

READERS' FORUM

Interview Testing: Focusing on Repetition and Increased Contact with a Variety of Teachers to Improve Language Retention and Reduce Anxiety

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Faced with students who were unable to cope with basic communication in English, a curriculum was devised that focused on repetition and increased contact with a variety of teachers to improve retention and overcome anxiety. Students were asked ten pre-taught questions on a variety of topics, in an interview test conducted by a teacher with whom they were not familiar. When responding in a Likert-type questionnaire at the end of the course, the majority of students felt they were better able to converse in English with World English speakers. Teachers and students were both supportive of the method. Benefits included increased impartiality and standardization.

英語の最も基礎的なコミュニケーションにもうまく対処できない大学生に対し、記憶力を増進し不安を克服するために、反復練習とさまざまな教師とのコンタクトを増やすことに焦点を当てたカリキュラムを考案した。2学期にわたり、学生たちはあまり面識のない教師が、事前に知らせた質問群の中から無作為に選んだ話題について10個の質問をするインタビュー形式の試験を行った。課程終了時に実施したリッカート形式のアンケート結果から、多くの学生が英語圏の英語話者と英語で話すことがより良くできるようになったと感じ、試験の方法に賛成していたことがわかった。教師たちからはこの方法に対して賛同や支持を得ることが出来た。加えて、試験の公平さ、標準化を推進することもできた。

Two main areas had to be dealt with. First, students needed to be able to retain the knowledge of the basic grammar concepts they had learned in order to be able to reproduce them on demand. Second, they needed the confidence and the tools to overcome anxiety when dealing with native English speakers with whom they were unfamiliar, in this case a teacher other than their main classroom instructor.

The Study Group

The study group comprised 434 first-year and 173 second-year students. Their average TOEIC Bridge score was 102 (SD: 19.75). Our first-year students have to take a compulsory one-year English conversation course. In the second year, English conversation is a one-semester course, with half the students taking the course in the first semester and half taking it in the second. The second-year students who took part in this study took the English conversation class in the second semester having had no English conversation classes in the first semester.

Our faculty consists of fifteen native English teachers (twelve of whom took part in the study) from the USA, UK, and Canada with a diverse range of accents, personalities, and teaching styles. There were approximately twenty students in a first-year class and fifteen in a second-year class.

Interview tests made up 40 percent of the final grade, with a further 40 percent for the written part of the exam and 20 percent for quizzes given during class. In the interview test students were awarded two points for a grammatically correct full-sentence answer, one point for a word answer or an answer containing grammatical mistakes, and no points for an incorrect answer or an answer containing Japanese. When students asked for repetition in Japanese no points were given, but if they asked in English, they were awarded points. The written

“Why can't our students speak English?” was the question my predecessor was asked by a professor who had recently returned from a study abroad tour with a group of students. In truth, the question is perhaps unfair. Our students are non-English majors, have been let down by the six years of English education they received before entering college, and have even less exposure to English at college than at high school. When I was put in charge of coordinating the English conversation program, I was determined to improve this situation. I believe that, at the end of the eighteen-month English conversation course, at the very minimum our students should be able to answer simple questions about themselves in English when asked by someone they do not know. The course attempts to mirror the scenario of a student on a study abroad program.

exam was based on the textbook, which was chosen to give grammatical support of a similar level to the interview test questions.

Spiral Learning and Repetition for Reinforcement

Retention of language is difficult for students who have low proficiency, poor motivation, and limited exposure (Harley, 1994). The program was therefore designed to overcome this with its emphasis on repetition. At the beginning of the first year, five topic areas were chosen—name, hometown, occupation, free time, and family—with one opening question and one follow-up question for each topic asked in the interview test. Various model answers were provided, which the students personalized, and ample class time was dedicated to memorizing answers and roleplaying the test scenario. In the next test a further two questions for each topic were added to develop the themes in more depth. With each additional interview test more follow-up questions were asked, and two more topics related to the past and future were also added.

My hope was that the ease of the initial test would alleviate some of the anxiety of being tested by a teacher they were unfamiliar with. In the second test, ten out of a total of twenty questions were asked; in subsequent tests, ten questions from the

increasing pool of questions (totaling 36 questions in the final test) were asked, with the students not knowing which questions would be used. At the end of the second semester students were expected to answer questions that they had been asked at the beginning of the first semester. This approach was extended into the second year. Owing to the attrition expected after a spring break and a semester without any English conversation classes for half of the students, the same questions were asked in the second year albeit condensed into one semester.

Increased Contact and Classroom Language

Retention was only half of the problem; the other problem was that of students being able to reproduce language on demand when asked by someone with whom they were unfamiliar. By increasing the contact time between our students and the experienced and varied teaching faculty, I attempted to create a close approximation of the scenario of meeting someone abroad. Each bi-semester an interview test was conducted by a teacher other than the regularly assigned teacher, which was organized by rotating classes. In order to better prepare the students, class teachers were encouraged to equip them with the appropriate classroom language: for example, how to ask someone to slow down their speech, speak more clearly, and repeat questions. These scenarios were again simulated in the classroom.

Table 1. Frequency of Response (%), Means and Standard Deviations: 1st year Students' Attitudes Towards the Interview Testing method

		M	SD	4	3	2	1
		SA	A	D	SD		
1.	I feel interview tests are a good way of evaluating an English conversation course.	3.27	0.56	30.3	63.0	6.63	0
2.	I think being able to communicate in English is important.	3.56	0.60	58.0	39.7	2.33	0
3.	I feel that now I am better able to talk about myself in English than at the beginning of the course.	2.97	0.64	17.5	62.6	19.4	0.5
4.	Because my teacher is not testing me, I consider he / she is there to help me pass the test.	3.17	0.66	30.3	57.3	11.5	0.9
5.	I am happy to continue being tested this way.	2.97	0.66	17.8	61.5	20.7	0
6.	Having different teachers interview me has made me feel more confident speaking to foreign people.	2.83	0.76	15.3	54.4	28.3	1.9
7.	I think we should only be tested on new questions, not the old ones as well.	2.08	1.13	5.3	12.4	70.0	15.3
8.	I believe that repeating questions from previous tests has helped me remember them.	3.11	0.71	29.7	53.1	15.8	1.4
9.	I would prefer my class teacher conduct the interview tests.	2.86	0.83	23.1	42.5	32.1	2.6
10.	I don't understand why we are doing interview tests.	2.09	1.17	4.3	18.5	59.2	18.0

Note: ^a n=210 ^b SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 2. Frequency of Response (%), Means and Standard Deviations: 2nd year Students' Attitudes Towards the Interview Testing method

		M	SD	4	3	2	1
				SA	A	D	SD
1.	I feel interview tests are a good way of evaluating an English conversation course.	3.37	0.50	38.3	60.1	0.9	0
2.	I think being able to communicate in English is important.	3.69	0.49	69.0	30.2	0.8	0
3.	I feel that now I am better able to talk about myself in English than at the beginning of the course.	2.96	0.58	14.8	66.1	19.1	0
4.	Because my teacher is not testing me, I consider he / she is there to help me pass the test.	3.20	0.65	33.0	53.9	13.0	0
5.	I had already learned the first-year questions so did not want to be tested on them again.	2.15	0.66	4.39	16.7	68.4	10.5
6.	Having different teachers interview me has made me feel more confident speaking to foreign people.	2.83	0.74	16.4	53.5	26.7	3.45
7.	I think we should only be tested on new questions, not the old ones as well.	2.02	0.59	4.5	4.5	79.5	11.6
8.	I believe that repeating questions from previous tests has helped me remember them.	3.26	0.65	35.7	56.5	6.09	1.74
9.	I would prefer my class teacher conduct the interview tests.	2.80	0.67	11.5	59.3	26.6	2.6
10.	I don't understand why we are doing interview tests.	1.81	0.69	0.9	12.9	52.6	33.6

Note: ^a n=117 ^b SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 3. Frequency of Response (%), Means and Standard Deviations: Teachers' Attitudes Towards the Interview Testing method

		M	SD	4	3	2	1
				SA	A	D	SD
1.	I feel interview tests are a good way of evaluating an English conversation course.	3.41	0.51	41.7	58.3	0	0
2.	I think that the way the course is graded (40%, 40%, 20%) is appropriate.	3.33	0.49	33.3	66.7	0	0
3.	I feel that the students are better able to talk about themselves in English than at the beginning of the course.	3.25	0.45	25.0	75.0	0	0
4.	Because I am not testing my own students, I feel that they consider me to be there to help them pass the test.	2.92	0.79	25.0	41.7	33.3	0
5.	Taking into account the additional work required, I feel that this is a worthwhile exercise.	3.58	0.51	58.3	41.7	0	0
6.	Exposing the students to a variety of native English speakers makes them better able to deal with the differences in English pronunciation, accents, etc.	3.75	0.62	83.3	8.3	8.3	0
7.	I think students should only be tested on new questions, not the old ones as well.	1.75	0.62	0	8.3	58.3	33.3
8.	I believe that repeating questions from previous tests has helped the students remember them.	3.42	0.51	41.7	58.3	0	0
9.	I would prefer to interview my own students.	2.10	0.74	0	30.0	50.0	20.0
10.	Overall, I feel that the questions are suitable.	3.43	0.51	41.7	58.3	0	0

Note: ^a n=12 ^b SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

There are pros and cons to using a teacher other than the regular class teacher. While the conflict of interest brought about by a teacher examining his or her own students is removed, thereby improving impartiality and standardization, there is also an increase in anxiety. Anxiety in language acquisition is well documented (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), but not all of it is harmful. With poorly motivated students, I hoped that by having someone other than the regular class teacher, students would be more motivated to study rather than having the nonchalant attitude to tests observed in previous years. Brown (2007) notes that this "facilitative anxiety ... over a task to be accomplished is a positive factor" (p. 162). I wanted this anxiety to be harnessed and the class teacher to be seen as an enabler, a tool to help the student pass the test, as opposed to an adversary. Furthermore, the test was designed to help students manage this anxiety through familiarity.

Evaluation

Students and teachers alike were asked to evaluate the interview testing method by means of Likert-type questionnaires (see Tables 1–3) that were in Japanese for the students and English for the teachers. The questionnaires were originally produced in English, then translated back into Japanese and checked by a native Japanese speaker who was familiar with the study. The teachers were also given the opportunity to write comments on the interview test method.

I found that there was little difference between first- and second-year students. Accordingly, for this analysis they have been considered as a whole unless otherwise mentioned. Students and teachers alike agreed that interview testing was an appropriate method of evaluating the course and the students understood why they were being tested this way. They felt that being able to communicate in English was important and 80 percent of the students felt they were better able to communicate in English at the end of the course. Students do have a tendency to respond positively in questionnaires, but in the absence of any objective analysis exactly how much they improved cannot be confirmed. However, the fact that all twelve of the teachers concurred lends the students' response a certain degree of validity.

Retention Through Repetition

Statements seven and eight dealt with repetition and essentially asked the same thing but from different angles: a negative response in statement seven corresponds to a positive response in statement

eight. This was designed to be a control mechanism. Once students get the general gist of a questionnaire there can be a tendency for them to check all the positive responses if they like the teacher, and all the negative responses if they do not, without reading the questionnaire properly. Accordingly, students who checked exactly the same response for all the statements were removed from the analysis: 13 percent and 6 percent of first- and second-year students respectively. Similarly, students who responded positively or negatively to both question seven and eight were also removed: a further 39 percent of first-year and 27 percent of second-year students. Over 80 percent of the remaining respondents (90 percent for second-year students) felt that being tested on questions taught earlier helped them remember those questions. Also, nearly 80 percent of second-year students agreed that they wanted to be tested on the same questions they had learned in the first year, and this showed the value of repetition.

Exposure to Different Teachers

Despite the majority of students (70 percent) preferring to be interviewed by their class teacher, over 70 percent felt that because they had been interviewed by different teachers, they were more confident in speaking to foreign people. This was confirmed by 90 percent of the teachers, who felt that this exposure had made students better able to deal with varieties of World English. A large percentage (80 percent) of first-year students were happy to continue with this method of testing, despite saying they would prefer to be interviewed by their own teachers. The teachers also agreed in spite of the additional work required of them. Second-year students had already finished the course, so they were not asked this question. Approximately 90 percent of students felt that their usual teacher's role was to help them pass the test as they would not be their examiner, and over 60 percent of teachers agreed.

Teacher Comments

The teaching faculty was encouraged to comment freely on the interview testing approach. They were told that any comments would be taken on board and if there was a general consensus that the interview testing method needed changing, it would be adapted accordingly. The teachers were supportive of the approach, or otherwise held their criticism back. One of the teachers felt that it was a little unfair for students to be expected to be able to respond to a different teacher in the test, although interestingly the same teacher strongly agreed that

this makes them better able to deal with differences in pronunciation and accents. Another teacher was “won over by the interview method. She stated that she “used to want to interview her own students, but now (saw) the value of having another foreign teacher do it,” adding that it is a “more formal and an authentic ‘test’” as opposed to “classroom ‘practice.’” An unexpected benefit of testing each other’s students was also revealed. One teacher felt that “it is very important for all of us to see the strengths and weaknesses in our teaching approach.” Presumably, working as a team had encouraged discussion on teaching methods. On the benefit of repeating questions in subsequent tests, the same teacher wrote: “the students need a core knowledge or ability with English communication. Asking some of the same questions has a lot of value.”

For the most part, the teachers approved of the testing method; however, there was some input regarding content. Two of the teachers of lower-level classes felt that there were too many questions for the students to handle. Also, there were two requests for more opinion-based questions. In the following year, the number of questions in the test were not reduced, but some of the questions were changed to opinion questions.

Conclusion

Teaching poorly motivated, beginner-level non-English majors does not have to be a thankless task. By properly assessing students’ needs, designing the curriculum accordingly, and setting appropri-

ate goals, there is plenty that can be achieved by students and teachers alike. This course shows that the language attrition expected over the duration of the year could be reduced, and the anxiety generated from contact with English speakers could be overcome and even harnessed to better motivate the students. At the same time, impartiality and standardization were improved, as was the interaction between the teaching faculty.

References

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Greetings! From this issue and beyond, we will have the pleasure of serving as the column editors for TLT Interviews. As you may already know, this is a brand new column for 2017 that will bring you insightful dialogues with some of the top experts in the field of language learning, teaching, and education. This issue’s featured interview is with Annamaria Pinter from the University of Warwick, a specialist in English education for young learners and one of the distinguished plenary speakers at the JALT2016 conference. She was interviewed by Lesley Ito, a teacher, teacher trainer, school owner, and

award-winning materials writer based in Nagoya. Lesley’s 20-year experience teaching young learners made her the ideal person to interview Annamaria Pinter. Her school for young learners, BIG BOW English Lab, has a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) curriculum with a strong focus on literacy. Her ELT writing credits include interactive graded readers, online support materials for interactive graded readers, teacher’s guides, workbooks, and an e-book on tips for teaching young learners. So without further ado, to the interview!