

A discourse-based evaluation of a classroom peer teaching project

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Review

Figure 1: Stages of the teaching project

	Activity in class	Stage 2 preparation	Stage 3 preparation
Stage 1 (Week 1)	Teacher produces and teaches two sample lessons.	Two groups receive a sample lesson (and teacher's notes) a week in advance of their turn at Stage 2.	
Stage 2 (Weeks 2-4)	Two groups per week teach sample lessons produced by the teacher.	The remaining groups receive their sample lesson a week in advance of their turn at Stage 2.	(Weeks 4-6) Groups teaching their lesson the following week submit their lesson worksheet in advance for the teacher to check.
Stage 3 (Weeks 5-7)	Two groups per week teach their own self-produced lessons.		

A discourse-based evaluation of a classroom peer teaching project

The use of student-generated materials and peer teaching in the language classroom offers a creative way to increase learner participation. Previous studies have shown that, provided they receive adequate assistance, learners can benefit from producing and teaching their own classroom materials. These studies have described ways of implementing peer teaching in detail. This article focuses specifically on the language produced by teams of Japanese university students as they taught their own materials. Such a focus is clearly important to the evaluation of the practice of peer teaching. Excerpts of classroom dialogue from this study show how communication and interaction lay at the heart of the peer teaching process and reveal different ways in which students assisted and engaged their peers. The peer taught lessons offered learning opportunities related to both lesson content and language learning.

Introduction

The use of student-generated materials and peer teaching in the foreign language classroom is relevant to the notions of learner autonomy and the learner-centered classroom. A learner-centered approach to pedagogy is now well established in language teaching literature. Harmer (2007: 394) describes how

“students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies so that as far as possible, they become autonomous learners. ... Giving students *agency* (enabling them to be the doers rather than the recipients of learning action) is one way of helping to sustain their motivation.”

Dörnyei and Murphey (2003: 105-6) suggest strategies to help students become agents of their own learning such as: allowing them to make choices about the learning process; granting them ‘genuine authority’ including aspects of management; encouraging ‘student contributions and peer teaching’.

These ideas are also characteristic of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning promotes inter-group reliance and, in an ELT context, can help to develop communicative competence and encourage peer-to-peer interaction in the target language (Ning 2011). Crandall (1999) presents a rationale for cooperative learning in the second language classroom, remarking on its positive effect on motivation and the affective environment. It also individualizes instruction for learners and gives them greater opportunities to speak and contribute. In a list of further potential benefits (*ibid.*: 233-40) she includes the following:

“Providing comprehensible input and output” (p. 234): especially when learners support each other by offering assistance with L2 forms, including negotiation of meaning or even specific instruction.

“An increased range of speech acts or language functions” (p. 237): learners progress from simply asking questions and giving instructions to engaging in other varieties of discourse such as the provision of assistance and the encouragement of student initiative and communication.

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3 The benefits of cooperative learning are not achieved simply by putting students into
4 groups and having them talk. Rather, activities should be structured in such a way that
5 communication and the exchange of information serve to support learning. As
6 Crandall suggests, learners need to be motivated to help each other to learn and to
7 succeed in the completion of classroom tasks (cf. Sachs, Candlin, Rose and Shum
8 2003).

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11 Student-generated materials and peer teaching, as structured classroom activities, can
12 be considered applications of cooperative learning with the potential to lead to the
13 positive features described above. Giving learners a role in determining classroom
14 content extends agency and encourages greater engagement in the learning process.
15 Previous studies have presented examples of students producing their own materials
16 and thereby drawing on each other's knowledge and skills as a resource for learning.

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18
19 Assinder (1991) asked EFL students on a preparatory course at an Australian
20 university to prepare teaching materials to accompany a selection of television news
21 stories. Students followed a lesson format modeled by the teacher and, after selecting
22 a short news recording from a bank of video materials, groups of six students devised
23 comprehension and discussion questions, and identified and highlighted problem
24 vocabulary. The students taught their own materials, first to a paired group and
25 thereafter to a separate class. The project included a preparatory discussion about
26 what constituted a good lesson and how it should be taught. The project was assessed
27 highly by students and the study presents a considerable list of positive observations
28 including increased motivation, participation, in-depth understanding and authentic
29 communication.

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31
32 Brown, Iyobe and Riley (2013), working at a university in Japan, asked groups of four
33 to five students to produce 'negotiation scenarios'. A notional project or problem,
34 such as deciding a school budget, had to be settled in the style of a group role-play.
35 The student-generated materials comprised a written explanation of the problem, the
36 signposting of relevant considerations and advice for preparation and decision-
37 making. The materials were then passed over to another group who would perform
38 the scenario. The project did not include peer teaching per se but time was allotted for
39 groups to check with each other on any parts of the scenario they did not understand.
40 Brown et al. describe benefits such as strong engagement and the development of
41 academic skills including learning assessment.

42
43
44 The peer teaching project described in this article took place within a university 'Oral
45 English' course. The course aimed to help students develop fluency and to gain
46 experience in a range of styles of communication. In the first semester they
47 researched a topic and gave a scripted oral presentation to share their findings with
48 the rest of the class. For the second semester I sought an alternative way for the
49 students to share information and this took the form of peer teaching. At a basic level
50 I hoped that it would result in greater interactivity with students engaging more with
51 each others' topics than was possible during traditional classroom presentations. Peer
52 taught lessons would allow the audience to discuss, ask questions and make their own
53 contributions.

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56 Further, I hoped that peer teaching would lead to learning opportunities both for the
57 student-teachers and for the audience. The former would need to have a good grasp of
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3 their facts in order to teach content and to field questions. In terms of English, they
4 would need to find the linguistic means to give clear instructions and to motivate their
5 peers, thus engaging in kinds of interaction not generally associated with traditional
6 classroom activities.
7

8 The structure of the peer teaching project

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10 The setting for the project was a private university in Japan. It was used in three first-
11 year classes of around 17-20 students whose proficiency level was approximately
12 intermediate to higher intermediate. Their TOEIC scores (the test is taken by all
13 incoming first-year students) ranged from 480-560. The students were majoring in
14 Law but had three obligatory English classes per week.
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17 The project included various phases of assistance and task modeling which are
18 summarized in Figure 1. In the first stage of the project, the teacher (myself) produced
19 and taught two sample 30-minute lessons based on topics such as crime, cinema and
20 trade. I prepared a worksheet for each lesson with around four different activities
21 including cloze exercises for vocabulary building, discussion questions and short
22 decision making tasks. I also introduced a list of 'teaching phrases' to help the
23 students manage their lesson and discussed the issue of time-management. In a second
24 training stage, students formed groups of three based on a shared interest in a topic on
25 which they wanted to produce a lesson. But before they produced their own lesson,
26 each group was given a further sample lesson prepared by the teacher and were asked
27 to teach this lesson to the rest of the class as a dry-run or rehearsal. In the final stage
28 the same groups worked together to produce and team-teach their own 30-minute
29 lessons.
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33 Each group made a worksheet with three or four activities based around their chosen
34 topic. They were free either to replicate the types of activities contained in the sample
35 lessons or to devise their own. The non-teaching students were arranged into groups
36 of three during these lessons in order to help each other answer the questions on the
37 worksheets and to discuss the topic together. The student-teachers' lessons contained
38 whole-class activities and smaller group activities. In the former, a student might be
39 called on to read a paragraph aloud or answer a quiz question. In group activities,
40 groups might be asked to reach a decision (e.g. agree on a good idea for a new public
41 holiday) or discuss a question related to the topic. During the group activities, the
42 student-teachers patrolled the classroom to check on progress and help out if
43 necessary.
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45

46 Examining the students' discourse

47
48 Peer teaching has proved to be a popular component in the course. A busy and
49 animated atmosphere prevails in the classroom when the lessons are taught and I have
50 been impressed by the students' enthusiasm to communicate and by how
51 conscientiously the student-teachers guide their peers through the lessons. I was
52 interested in investigating the students' discourse to see in detail how the structure of
53 the project might help to deliver on some of the principles of cooperative learning. In
54 other words, to see whether the project promoted peer to peer interaction in the way
55 that I intended and to discover potential learning opportunities arising through
56 cooperation and assistance between the students. This included the transfer of
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knowledge relating to lesson content and focus on L2 form arising from the process in general.

I therefore made recordings of the final stage of the project. Each of the student-teachers (henceforth 'ST') carried a small MP3 recorder with a clip-on microphone as they taught their own lessons. The recordings included whole-class discussion, interaction with smaller groups as the STs patrolled the class and interaction with fellow STs as they managed their lesson. The excerpts¹ that follow, as well as giving a flavour of the classroom atmosphere, reveal the interactive nature of the students' lessons and show how the various participants worked together to achieve an exchange of knowledge pertaining to the topic of each lesson and to the target language.

Authentic interaction

With the STs teaching the lesson and the rest of the class working in groups, classroom discourse was dominated by student voices. The most common activity type in the students' lessons were those that required group discussion or deliberation, so oral communication was very much at the centre of the project. I myself made only occasional interventions to address L2 accuracy or to assist with organizational oversights.

Chappell (2013) discusses the difference between classroom talk and authentic communication, and how too much time in the classroom consists of the former, in particular, the 'recitation script' where the teacher asks a question, a student answers and the teacher then ends the exchange with a short feedback response. Authentic conversation on the other hand "is interactive and therefore jointly constructed and reciprocal" (ibid.: 2). Excerpts 1 and 2 are characteristic of Chappell's description of authentic conversation. Both STs and students initiate topics while the STs encourage participation and acknowledge their students' contributions. The students also pay attention to L2 form, seeking out alternative ways to express their message.

Excerpt 1

In a lesson about coffee, the worksheet has asked students to match varieties of coffee with their key ingredients. For example, Irish Coffee contains whiskey and Vietnamese Coffee contains condensed milk. The ST has approached a group to check on their progress.

1. ST: How are you doing?
2. Student 1: What?
3. ST: How are you doing?
4. Student 1: Oh. I don't know. I have no idea.
5. ST: [laughs] Do you eat coffee – eat no - drink coffee?
6. Student 1: I always drink coffee.
7. ST: Oh! Good.
8. Student 1: But I don't know the difference.
9. ST: Eh milk or sugar?
10. Student 1: Uh a little sugar.
11. ST: Oh, yeah.

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3 12. Student 2: He can drink without sugar.
4 13. ST: You can do?
5 14. Student 3: I drink only dark eh black.
6 15. ST: Only black ah good.
7

8
9 Student 1 signals at turn 4 that he is struggling with the question on the worksheet.
10 The ST does not address this specific problem, and asks instead about the group's
11 coffee drinking habits. It is unclear why the ST does this, but it may be that he has
12 detected a drop in interest and is attempting to reengage the students at a general
13 level. The ST makes an effort to keep the conversation going with his questions at
14 turns 9 and 13. Attention to form is seen in the self-corrections at turns 5 and 14.
15

16 Excerpt 2

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18 In excerpt 2, the lesson is about Christmas (the lesson took place in December) and a
19 student is offering his thoughts on Santa to the patrolling ST.
20
21

- 22 1. Student 1: Santa is, Santa is, each. Santa is each my parents.
23 2. ST: No! [laughs]
24 3. Student 1: No? [laughs] No?
25 4. ST: No.
26 5. Student 1: My Santa is only my parents.
27 6. ST: Do you realize? [laughs] How old do-did you realize?
28 7. Student 1: I-I *shinjite* [believe]
29 8. ST: discover?
30 9. Student 1: I believe in Santa
31 10. ST: Ah okay okay. You are pure. [laughs]
32
33

34 In terms of learning opportunities we can see attention to linguistic form throughout
35 this short dialogue. Turn 5 is an improvement on the student's opening statement at
36 turn 1. The same student has to fall back on the L1 in turn 7 but manages to recall the
37 word he is looking for 'believe' in turn 9. Finally, the ST reformulates his question
38 within turn 6 making it more comprehensible. Both excerpts show attention to form in
39 the context of authentic and spontaneous classroom communication.
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41

42 Content focused learning

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44 Successful cooperative learning relies on learners wanting their peers to reach a goal
45 and providing appropriate information to let them achieve it. The next four excerpts
46 show some of the ways in which the STs did this: by answering questions, using hints
47 and supplying model answers.
48

49 Excerpt 3

50
51 Here, the class has been presented with several categories of festivals and has been
52 asked to think of specific examples. 'Category B' on the worksheet is 'harvest
53 festivals' and a student is asking the ST for help.
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- 56 1. Student 1: B, please give me a hint.
57 2. ST: Hint? B? B. Harvest. Hmm? Than- eh. Do you know
58
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3 Thanksgivings Day? It's ah Thanksgivings Day. It's ah
4 America and Canada's festival. It's harvest festival.
5 3. Student 1: What do they celebrate?
6 4. ST: Ah ah they celebrate uh [laughs] harvest and they eat turkey
7 and celebrate autumn harvest. Crops.
8 5. Student 1: Thanks..? [confirming name]
9 6. ST: Thanksgiving.

10
11
12 The 'hint' actually takes the form of an answer at turn 2 which would have been
13 sufficient for the student to complete the entry on the worksheet, but she wants to
14 know more and requests further information at turn 3. The ST then elaborates on her
15 description of Thanksgiving.
16

17 Excerpt 4

18
19 Excerpt 4 comes from the same lesson. On the worksheet are four photographs of
20 festivals from around the world and the students must guess where each one takes
21 place. The same ST is offering assistance.
22
23

- 24
25 1. ST: Can you answer? I'll give some hint. Ah. Brazil correct. It's
26 correct. China correct. But it's [this one is] not correct.
27 2. Student 1: Malaysia?
28 3. ST: Uh it's in Europe.
29 4. Student 1: *Makedonia* (Macedonia)
30 5. ST: No. [laughs] And *nan darou na?* (what can I say?) Near to
31 Holland.
32 6. Student 2: *Berugii* (Belgium)
33 7. ST: It's correct.
34 8. Student 1: *Berugii?* *Berugii?* Bel?
35 9. Student 2: Belgium [bɛldʒum]
36 10. ST: [bɛldʒum] *mitai na* (looks like [bɛldʒum] doesn't it)
37 11. Student 2: *B-E-L-G-I-U-M*
38
39
40

41 The ST first confirms two correct answers and then offers effective scaffolded
42 assistance, providing enough information to encourage engagement without revealing
43 the answer. Her two hints at turn 3 and turn 5 both prompt guesses and ultimately lead
44 to a successful outcome. From turn 8 the students explore the English name for
45 Belgium, its pronunciation and spelling.
46
47

48 Excerpts 5 and 6 are examples of STs giving a model answer. In Excerpt 5 the ST
49 finishes his segment by offering supplementary information that the students had not
50 mentioned when giving their own answers. He seems keen not to let his research go to
51 waste, reporting it to the class as fully as he can.
52

53 Excerpt 5

- 54
55 ST: Incidentally I explain Number 2. Santa image. His image in each other- in
56 each countries is different. Some countries eh he look red but some countries
57 blue and brown. All coun-eh countries is different. Yes. Eh. Formally, eh red
58
59
60

Santa Claus is eh red Santa Claus image is defined by Coca Cola in 1930. And eh [Question] 5. Santa was spread in Meiji [period] in Japan. Actually Sant-Santa existed in Meiji but stead-steadily admitted [accepted] by people in-after World War 2. Yes. Okay.

Excerpt 6

In Excerpt 6 the ST gives a model answer before asking students for their own example of a local festival.

ST: In my town in Gifu we have *Ukai* [cormorant fishing] *Ukai*. Bird catch *ayu* [type of fish] fish. It's *ano* [eh] historical and harvest festival. If you have any festival?

The excerpts in this section show the ST as expert, possessing knowledge that the other students need to complete a task or to better appreciate the content of the lesson. Knowledge is shared through interaction: through student requests for help or by STs taking seriously their roles of informant and facilitator.

Language focused learning

In the previous section, the students' dialogue centred on factual content pertaining to each topic, but students also discussed language form during the lessons which was a further locus of potential learning. Focus on form was sometimes proactive when STs predicted potential difficulties with language and sometimes reactive in response to a breakdown in communication or when students noticed a gap in their knowledge of English. Instances of proactive and reactive focus on form are exemplified below.

Excerpt 7 is from a lesson on the social and psychological significance of colours. The STs have asked the groups to think of possible answers to questions such as why footballs are black and white or, in this case, why barbers' poles are red, white and blue. The ST is asking a group to report its answers to the whole class.

Excerpt 7

1. ST: Okay Number 3 question. Why are barbers put red, blue and white pole? Uh, Group 3? Red means?
2. Student: Red means ar-artery?
3. ST: Yes correct 'artery' In Japanese *doumyaku* and blue means
4. Student: Vein?
5. ST: Yes correct. Vein means *joumyaku* And white means?
6. Student: Bandage
7. ST: Yes correct, bandage, bandage, in Japanese *houtai*. There are various opinions. For one opinion in 12th century Europe a barber also worked as surgeon.

The ST has made use of the lexical items, *vein*, *artery* and *bandage* in producing her lesson and has decided that a translation is necessary for the class. This is a display of what Legutke and Thomas term "intellectual empathy" (1991: 278) which describes

1
2
3 how learners are well attuned, perhaps more so than the teacher, to their peers' level
4 of proficiency and understanding.

5
6 In the next two excerpts, STs deal with sudden language difficulties.
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9 Excerpt 8

- 10
11 1. ST: "Please tell me your opinion" *de kotaete moratte?* (We ask for
12 answers with 'Please tell me your opinion?')
13
14 2. ST: Okay please tell me your opinion. Eh, Group 1 please.
15

16 The STs are waiting for the groups to complete an exercise. In the first turn the ST is
17 talking quietly to her peer ST to confirm how to solicit answers from students in
18 English. The next turn occurs some 40 seconds later when the ST repeats the phrase,
19 this time out loud, to begin a whole-class discussion.
20

21
22 Next, an ST consults privately with a peer ST, asking for an English translation of a
23 phrase he needs to check on the groups' progress. He immediately repeats it out loud
24 to the rest of the class in turn 3.
25

26
27 Excerpt 9

- 28
29 1. ST 1: *Konkai no jikan irutte nante iu no?* (How do I ask if they need
30 more time?)
31 2. ST 2: Does anyone need more time.
32 3. ST 1: Oh [laughs] Does anyone need more time?
33

34 These final two excerpts illustrate learning opportunities in the form of 'pushed
35 output' (Swain, 1995), where the act of communication has served as impetus for STs
36 to seek out unfamiliar English expressions.
37

38
39 Discussion

40
41 Peer teaching contributed effectively to the aims of this course, the foremost of which
42 was to give students speaking practice and develop greater fluency in English. The
43 lessons generated uninterrupted peer interaction and the recordings reveal a friendly
44 and cooperative atmosphere in which students worked together to discuss and
45 explore the topic of each lesson. Moreover, during interaction that centred on the
46 exchange of ideas and the construction of meaning, the students focused on language
47 form, taking the opportunity to self monitor and modify their L2 output when they
48 believed their message was not quite clear enough. They also helped each other to
49 understand unfamiliar L2 vocabulary and to produce L2 messages when those proved
50 problematic.
51

52
53 The students took to their role of teacher with enthusiasm and strove to produce
54 materials that were of interest to the class. I was often impressed at the depth of their
55 research and it seemed that the novel role, with its accompanying responsibility,
56 motivated them to gain as broad a knowledge in their topics as possible given the time
57 constraints of the course. Enthusiasm is of course contagious and when it came to
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3 teaching their lessons the STs were adept at maintaining their peers' interest and
4 engaging them in goal-oriented interaction.
5

6 Crandall (1999) considers potential resistance to practices in cooperative learning. In
7 cultures where teacher-fronted instruction is the norm, learner-fronted lessons may
8 carry the risk of chaotic practice. A fear of over-reliance on the L1 or of exposing
9 learners to non-target-like L2 might also make some teachers hesitate before ceding
10 control of lesson content (pp. 240-42). Such resistance is clearly relevant to the
11 practice of peer teaching as described in this article.
12

13
14 Japanese students are likely to have experienced only teacher-fronted classes until
15 university level (Sakui, 2004). Despite this, the students in this study exhibited
16 considerable skill when roles were switched: as described above, they kept their
17 students on topic, they encouraged them to think and to speak English, and they
18 strove to make the contents of their lesson comprehensible. The initial stages of task
19 modeling and rehearsals served to reduce confusion by easing the students into their
20 new roles, and the regular classroom teacher was of course present to help out during
21 their lessons if necessary.
22

23 24 Conclusion

25
26 The use of student-generated materials does not necessarily entail peer teaching and I
27 could have taken an alternative approach and taught the students' materials myself.
28 Yet, in reducing the students' contribution in this way, many of the learning
29 opportunities revealed in the recordings would have been lost. Peer teaching
30 described here did more than simply provide students with increased speaking
31 practice. It encouraged them to make use of processes such as cooperation, scaffolded
32 assistance and negotiation of form and meaning. In so doing, they demonstrated what
33 Legutke and Thomas call 'didactic capabilities' namely "the ability to make insights
34 and findings available to others – the ability to teach one's peers" (1991: 276). The
35 discourse presented in this article shows that learners can demonstrate these
36 capabilities and also reveals valuable learning opportunities arising from the process
37 of peer teaching.
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40 41 Notes

42
43 **1** Transcription conventions: Italics represent use of L1 Japanese. Round brackets
44 contain English translations. Square brackets provide contextual information and
45 phonetic descriptions.
46

47 (3878 words)
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