立つ。		
談話機能	<b>3</b> 談話標識を	<b>2</b> 談話標識を	<b>1</b> 談話標識が		

Discourse function	効果的に使 い、会話を展 開している。	使っているが、 結束性にやや 欠ける。	殆ど使われず、 結束性に欠け る。
タスク達成度 Task achievement	<b>2</b> 不備なく達 成している。	<b>1</b> 若干の不備 はあるが、達成 している。	<b>0</b> 不備があり、 達成していな い。
相手の理解度 Understanding collocutor	<b>2</b> 相手の発話 を理解し、会 話を繋げている。	<b>1</b> 時々理解が 出来ず、会話の 流れを妨げて いる。	
場面と相手と の関係性 Relation to situation & collocutor	<b>2</b> 相手と場面 に対して適切 である。	<b>1</b> 相手と場面 に対してあま り適切ではな い。	

## 5.4 QUESTIONNAIRE

1

1-1 Are you taking some Japanese language course? Yes No

1-2 If yes, please write which course. If no, please write which course you took last semester. ( )

2

2-1 How long did you spend to prepare for the final exam? ( Hours)

3

3-1 Do you think you have improved your speaking ability?

Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

3-2 Please explain for No. 3-1.

4

4-1 Please evaluate each activity.

Very useful Useful A little useful little useful

Listening quiz	Speech 4 (news)	How to listen to news
Vocabulary/grammar quiz	Transcript on speech 4	Vocabulary explanation
Speech 1 (self-introduction)	Local people interview	Situational conversation
Speech 2 (travel)	Onomatopoeia	3-minute conversation
Speech 3 (health)	Filler practice	

4-2 Are there any other activities you would like to add?

5

5-1 How was the textbook?

Very good Good Not good Bad

5-2 Please explain for No. 5-1.

6 How was the amount of homework and assignments?

Too much Appropriate Not enough Too little

7 How was the amount of speaking practice?

	Too much	Appropriate	Not enough	Too little
8	Are you planning to take some Japanese course? Yes → ( course:                    )		Yes	No
9	Feel free to write anything about the course.			

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