

Advanced Communication Training: Evaluation of Activities

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The Advanced Communication Training (ACT) program, which is in its second year since inception at Ochanomizu University, is designed to help students develop their oral communication skills. The program is open to undergraduates and graduates. This paper examines two activities from the ACT class taught in the academic year 2013: pechakucha and group discussions. There were two sections of the same class, with 18 students in one and 16 students in another. The majority were first year students, and their average TOEFL ITP score was 528. Feedback from the students concerning the activities was overwhelmingly positive; many students reported that they had become more confident through the ACT class. Furthermore in the paper, the author discusses several areas in the ACT class that could be addressed to further bolster the course in the future.

keywords : Speaking, Discussions, Presentations

Background of ACT Program

In 2013, the foreign language curriculum at Ochanomizu University launched the Advanced Communication Training (ACT) Program. The goal of this program is to help students develop strong English skills necessary in various settings, such as studying abroad, post graduate studies, and working in multi-national companies. The ACT classes are open to both undergraduate and graduate students. Upon receiving 12 credits, students are certified to be teaching assistants for undergraduate core English classes. The program offers many types of classes, including business English and presentations. In the academic year 2013 to 2014, there were five ACT classes taught.

ACT Program – What We Do

This paper gives an overview of an ACT class taught during the academic year 2013. The class met once a week for a period of 15 weeks per semester. In one section of the class, there were 18 students enrolled; in another there were 16. All were undergraduate students, the majority

being first year students. The average TOEFL ITP score from the exam was 528 (the exam having been taken between April and December of 2013). Some students had already had experiences studying abroad, while others were planning on going abroad in the near future. Nation (1995) states that putting to use language that has already been learned is effective for building oral fluency. The emphasis in this particular class was on fluency. While the teacher at times gave advice on pronunciation and grammar, the students were encouraged to talk extensively without worrying too much about making mistakes. The goal the teacher set for the students was to build confidence in their speaking. This paper will highlight two activities from the ACT class that were particularly successful.

Pechakucha

Pechakucha, which means “chitchat” in Japanese, is a powerpoint presentation format which consists of 20 slides, lasting a total of 6 minutes 40 seconds. The slides automatically change every 20 seconds.

Reynolds (2008) suggests, “...the spirit behind [pechakucha] and the concept of ‘restrictions

as liberators' can be applied to almost any presentation situation" (p.41). That is, a concise but to-the-point 6:40 presentation may be more successful in delivering the message than a presentation with no time limit that seems to be never-ending. Christianson and Payne (2011) concur, "The main benefits seem to be that students can gain experience with focusing their points, making more appealing visuals slides, managing time, and rehearsing thoroughly in an efficient way" (p.10).

In the ACT class, students were given two Pechakucha assignments during the year. In the first, students were asked to present on the theme "studying abroad." Students who had already studied abroad could talk about their experiences. Those who hadn't yet could talk about what they envisioned studying abroad to be. In the second, students were allowed to choose their own topics.

Students in both sessions gave overwhelmingly positive feedback on the pechakucha activity. Although many wrote that pechakucha was challenging, they found it to be a gratifying experience. Below are some comments students gave after the pechakucha activity:

Indeed there are many things to reflect but, first of all, I really enjoyed my presentation and listening to other presentations! I'm looking forward to next class.

We could choose the topics for ourselves, so they were various and interesting. And I was very pleased with comments on my pechakucha by other members.

Pechakucha gave me many opportunities to think of ways to make my presentation more interesting and easier for the audience to follow, so I will try to make use of the experience as much as possible next time make one.

Everyone was very good so it stimulated me a lot. I thought I should have practiced more.

But I presented about what I like so I had fun preparing, practicing and presenting.

The following are some of the areas students addressed as being difficult:

Comprehensibility

I was worried that everyone can understand my speech.

Sometimes I could not understand what I was saying at the moment. I am worried about whether everyone could understand my English or not. In the next semester, I am going to practice English more and more to be able to speak fluently and naturally.

When I make a presentation or tell what I want to tell to others, I always worry about whether others can understand my message and whether I can really express what I mean.

Speed

I could speak without the script, but I should have spoken more because there were a little more times of each slide. I was in a hurry and ought to have been calm me down. To be calm, I should have practiced more.

Preparing for Pecha Kucha was very tough for me. 20 slides seemed too many, and 20 seconds sometimes seemed too short but sometimes seemed too long. So, deciding what to talk on each slide and writing a script for each slide were difficult.

If it was the normal presentation, I'll have time to think when I forget or mistake a word but this time the time of one slide was limited so I thought that I can't make a mistake and got more nervous than before.

Eye Contact

I couldn't make eye contact at this time because during speaking, I was anxious that my

pechakucha would succeed.

I was able to hardly do gestures and eye-contacts.

Humor

Every time I try to use some jokes and big gestures to make others laugh, but I felt this time they couldn't work so much...

Discussion

The second activity that was successful is the discussion activity, which spanned five classes. There were eight discussion groups per class, four going on simultaneously. Each discussion lasted about 40 minutes. After the first four groups had conducted their discussions, the latter four did theirs. In each discussion group, there was anywhere between three and seven people. For each discussion group, there was a leader, whose job was (1) to decide the discussion topic, (2) to find one or two articles related to the topic, (3) to think of questions to be used during the discussions, and then (4) to e-mail the articles and questions to the group members a week or two before the actual discussion date. This way, the group members were given ample time to read and understand the article(s) and to prepare their answers to the questions. Everyone in the class had the opportunity to be a discussion leader.

In the first semester, all discussion groups had the same members throughout the semester. Each time there was a discussion, somebody different from the group was the leader. It was believed that this would give the students the chance to bond with each other and become more comfortable speaking in front of their groups. In the second semester, however, after receiving feedback from the students that they wanted to be in different groups (so as to get exposure to different speakers and speaking styles), the teacher assigned students to different groups each time for the second semester.

As stated above, the leader was given the

freedom to choose the topic, as opposed to its being assigned by the teacher. The reasoning behind this was to afford the students more ownership of their discussion, to be able to discuss topics that truly mattered to them. Some of the topics chosen were abortion, the death penalty, the new secrecy law in Japan, and food safety.

31 students responded to a brief questionnaire which asked them to describe their experience participating in the discussion.

When asked, "Do you think your speaking skills improved?" , 26 answered yes. Below are some of the comments and their frequency.

There were many opportunities to express my opinions. (10)

My vocabulary improved. (5)

Because this activity gave me some time to read in English and think about the topic, it became a little easier to speak in English than before. (3)

Last semester, I couldn't speak for a long time and I sometimes couldn't convey my ideas clearly. But this semester, I spoke longer, rephrasing what I wanted to say.

Five students responded that their speaking skills did not get better or worse though the discussion activities. One noted, "Discussions have helped me to speak English spontaneously, but I've noticed it is not correct sentences and it is not grammatical." Another wrote, "I am not content with my speaking skills when I express my opinions. I still cannot speak and make appropriate sentences fluently. But I think I became a better listener than before. I can make brief responses while listening."

Other comments:

I would like to listen to your opinion. (5)

The discussion is sometimes over too early. It might be because we don't know what to say. I'

d like you to help us with finding things to talk about when it happens. (4)

Error corrections. (4)

I don't know how to act as a discussion leader, so I want to know about it more. (3)

I think it would be good for us to discuss the same topic among every group. (2)

I think the topic should be something which students can manage in English. Some students chose topics quite difficult for them, and they couldn't explain well in English.

I would make discussion time longer, like 90 minutes, for each discussion, or decrease the number of questions, because we weren't able to finish most of the discussions.

I like how the teacher goes around, because I can talk freely.

Group leader should write summary, and if the teacher checks the summary (grammar is ok, vocabulary is ok) I would be very happy. It's because I can practice writing skills at the same time.

Future Direction

Feedback from the students was generally positive; many indicated that through the class activities they had become more confident in their speaking.

Still, there remain areas of improvement for the ACT class. First, as several students noted in the class, there was little emphasis placed on accuracy. The teacher's assumption was that students had had ample grammar-based English classes in their previous experiences at high school; therefore, what students needed now was a platform on which they could apply what they had learned. However, different students

have different learning styles. While the fear of making grammar mistakes may inhibit some from speaking, others find grammar to be a source of confidence (Lockley & Farrell, 2011). In a similar vein, while some students may place little importance on grammar, for others it could be paramount. Perhaps if someone (e.g., a teacher) could point out a grammar mistake that the student did not know she herself was making, the same mistake could be avoided in the future. On the other hand, repeatedly failing to correct the errors students make might lead to fossilization of those errors (Nation, 1989).

In light of the students' wishes, there could be more room for accuracy in the ACT class. There could be awareness-raising activities, in which students are asked to pay attention to how they speak, and how their peers speak. Additionally, the teacher could simply ask students what grammar points they have trouble with, and take the occasion to go over them. If possible, the teacher could also spend more one-on-one sessions with the students to assess their grammatical skills.

Second, as an additional dimension to ACT, lessons focusing on cross-cultural communication could be incorporated. Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2010) observe, "Being sensitive to and understanding others' cultural productions and the way in which they play with the various identities available to them (discourse on their identities currently available in the context of their interactions) is a crucial part of good intercultural communication" (p.19).

Today while many people still identify with their countries of origin and cultures, they are increasingly coming into contact with those from different backgrounds. Because of this, it seems that good communication skills for these people entail not only how well they can speak and understand the language they choose to communicate in, but equally importantly, how well they can respond to different ways of thinking.

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2014年4月21日 受稿