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Improving Second Language Speaking Classes through the Use of Student Assistants

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1. Overview

The difficulties in teaching large beginning-level oral language classes to Japanese university students have been well documented. This paper focuses on the ways that incorporating novice student assistants (SAs) into these large conversation classes can help overcome these difficulties and promote more extensive authentic communication in the target language.

Thanks to a grant⁴ from the School of Languages and Communication (SOLAC) at Kobe University, the authors were able to hire SAs for one semester for support that included conducting language tests, providing individual and group feedback to students, and helping with everyday classroom management.

In this paper, we present a brief description of the Immediate Method that was used in these classes, case-study profiles of the SAs who were involved in this project, and reflections on the role of the SA as a language tester. In the final section of the paper, we discuss the impact that the SAs had on our classes and suggest some promising future directions for the effective use of SAs in second language education at Kobe University.

2. The Immediate Method at Kobe University

The Immediate Method (IM) is a conversation classroom management technique that was developed in Japan. The fundamental assumption of the IM is that, to bring about progress in conversation skills, students have to actively practice sentence patterns, vocabulary, and pragmatic strategies in short conversations that allow for real-time, interactive exchange of information. Regular in-class conversation tests provide a unique opportunity for students to practice language actively in class. These tests motivate university students and are clearly more effective than constantly trying to persuade students to practice speaking in class.

Efficient time management is an integral part of the IM. The teacher tests all students *during class-time* on a regular basis. For example, if students are tested in pairs and each pair is tested in

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a conversation with the teacher for a period of five minutes, it would take 50 minutes to test half of a class of 40 students, the typical size of language classes at Kobe University. Various strategies can be used, including testing three students at a time instead of two or varying the type of tests, but clearly lack of time is a significant issue in such classes.

The IM is further characterized by the utilization of everyday life topics for the conversations and practical classroom management tools and techniques such as the “progress sheet” (see Appendix for a sample progress sheet). A full description of the IM is beyond the scope of this report, but for further information refer to Azra, Ikezawa, Rowlett and Vannieuwenhuyse (2005), and Jones and Vannieuwenhuyse (2002).

The authors used a variety of IM techniques in their conversation classes during the first semester of 2008. Although the levels differed (Vannieu’s French students were mostly beginners and false beginners), the same general outcomes and challenges were observed. Students gained fluency in the language being taught, and were able to practice and integrate culturally appropriate pragmatic skills in the language. Teachers and students alike experienced a tangible sense of achievement by engaging in “real-time” conversation. However, teachers faced the dilemma of accepting fluency over accuracy in this interaction. In addition, it was also often necessary to choose between interacting with the students in the realistic conversation test setting and introducing an appropriate amount of teaching material to meet the course goals. A further challenge inherent in the use of IM techniques is teacher fatigue. Teachers who are physically tired are less likely to experiment with new techniques and also less open to the individual needs of their students.

After employing the method in the first semester of 2008, it soon became apparent that the IM posed a number of serious challenges for teachers with large language classes at Kobe University. It was for this reason that the authors decided to make use of student assistants (SAs)⁵ in the second semester in order to more efficiently provide adequate feedback to small groups within the large class context. We set about the task of selecting appropriate participants and negotiating how best to use them to help our students improve their second language skills.

3. Student Assistants

This section provides a brief description of the student assistants who were employed in the project. Since the number of SAs was too small to warrant any quantitative analysis of their performance, these case studies document the implementation of the approach based on the observations and reflections of the participants. The case studies were written by the supervising instructor, and were based on feedback from the SAs as well as on direct observation. All names are pseudonyms.

⁵ The term student assistant (SA) is used at Kobe University chiefly to refer to under-graduate assistants who may perform a variety of tasks for professors, including those described in this paper. It was coined to differentiate SAs from teaching assistants (TAs), who are generally post-graduate students.

Case study 1: “Liam”

Liam was a second-year undergraduate who was majoring in journalism and Asian Studies at his university in the United States. He arrived in Japan in September of 2008 on a one-year exchange. His Japanese was at a basic level, and prior to these classes he had had no teaching experience. However, he was keen to take on the position and enjoyed communicating with the students. A chance meeting with the instructor led to his being offered the position on short notice, but he soon rose to the challenge of being an effective SA.

Since this particular class was based around presentation skills, there were times when Liam had to sit with the students while the instructor lectured at the front. However, the class also involved plenty of small group practice, and at these times, Liam would circulate among the students and provide assistance where necessary. On a few occasions he was also able to prepare his own version of the speech the students were working on, so that they could see how a native speaker of English would approach the task they had been assigned. The students appeared to relate easily to Liam since he was about the same age as they were.

Another of Liam’s roles involved providing formal feedback on the students’ presentation skills. Typically the students would prepare and practice their presentations in small groups before presenting them for assessment. Sometimes this involved an individual presentation in front of the whole class, but at other times they presented in front of a small group of their peers. On these occasions Liam took the small group to a nearby classroom where they would carry out their presentations in front of a smaller, less intimidating group of their peers. Liam assessed them according to criteria that were given in detail on the students’ progress sheets (vocabulary and grammar, pronunciation and fluency, active participation, presentation structure). In addition, he would engage the students in impromptu discussion about their topic, encourage other students to ask the speaker questions and write a brief comment on each student’s performance. While this was happening, the instructor was free to go on to the next topic with the remainder of the group with far less “downtime” than there was during the first semester when the testing process was conducted without an SA.

Although Liam began with on rudimentary Japanese, he gradually learned more throughout the semester and occasionally practiced it with the students after the class. Most of his classes were spent in the company of other international students, so he was glad to make friends with some Japanese students his own age. Liam was motivated to become an SA by his interest in Japanese culture and often commented on how various aspects of culture were played out in the classroom. This was one aspect of the SA experience that was unexpected—that the SAs themselves may in fact have benefit linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically by comparing their own Japanese language study with the Japanese students’ approach to learning English.

Case study 2 “Tristan”, “Stephane” and “Mariko”

Tristan was an SA who proved to be beyond the average level commonly found among the overseas exchange students available to act as SAs. He was a French doctorate student at Kobe University who was fluent in Japanese, understood Japanese learning styles, and had teaching experience. By coincidence, he had also studied Japanese in France with a teacher who was using the Immediate Method. He started working as an SA during the first part of the first semester, and continued throughout the second semester. He worked in three first-year French conversation classes, each with 35 to 40 students.

Tristan helped the instructor with conversation tests, reducing the testing time to half of what it had been in the first semester. Tester training was done in a practical manner during class time: Tristan observed a first series of tests done by the instructor and then conducted tests while being observed by the instructor. Between each test, the instructor commented on the testing criteria and on other aspects of testing such as how to make students feel comfortable and how much should be pointed out regarding accuracy. The instructor and Tristan conferred between tests to adjust their marks. This process was quite smooth. The testing role was the most important because it freed time to do other activities, and also allowed the instructor to be more relaxed and attentive during conversation tests. Tristan, who plans to become a teacher, enjoyed discussing pedagogical techniques with the instructor and gave useful suggestions on several occasions on how instructions could be understood more easily by students.

He could not be present for three consecutive weeks during the second semester and was replaced by a younger exchange student he knew from the same university, Stephane. Stephane was briefed by Tristan and was keen to learn how to work as an SA. His contribution was quite satisfactory in terms of helping with testing and answering questions from students.

Stephane's friend, Mariko, a Japanese student who had been to France for one year on an exchange program, joined the class as an unpaid SA in one class until the end of the semester. She helped mainly by answering students questions, particularly about grammar, during the oral practice time.

Over the semester, Tristan learned teaching techniques that he felt he could use later in his career as a teacher. Stephane seemed to enjoy learning some basics of group management and of intercultural communication with Japanese students. Mariko was able to practice her French with the instructor, Stephane and Tristan, and to see second language learning from a teacher's perspective.

Case study 3: “Brett”

Brett was a fourth-year undergraduate exchange student majoring in Japanese at a university in the United States. He was a native speaker of English and had no teaching experience prior to taking on his position as a student assistant in two second-semester oral skills classes. Although he was majoring in Japanese, he spoke only in English in class. He was a very quiet person and

had difficulty communicating to the 40-student classes without the support and intervention of the supervising teacher.

Brett attended all classes except two during the semester and was called on regularly to help with everyday logistical tasks in class. He helped model conversations with the supervising teacher and often read and commented on homework submitted by students. At times he tabulated student responses on the board and also maintained individual contact with the students by circulating in the classroom and engaging students in brief conversations about their progress on specific tasks. Students came to trust him through this process.

Brett's primary role as an SA, however, was to conduct conversation tests with the students. Over the course of the semester, there were three oral conversation tests. After he completed the training described in Section 5 below, he conducted half of the testing for the course on his own. The majority of his conversation tests were captured on video to document the training process and also to provide a record of the tests in case any problems with scoring were to arise. The supervising instructor reviewed the videos after each test and agreed with Brett's scoring in virtually all cases.

Over the semester, Brett developed a good, professional relationship with the students. It was relatively easy for the students to ask him questions, in part because of his age. He was also able to communicate more on a peer level with students during the conversation tests than the instructor was. In some cases, this made the students more relaxed and helped them to perform better on the tests.

Brett and the supervising instructor spent some time after each class reflecting on what went well and what didn't. Changes in either materials or activities were made based on these discussions. By the end of the semester, Brett's interest in taking an active role in the teaching had increased to the point that he asked if he could conduct a short activity with the entire class. The instructor agreed and helped him develop the materials for this 20-minute activity. Although the lesson didn't go very smoothly, he showed a strong interest in trying to improve it for the second class. This experience helped him see the challenges that a classroom teacher faces every day and also reassured him that his role as a tester and as a support person in the class was the appropriate one.

By the end of the semester, Brett's confidence as a tester had grown considerably. He had come to a clear understanding of his role in the class and was very interested in continuing to have contact with students as a tester in the next semester. It was interesting to see how this experience had brought about a change in his future career plans: he had decided that he would apply to the JET program as his next career step.

Based on the experience of the three supervising instructors with student assistants in this pilot project, it was clear that the SAs were not qualified to be classroom teachers. Although they worked effectively in smaller groups and were also able to provide useful individual feedback to

students, they did not have the skills and experience needed to manage the needs and dynamics in a large class of second language learners. However, this study confirmed that SAs make very important contributions that can lead to a more effective learning experience for the students.

Prior teaching experience is not a necessary qualification for an SA; although one SA did have such experience, small group and individual interaction with students, modelling the target language, and testing do not require teaching experience. For two of the SAs, fluency in Japanese was not necessary, but for the French SA who was working with complete beginners, it was seen as more important.

All three of the supervising instructors felt that the presence of an SA allowed them to function more effectively in the classroom. Regular testing is a key feature of the Immediate Method, but the logistical burden of carrying out small group conversation tests in a large class can easily overwhelm even a highly experienced teacher, potentially diminishing the effectiveness of the course. SAs in all cases supplied the support necessary to help the instructor maintain the energy necessary for providing a good learning environment for the students. With some basic guidance on testing through training, clear performance criteria and/or experience, the SAs were able to reliably test the second language students.

In addition to providing essential teaching support to the instructors, the SAs also benefited personally from the experience. Their close communication during class time and in the tests provided a good basis for them to get to know Japanese students better. They developed an increased understanding of the learning process for these students as well as of the cultural context for university education in Japan. The experience helped bring them out of a closed circle of peers, typically other international students, into a setting that encouraged intercultural communication. The SAs began to interact with some of the Japanese students outside of class and through this process further developed their Japanese language skills. In addition to the development of skills as language testers, these personal benefits made the experience a rich one for all who were involved.

4. One Approach to Training SAs as Testers

From the beginning, the primary purpose of this project was to assess the impact that having an SA attached to large second language classes as a conversation tester would have on improving the overall effectiveness of the supported courses. One of the SAs, Brett, went through formal tester training based on the model that the US Peace Corps uses in training oral proficiency interview testers in over 70 countries around the world (see Peace Corps, 1998; Byrnes & Thompson, 1989 for details). This training typically is conducted in a workshop format over a five to seven day time period, but because of logistical and other practical constraints, in this case it was done with two sets of interviews (each set had six groups of three students) that had been recorded on video for review and discussion.

The first step in the training was for Brett to observe several tests from previous classes that had

been recorded. Using a descriptive rating scale that had been developed for these conversation tests, both he and the instructor rated students in several different conversations. This experience prepared him for the actual tests in class the following week. On the actual conversation test day, the supervising instructor conducted the first test while Brett observed. After the test, they discussed the scores that the instructor had given using the rating scale to explain the scoring. Brett then conducted an interview on his own while the instructor observed. They discussed his ratings and then the remaining conversation tests were conducted separately. However, all of Brett's test were recorded and subsequently saved on DVD for individual review.

Over the following week, Brett and the instructor rated the conversation tests separately and then met to compare their ratings. Differences in ratings were discussed in relation to the descriptive scale, and in all cases, the two raters were able to agree on a score. It was noted that there were more discrepancies between ratings on the first set of tests than on the second. By the end of the two-hour discussion session, it was clear that a fairly good level of reliability had been established between Brett and the supervising instructor. Subsequent spot-checks throughout the semester revealed that the two raters were rarely more than half a point apart on the 20-point scale. Establishing this basic level of inter-rater reliability was an important step in ensuring that the SA's grades were an accurate assessment of student performance.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study represents an initial investigation into the benefits of incorporating student assistants into second language oral skills classes within the general education program at Kobe University. While the program is still in its very early stages, it is apparent that the results are positive. Instructors felt less harried when their courses were supported by SAs. The SAs were able to direct and assess small groups of learners, allowing the instructor to focus more on teaching the whole group and giving the Japanese learners an opportunity to communicate in the target language with someone around their own age. Anecdotal evidence shows that students may feel more comfortable talking with SAs in small groups, lowering their inhibitions and allowing them to acquire increased oral communication skills.

In this respect, the SA program is a very cost-effective way to improve the efficiency of speaking classes. Classes that can most benefit from the introduction of SAs include large classes of 30 or more students and classes that implement pedagogical approaches such as the IM, which centre on meaningful interaction.

At present, however, the system within the university is not conducive to the use of SAs. Under the present system, teaching assistants (TAs) are available but the hours are limited and they need to be shared, meaning that the number available for each class is insufficient. Moreover, the present regulations stipulate that only graduate students can be employed as TAs. As SAs, undergraduate short-term exchange students and Japanese students who have studied abroad can actually also effectively carry out the sorts of tasks that are routinely assigned to TAs, and they

cost less to employ than graduate students. With a competent instructor, undergraduate students can prove to be very useful in supporting our efforts to teach effective second language classes.

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Appendix

A sample of the class project sheet used in some of the classes

Class Progress Sheet

Name in English	
Name in kanji	
Student Number	
Faculty / Department	
Year of Study	

この紙は毎回の授業と試験に必ず持って来てください。

Please bring this sheet to every class

この紙を絶対になくさないでください。

Do not lose this sheet

	Date	Attendance (one absence = - 3 points)	Conversation Test Scores	Class Participation/ Other Scores
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				

Total points ____ / 100