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Generating Effective Communication Using Photos

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Generating Effective Communication Using Photos

David John WOOD

1. Introduction

Japan's TOEIC® scores seem low even compared to countries with a fraction of Japan's GDP (IIBC, ThoughtCo.com, 2017). Its top heavy education system often paralyzes communication (Pickles, 2017). Exchanging real experience is essential in order to develop fluency, but frustrated by insular pedagogy. We present an alternative method to counter this. Starting as low-communicative-ability undergraduates, subjects' overall situation was first analysed. Using photos seemed one promising approach. Participants enjoyed sharing theirs in English. The process was monitored via interactional assessments. To validate the approach, fluency building blocks were measured regularly. Fluency relates to speech delivery as a part of oral proficiency, divisible into three kinds, cognitive, perceived and **utterance fluency**:

* cognitive fluency refers to processes involved in the production of utterances;
* perceived fluency refers to listeners' interpretations relating to speakers' cognitive fluency, based on perceptions of **utterance fluency**; and,
* **utterance fluency** refers to features of utterances reflecting speakers' cognitive fluency, measurable via speed fluency, predominantly for testing and monologue research (Segalowitz, 2010, Tavakoli, 2016).

We assessed dialogues not just monologues to test the photo method for fluency improvement. As proficiency was tested both at the start and end of each year, results were used as reference points. Both showed clear progress, the sampled subject's score rising 200 points on TOEIC®. Finally, anonymous feedback in regular class evaluations compared with those given in other classes indicated that using photos for communication fostered interaction so deserves serious attention.

2. Introduction: Communication for Fluency

In the context of communication research, the trend to measure fluency in terms of "disfluency" poses risks (e.g., Liyanage & Gardner, 2013) as fluency is increasingly assessed via disfluency's and communication breakdown's absence (de Jong, 2013). Origins of the approach may be found in speech language pathology (Yaruss, 1998). Principal criteria cited there included: hesitation; revision; and phrasal repetition. Transferring these to the analysis of foreign-language learners as fluency indicators risks their being perceived as having some clinical abnormality. Clearly, these and other "disfluency" factors exist naturally to varying extents in all live communication. This includes L1 acquisition, subject to all the rapidly increasing and evolving variants. No-one can master them all, and by definition, all living languages are in a state of flux. Labelling a single variant better is misleading as each serves its communicative purpose best. Therefore the use of disfluency in fluency measurement may be open to dispute. Interaction is sometimes downgraded to an inferior and phatic form of communication (teachit.co.uk 2002, Richards 2017 and so on) defined, for example, as "language in conversation sometimes used for interpersonal reasons and socializing" as if devoid of any real or further significance. Yet interaction is essential to meaningful communication.

Distinctions between one's mother and another language (or L2) can be vague as we increasingly acquire more than just a single L2 or L1 variant of our own. The way that fluency is sometimes evaluated points to potentially important areas, but also inherently logistical paradoxes. Directly or indirectly, questionable *assumptions* arise like:

* *language is detachable from people* but only people embody meaning;
* *there is a single, static L2* instead of countless evolving varieties; and,
* *written communication dictates research* but it is primarily spoken.

What is most needed is an accurate grasp of what communication means.

We should focus on this first, then the effective methodology to achieve it. In this study, measurement of the samples used is restricted to speech rate, syllables per second per utterance and question lengths, including pause time, but excluding disfluency and communication breakdowns. This indicated effective communication development as the number of words per utterance increased markedly.

3. Communicative Fluency

Perhaps the most important aspect of communication is **utterance fluency**, so we focus on some specific measures of fluency. Of the three major communication indicators, complexity,

accuracy and fluency (Thornbury, 2000) changes in **utterance fluency** were monitored and evaluated via analyses of recordings of students' interactions. The comprehensive process was detailed in a full-length study (Wood, 2015).

We outlined the development with examples of the methodology involved and its assessment. By avoiding text dependency or explicit, intensive grammar, and instead foregrounding student interaction, the communicative fluency achieved by using photos promoted learning experiences not always possible in much pedagogy. The effectiveness of the approach is evinced by evaluating progress in terms of **utterance fluency** which:

> . . . in the social context of communication . . . the role played by the pragmatic and sociolinguistic nature of communication in shaping L2 fluency development . . . *is experience in using the language that sharpens the learner's cognitive-perceptual systems so that these cognitive operations become rapid, efficient and fluid, resulting in speech output that is fluent*.
> (Segalowitz, 2016 – emphases in italics are the present author's.)

4. Samples

Such "experience in using the language" may be best ensured in classes through intensive interaction between students themselves, free from undue constraints, like grammar-explicit texts and excessive teacher talk. In 45 hours over three half-yearly semesters of thirty 90-minute weekly classes, the subject's conversation speed increased:

Sample:

Date	*Words/Second*	*Syllables/Second*	*Words/Question*	*Words/Utterance*
1: 07/2015	1.1	1.3	4.5	5
2: 05/2016	1.6	2.1	9	7
3: 12/2016	1.5	2.1	10	**15**

The exchanges that follow all lasted from 60 to 90 seconds. As with all such classes, the interactions were completely spontaneous and unscripted. The subject is the same in each case, using a new photo in different communication courses. The samples show increasing language interaction.

Conversation classes are carried out by eliciting each photo's essential contents and spin-offs over two rounds of questions. Seminars employ some reading by having students write questions about each other's photos to prepare.

The approach itself arose from a situational analysis indicating that all students enjoyed

photos involving domestic and international travel in particular. Many dreamt of working for airlines. The subject now runs a busy airline check-in desk at a major airport.

Students' choices of photo reflected their interests in many cases, but were in no way limited to these areas alone. The method and student performance were assessed in a tripartite structure of:

* **utterance fluency** analyses at relevant stages of production;
* external language proficiency exams at the start/end of courses;

and,

* students' self-evaluations, both of their own and each course's merits.

Samples **1-3** below indicate average **utterance fluency** in classes in successive semesters:

Sample 1 July 2015 - **Subject's photo in Conversation: *A New Year's Meal***

60 seconds/ 68 words/ 80 syllables = **1.1 words/ 1.3 syllables per second**;
6 questions = **4.5 words per question**; 12 utterances = **5 words per utterance**

Q1: Who are they?
A1: They are my relatives for mother.
Q2: Where did you take this picture?
A2: The hotel.
Q3: What did you do?
A3: I ate a special dinner because it was New Year's Day so we gathered.
Q4: Did you have a good time?
A4: Yes.
Q5: What did you eat?
A5: I ate buffet. So I ate beef and fish and other things.
Q6: What was your favorite food?
A6: I like roast beef

Sample 2 May 2016 - **Subject's photo in an early seminar** (*HP=Harry Potter*)

60 seconds/ 99 words/ 127 syllables = **1.6 words/ 2.1 syllables per second**;
7 questions= **9 words per question**; 14 utterances= **7 words per utterance**

Q1: How many days did you stay in Tokyo (T)?
A1: I stayed two days.
Q2: Where's your favorite place in T?
A2: I like Shibuya.
Q2b: Why?
A2b: There are many shops.
Q3a: What series of HP do you like?
A3a: I like third one.
Q3b: How about you?
A3b: I don't know.
Q4: What's your favorite English literature besides HP series?
A4: I like Lord of the Rings.
Q5: Do you have a plan to go to Tokyo next?
A5: I don't have a plan but I want to go soon.
Q6: Which do you like HP attraction?
A6: I like Sirius Black as he's very kind.

Sample 3 Dec. 2016 - **Subject's photo in a subsequent seminar**

90 seconds/ 131 words/ 193 syllables = **1.5 words/ 2.1 syllables per second**;
4 questions = **10 words per question**; 9 utterances = **15 words per utterance**

Q1: Why did you choose HP to talk about & why did you choose this photo?
A1: I chose HP because he is popular. Maybe I chose this photo for my first page as I like HP & Newt Scamander.
Q2: I don't read or watch HP so please tell me recommended point.
A2: I think characters in HP are very attractive & the story is interesting so I recommend it.
Q3: Please tell me your favorite character.
A3: I like Sirius Black. He's HP's parents' friend & he's a nice guy.
Q4: Why is HP so popular?
A4: I think HP is popular as in 1990s Internet was used all over the world & HP is released in 1990s so I think it is related

5. Discussion

In comparison, Presidential runner Al Gore's speech rate is **2.2 words per second** in the former VP's prepared presentations (Dlugan, 2012) easier than in live interactions. The measures employable include speed of association and continuity, and speed and efficiency of making word-meaning links (reaction time and reaction time stability). Vocabulary size, however, is not a cognitive fluency measure but a knowledge measure that may be strongly associated with cognitive fluency and even spoken accuracy as distinct from the more communicative spoken **utterance fluency** (Segalowitz, 2016).

Under two days of communication experience spread over a year and a half (the subject didn't take other oral classes or study abroad) generated clear increases in the main **utterance fluency** measures, namely the word, question and syllable production rates. The interactions were spontaneous and thus appear to indicate a significant development in **utterance fluency** using this method. Instead of taking the essence of communication as a given, a principal but rarely researched area of TESOL is its actual meaning (Wood, 2018). Traditionally, sociolinguistic perspectives of communication deviate from those of mediated discourse researchers (for example Scollon 2001, and Gee 2004). Their research stresses communication, language use and related issues as part of our social practice and in a dialectic relationship with language. They suggest language use equals social practice situated at the intersection of the discourses and social relationships that people bring to what they call sites of engagement or moments of real-time social action. Communication is a social practice, operating at the junctions of and subject to social norms and values, relationships between the interlocutors, the ideas that our discourses entail and all the routine-based practices we bring to these moments of interaction. This broad mapping of human communication accounts for more than one process at any particular time. It

takes into account all of the elements we bring with us, actively foregrounded or backgrounded during these interactions (de Groot, 2017). On a more immediate and visceral level, to teach or learn language we need a working definition even though there may be more meanings of communication than there have been communicators. The expanding digital universe only accelerates communication's evolution exponentially. Most research avoids meaningful and in-depth descriptions altogether. Instead, it concentrates on devising "communication strategies" without even knowing what communication can mean. Texts are even less scrupulous, trumpeting the word communication with no obvious understanding of or interest in what it may actually mean, but as a mere word for the purpose of decoration (e.g. Kitayama et al, 2018). Grammar translation invariably substitutes real communication, leaving students clueless. This typical page communicates nothing except vague vocabulary lists and prescriptive L2 to L1 grammar translations minus any interaction:

5 UNIT

Kitayama TOEIC L&R

Communication

▶ VOCABULARY UPGRADE

1 単語の意味を下の語群から選び記号で答えなさい。

1) activate	( )	2) belongings	( )	3) client	( )
4) document	( )	5) electrician	( )	6) extremely	( )
7) inconvenient	( )	8) kid	( )	9) locate	( )
10) naturally	( )	11) prepaid	( )	12) scratch	( )

a. 顧客	b. 極端に	c. 電気技師	d. 不便な	e. 削る	f. ～の位置を探す
g. 書類	h. 所持品	i. 自然に	j. 前払いの	k. 子供	l. ～を始動させる

A crass disregard for the meaning of communication makes many such texts irrelevant. Most teachers in Japan are not required to study basic TESOL courses, relying instead on outdated beliefs with the surface validity of hierarchic imposition as sole rationale, or merely a Caucasian face, no qualifications or training necessary. College entrance exams revert to forms of English subservient to those taught at high school, archaic, inaccurate and non-communicative. It should be a global communication medium in the digital age, but English study often expresses and reinforces disconnected self-containment instead.

6. Some Definitions of Communication

Communication principles (see related comments in **8. Supporting Data**) include:

* the intention to convey what the conveyer believes to be true;
* the interactive ability to accept that we don't know or may be wrong;
* a readiness to update our own views of things accordingly; and,
* a willingness to engage in many kinds of communication.

(Wood, 2018)

Without such prerequisites, communication cannot exist meaningfully in classrooms. The communicative validity of texts is ignored, preventing interaction. Instead students are left prey to commercial publishing, the opposite of impartiality and communication.

Representative definitions, all of which are currently available online, were discussed in detail (Wood, 2018). It was argued that one of the better attempts was to denote communication as: "a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information, news, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning" (*businessdictionary*, 2017) because it seemed closest to the goal of language teaching.

Other attempts considered stressed actual exchange, including the most important aspects, the paralinguistic and the spoken in that order, but only went half-way to essential communicative interaction. Tokyo's 2020 Olympics make authentic human communication all the more urgent, challenging the government's intent on the increasing reliance on translation technology. The business dictionary won gold for declaring creative co-operative contact as the ultimate goal.

Naturally, not all communicative attempts attain this objective, but if that is not at least their aim, the possibility of any real communication may be compromised. Its failing (like that of similarly common definitions) is suggesting that all communication is two-way, when it is just as often multi-directional.

Most classes, however, are teacher monologues, occasionally disguised with dead-end dialogues predetermined to defeat communication.

7. Using Photos versus Explicit Grammar

The first half of a 90-minute seminar combines conversation and writing class approaches by beginning with short written explanations of students' photos circulated for other students to write warm-up questions. Students next present their photos ordering and using questions they choose. Each student has a rapid spoken interaction to promote fluency. Sample comparisons indicate clear development. This integrated approach is more extensive than either the spoken or

written approaches are individually. As many students have taken the former courses in the preceding years, their evolving confidence is clear.

In terms of **utterance fluency** (the speed of successful interaction) their exchanges rival native speech, and contain no insurmountable communication breakdowns. TOEIC is a major proficiency measure, helpful for employment. Results from these classes over ten years show major improvement on the higher level sections because of the extensive listening approach adopted. The average score of all such takers is now the highest on record since testing began 20 years ago.

The result of the sample student rose by 200 points. Associating words through synonyms and relating words lexically at speed (skills that increase as a result of the extensive method employed) aren't achievable by standard intensive grammar approaches, the mainstay of English textbook education. Extensive listening is a higher skill than one-correct-answer-only text-book grammar. When over-taught at the expense of global comprehension, the result both in international language proficiency tests and in real-life communication is failure. Educational conservatism imprisons conventional classes in passive-intensive L1 monolog.

Grammar and teacher talk are still the center of language teaching, exceeding 90% of classes. Motivating students to use English positively is the cornerstone of acquisition. This requires courage to break away from explicit-grammar approaches. Students know this instinctively so many just give up when faced with the reality of its absence, believing studying only means more grammar and testing. In contrast, those using photos become confident communicators. The integrated approach using photos to interact with each other is a proven formula. Its essence is that it cannot be contained or constrained by being pre-scripted.

Instead, it generates genuine and spontaneous interaction at all stages. Students respond well to the cycle of study that it involves. It offers a good structure involving the preparation of a new photo every week, a first draft of a presentation, written questions to stimulate clearer explanation, real-life conversation and "movies" for students to study at their own pace in order to reflect on the way that they use English. In this way it evolves naturally from preceding written and spoken communication classes.

Any need for grammatical correction can be addressed by using the natural context of language production to focus on misunderstandings arising, whether on the producer's or receiver's part. Intrusive grammar stifles and obstructs communication (Wood, 2016). Foreign language communication needs rules but relies more heavily on freedom of expression, even from a very basic level of grammar knowledge. As Japanese college students have already received seven years of primarily grammatical English education at Junior and Senior high schools, to continue teaching grammar excessively is counter-intuitive (Hirasawa, 2009.)

Speaking naturally precedes writing as a kind of interior dialogue with the writer editing and improving earlier thoughts through the process of reading and re-reading. By putting the natural speaking-writing process in the reverse order and stressing accuracy over fluency, students are discouraged from communicating and developing fluency. Grammar belongs within the context of meaningful communication instead of in isolation (Nunan, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Fotos (1993) suggests grammatical structure awareness is raised through interactive grammar tasks just as effectively without explicit grammatical explanation.

Despite their differences, all surveyed said their main intention when speaking English is to be understood. While rating grammatical accuracy highly, they know perfect grammar is not a necessary component of communicative competence (Eickhoff, 2016) but just a threshold level needed for them to be understood. Errors past that point can be more easily ignored or forgiven. Ultimately it depends on each situation. Those in an L1 English environment believe communicative strategies can compensate for most grammatical shortcomings.

The different perceived level of formality and tendency of writing to remain longer than speech make writing more susceptible to overemphasis on grammar. Any grammar presented should include not just form but also the meanings and uses of different grammatical structures. Teachers should endeavor to focus on those grammatical structures that are known to be problematic to learners rather than trying to teach the whole of grammar. A focus-on-forms approach is valid as long as it includes opportunities for learners to practice in real-life communicative tasks.

8.1 Supporting Data:

Core Course Overview 2017 April-September Term 1

Average size for 30 Writing, Conversation & Graduation Seminars: 21

Researcher's classes using photos only -

Writing Year 1, Conversation Year 3, Seminar Year 4: 3 classes

All other 15 teachers' classes using textbooks only -

Writing/Conversation Years 1-3, Graduation Seminar Year 4: 30 classes

8.2 Class Feedback (Students evaluate anonymously.)

Researcher's student response rate: 66% /

Average rate for 30 W, C, G classes: 10%

Researcher's classes' average rating: 4.9/5.0 /

Average for all 30 other classes: 4.5/5.0

8.3 Class Comments

Researcher's classes' students commenting: 40% /

Other classes' students: 5%

Typical comments about the author's 3 classes:

(The author's classes receive up to 8 times more than other classes)

I really enjoyed using photos to speak in English.

I learned a real interest in getting others to understand me in English.

I was more motivated to understand what others say using photos.

I enjoyed using photos because I could learn so much about everyone.

I could increase my speed of communication and understanding.

This was the first class I felt my communicative ability improve in.

I expanded my conversation range through this class.

The teacher tackled misunderstandings spontaneously so we learnt a lot.

Typical comments about all other 30 classes:

(Most classes receive few/no comments resulting in a distorted picture.

When only 1 student answers, results can be higher than if all answered.

Often nobody answers suggesting extreme apathy.)

I couldn't understand the aims of the lessons or what the teacher meant.

The teacher got angry when we couldn't understand what he said.

The teacher didn't make enough effort to listen to us.

I completely lost confidence in my English ability.

We only studied grammar and English-to-Japanese translation.

9. Conclusion

The amount and quality of response for classes using photos indicated greater interaction than with text-based classes, many of which get fewer positive reactions internally and lower results in external proficiency tests. TOEIC scores for Conversation classes using photos show a year-on-year 15% plus increase in listening ability (with no significant reading improvement) after the former are only taught a single half-year course in Year Three.

This writer teaches a Reading class in Year One only, when students' year-end TOEIC scores are over 15% higher for reading than listening. This is a result of stressing written **utterance fluency**, indicating the approach's multi-skill, multi-level efficacy. Without it, communication wanes in all the other 30 conventional classes.

Research is best measured by improvement in methodology and effective communication. Resistance to change suggests lack of communication between research and practice. Ultimately, teaching is subordinated to employment prerequisites, but communication remains a democratic

and life-long process. If students are not able to achieve it in classrooms, the fault is not theirs but their educators' for failing to create trust and purpose in employing the methodologies most likely to help.

To communicate competently, students need pragmatic competence just as much as if not more than grammar. Communication implies speakers' ability to understand and respect each other's culture and accent (Sauvignon, 1991). Textbook forms are not enough to achieve either individual or international communication.

The most widely understood form of English needs prioritizing simultaneously with the understanding that accents and first language interference should be respected and recognized without prejudice.

Communicative competence includes the abilities to interpret, express and reach meaning. Standard methods and textbook activities are predetermined, the opposite. The concept of language and literacy as social practice is fundamental for people to express and share the vitality of their cultures, communities, experiences and opinions. Grammar and texts teach only idealized forms of language and culture, minus the vital pre-requisite of individual *ideolects* and *ideocultures*, namely, the unique linguistic and cultural skill sets each person has and wishes to share. Textbooks fail to communicate as they sidestep these basic needs.

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