

USING A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN ENGLISH CONVERSATION CLASSES IN ASIA: ADDRESSING SOME OF THE CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper addresses some of the common challenges involved in instructing English conversation classes in Asia through a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. It provides teachers with a cohesive set of components underpinning CLT, involving pedagogy, curriculum, materials and assessment. The main areas covered include suggestions for managing classes taught through this approach, along with methods to reduce (or hopefully eliminate) LI use by the learners. Many of the suggestions in these areas are supplemented by results from a survey of students asked to comment on some of the more relevant issues. The paper also outlines the better task-types to use to maintain learner interest and support for the largely student-centered approach advocated here, and it additionally highlights the need to blend language-focused and meaning-focused learning and discusses ways this can be done.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching, Asian EFL learners, teaching conversation classes, TESOL teacher training, communicative learning task-types

Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT), where the instructional emphasis is placed on meaning-focused learner engagements, has gained favor in many areas of the TESOL world over the past few decades (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), largely usurping structure-based approaches involving methods

such as the grammar-translation and the audiolingual method. Consistent with this trend, governments across Asia have advocated and tried to implement CLT in English language classrooms mainly because of the growing realization that traditional, structure-based instruction leaves learners ill-equipped to communicate in situations outside of the classroom (Cross, 2005). However, there have been continued obstacles to the adoption of CLT across Asia (Cross, 2005; Weerawong, 2012). One has been objections to the appropriacy of the approach for many Asian learners (Hu, 2005), where the prevailing context of teacher-dominated learning interactions maintains Asian hierarchical traditions of student respect and subjugation to the teacher. Another objection stems from a tradition of lockstep practice of sub-skills and discrete aspects of the language, largely under the rationale that higher level, communicative abilities will be easier to develop once these lower-level abilities are mastered (Gardner, 1989).

From the learners' perspective, Littlewood (2010) found that students from a number of East Asian countries were open to a diversity of teaching approaches, CLT in particular. And for those teachers who do aspire to use CLT or integrate it into their classes, a major impediment is often lack of knowledge of how to effectively implement the approach. Such teachers, thus, often revert to the structure-based approaches they are more familiar with (Humphries, 2010; Weerawong, 2012). Consequently, this paper provides advice to conversation teachers which might help them more effectively adopt CLT. In particular, this paper is most relevant to teachers of tertiary-level English learners and language school teachers, where exams tend to exert less influence on their style of teaching; learners in such classes are also often ripe for learning communicative skills, as they often already have a rigorous grounding in the lexical and grammatical structures of the language from their preceding years in school. This paper provides teachers of such classes with a cohesive set of components underpinning a CLT approach, involving pedagogy, curriculum, materials and assessment.

Some of the main challenges to adopting CLT which are addressed in this article include: 1) managing classes, 2) adopting strategies to reduce or eliminate use of the first language (L1) between the learners, and 3) materials and content most suitable for such an approach. Some of the suggestions made here are derived from past research, while others are from my own (and fellow teachers') experiences instructing Asian learners for more than 20 years. These suggestions are supplemented by results from a survey of a class of students asked to comment on many of the relevant issues. First, details of this survey, including its participants, are outlined below.

The student survey

The participants

The participants in the survey were 28 lower-intermediate level Taiwanese EFL learners in a freshmen General English class, which I taught for almost one year. These learners were generally well-motivated, even though many had a tendency to sometimes lapse into their LI during class activities. To broadly contextualize the teaching approach in the class, the learners had been taught through a combination of language-focused and meaning-focused activities (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), with the balance probably slightly in favor of the latter. In the language-focused activities, the learners were explicitly taught various aspects of the language, such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, and practiced the use of these language components in class exercises. The meaning-focused tasks were mainly conversational activities which expanded on the language-focused learning through learner-centered tasks (using conversation questions, information gaps, jigsaws, and so forth). The learners were also taught a number of expressions, such as “How do you spell that word?” and “I’ll ask the first question”; to help reduce the use of the LI and enhance the effectiveness of these communicative activities.

A further aspect of the course pertinent to the student survey is that the class had attended two language lab sessions late in the previous semester, where they spent a substantial amount of time conversing through the headphones in pairs; I was able to drop in their conversations, without them knowing when I was listening, where I could check their progress and correct their errors or join in on their discussions. Another relevant aspect of the course was that participation in the class activities, along with homework and attendance, constituted 40% of the class grade (with more formal measures constituting the rest of the grade).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was given midway through the second semester of the course. In the questionnaire, the learners were required to rate a number of aspects they had experienced in my class in the questionnaire on 4-point bipolar rating scales, with choices ranging from a minimum of 0 (for responses not useful/dislike) to a maximum of 3 (for responses useful/like). Early questions on the questionnaire also included open-ended components for students to explain their answers. The questions asked on the questionnaire are shown in Appendix I; these questions are not outlined here,

but they are raised, along with the student responses to them, at appropriate points during the paper.

To enhance the participants' honesty, given that they were my students, I had them answer the questionnaire anonymously.

I. Suggestions for managing CLT classes

A key plank of CLT is using mainly student-centered configurations, where a substantial component of the class time has the students engaged in meaning-focused tasks. Obviously such configurations involve a transfer of power and control from the teacher to the learners, thereby increasing the possibility for the learners to 'play around' during the class activities. There are various ways to help in managing such classes and, in particular, to minimize such learner frivolity. These methods include: 1) explaining to the learners how such student-centered activities can benefit their learning; 2) emphasizing to the learners that making errors is not such a bad thing; 3) using assessment procedures suitable for student-centered learning; and 4) incorporating use of a language laboratory for pair and group speaking tasks. A further piece of advice in classroom management is to use class-fronted student interactions judiciously.

Point out the benefits of student-centered tasks

The meaning-focused, collaborative configurations of CLT, where learners speak with each other in pairs and small groups¹, or move around the room exchanging information with their classmates, allow learners more speaking time, and fluency practice, than if the teacher interacted with one student after another. Such student-to-student interactions do not allow the learners much time to interact directly with the teacher – except mainly when the teacher visits students during the task to assist or correct them, or when modeling a task before it starts or when wrapping it up at the end. This lack of direct teacher contact is potentially an obstacle to using CLT as most students are used to gaining information from the teacher. However, these student-centered interactions have strong theoretical support in the ELT literature. Even though EFL and ESL learners do not always give each other correct grammatical input, these interactions can:

- encourage negotiation of meaning between the learners (Long, 1996; Long & Porter, 1985). Such negotiation involves speaker and listener cooperating to co-construct the meaning of messages

- involving such actions as the listener providing the speaker with feedback on areas of the utterance that are difficult to understand, and the speaker being forced to clarify these aspects to the listener.
- encourage hypothesis testing by the speaker – that is, experimentation by the speaker by saying something in new or different ways to see if the listener understands it.
- allow the speaker (and listener) to consciously notice gaps in their ability to produce (or understand) the language (Swain, 1995), which awakens the need to seek remedial knowledge or utilize suitable communication strategies.

Importantly, there is often a need to emphasize to the learners these benefits of such student-to-student interactions, especially when the learners question, or may not realize, how talking to classmates can help their learning. McDonough (2004) found that even Asian learners who progressed most from pair and group work often were not aware they had benefitted from such activities.

One procedural note worth mentioning is how to group students in the pair and group work tasks to maximize learner benefits. Matching students of similar proficiency levels is desirable, especially, as Storch (2002) found, if they were willing to engage with each others' ideas. Storch (2002) found that learners in such collaborative pairings maintained more of their L2 knowledge over time than pairs who were either less willing to engage with each other's contribution or where a dominant individual appropriated the task from the more passive partner. Storch also found that such relationships within pairs remained stable over time; this suggests the desirability of grouping students who are friends, or who at least are familiar and relaxed in each other's company, and also to separate pairings that are less collaborative.

If it is impractical to arrange matching proficiency pairs in class, Storch (2002) found that mismatched pairings could also be beneficial for the learners, finding evidence that the more-proficient learner would act "as an expert who actively encourages the other participant (the novice) to participate in the task" (Storch, 2002, P. 129). Storch concluded that this result supported Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learner development – that is, that development occurs from the social interaction of learners functioning collaboratively and in expert-novice roles.

Emphasize that making errors is not such a bad thing

It is important to emphasize to your learners that while you will correct their spoken errors, making errors is not necessarily such a bad thing. This is to enlighten students who assume they will not learn unless they are directly speaking to, and being corrected by, the teacher. Students need to become aware that errors are not always bad as they provide the basis for the negotiation of meaning and hypothesis testing processes, mentioned earlier, often helpful to their development (Swain, 1995). There is also little theoretical support these days for the behaviorist notion that making errors will encourage and cement bad habits in learners. Error-free communication is the ultimate *goal* (for many, not all, learners), and theorists working from such perspectives as cognitive, interactionist, and social constructivist ones (Long, 1996; Lyster, 2004; Swain, 1995, 2000) hold that errors are a natural part of the process leading up to that goal.

Another straightforward reason for downplaying errors is that if learners are too worried about making them (perhaps students from learning backgrounds characterized by regular tests and where correctness was always emphasized) they may be reluctant to speak, especially when the teacher draws near to their group while they are conversing. And the success of student-centered learning relies mainly on having the learners open up to their classmates.

Include assessment procedures appropriate for student-centered learning

As mentioned, such student-centered classrooms can potentially lead to the teacher losing control of some classes, or of less-motivated learners in the class, leading to the students 'playing around' together rather than attending to the tasks. One way to offset this problem is by directly assessing the learners' speaking at the end of the course to encourage learners to focus on performing the spoken class activities well (as they know they will be assessed later on their actual ability to speak). Such interviews are time-consuming, though, especially with larger classes, and it is also difficult to gauge learner progress objectively (to properly assess learner development through the course, teachers would also need to interview each student at the beginning of the course to set an initial benchmark for each of the learners).

A more practical strategy is simply to base a large proportion of the students' grade on their amount of effort in class, especially for classes where you anticipate discipline might be a problem. In most of my classes, this participation component constitutes 40 percent of the grade. Procedurally,

when using this strategy, it is important to get to know your students, so you can correctly identify them when you assign their grades. This identification is difficult in classes of fifty or more learners, so it is crucial to have the learners sit in the same seats each lesson, and to have a floor plan of where each learner sits. There is no need to be too pedantic about this part of grade. Just notice who works the hardest in class activities (and also who doesn't, and remind these less enthusiastic learners of the need to do the tasks well to get a good grade). If you like, include other factors such as punctuality to class, attendance and homework in this 'effort' component of the grade to make some of the assessment criteria more tangible. The main value of this assessment strategy, though, is for the students to be aware that completing the tasks well in class can enhance their grade – that is, to use the strategy as a tool to encourage the students to do a good job in this less-structured learning environment.

Use a language laboratory if possible

Using a language laboratory is marvelous for pair and small group speaking tasks. Most labs have a pair or small group work function which allows the learners to speak to their partner(s) through their headset. This enables the teacher to drop in on any of these conversations with the push of a button, allowing immediate teacher-pair/group interaction. This obviously adds efficiency in terms of facilitating teacher feedback on the speakers' ideas and any language problems they have. Also, importantly, the teacher is able to monitor any pair or group of speakers without the students knowing when the teacher is listening to their pair/group. Letting the learners know this, especially if a sizeable portion of their grade is based on effort in class, can be a wonderful tool for maintaining their focus on the task!

Note that some teachers might object to using a language lab, or suggest it be used sparingly, on the grounds that talking through headphones reduces the learners' opportunities to practice using visual cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, to convey and understand meaning. On the other hand, though, communicating without many of these cues forces clarity by the speakers and closer listening by their interlocutor. And learners can still practice using visual cues when they speak face-to-face with their classmates in other, whole class activities in the lab, or in activities in their regular classroom.

The relevant survey results

The questionnaire question asking the students about learning in the language lab was 'I. How useful do you think it is talking in pairs in the language lab (through the headphones)?'. Noting that a neutral mean score on the rating scale (which on the bi-polar scale from *not useful* to *useful*, had a minimum rating of 0 and a maximum rating of 3) would be 1.5, the mean score for the class of 2.25 (SD=0.52) indicated that the learners generally found the language lab pair work a useful practice.

In their open-ended explanations for their answers, many commented simply on the advantages of pair work in general. Of those who did address the issue specifically in relation to pair work in the lab, while some students endorsed my suggestions outlined above for the advantages of lab pair work, by mentioning that lab work enabled error feedback and encouraged them to speak in English, the most common advantage, mentioned by nine learners, was that speaking through headphones made them less nervous than they would be speaking face-to-face with a partner in their regular class pair work. So from the students' perspective, a major benefit of lab pair work lay in its affective advantages. Other learner comments of interest were that speaking in the lab provided an opportunity to speak to a wider variety of partners than usual (presumably this comment was in reference to the benefits of the random pairs function in the lab, which I used to assign the learners with any partner randomly in the room), and also that speaking through the headphones allowed a better focus on a partner's utterances because there was less outside noise than when speaking in a regular classroom.

Perceived disadvantages were that there were 'less feelings' than in regular class pair work (pointing to the disembodied nature of speaking through headphones), and the potential to 'have a chat' (presumably due to the feeling of anonymity in the laboratory booth).

Use class-fronted student interactions judiciously

In terms of the procedures teachers often adopt in student-centered classes, one is to model a task before it begins (so the learners will know unambiguously what to do in the activity) using selected learners brought to the front of the class. Teachers also often wrap-up a task at its conclusion by having learners perform it at the front of the class; this is mainly to keep the class focused on the task when they do it due to the looming threat of having to perform it later for everyone else². However, these class-fronted performances can cause undue anxiety for the learners, especially for less-

proficient speakers. Asian learners, in particular, often worry about losing face when they have problems accomplishing a task well in front of others (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Peng, 2007; Shing, 2001), and reducing such class-fronted interactions can make the class atmosphere more relaxed. Liu (2006), for example, found that Chinese students were most anxious when singled out to speak by the teacher, and least anxious when speaking in pairs. While some stress is useful for enhancing performance, too much can be debilitating, and could lessen the potential benefits of a communicative class. Reducing class-fronted interactions can also have positive effects on learners' later willingness to communicate in the L2. McIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998, P. 548), for example, claim that a greater willingness to speak is often because the learner's "prior language learning has led to development of self-confidence, which is based on a lack of anxiety combined with a sufficient level of communicative competence, arising from a series of reasonably pleasant experiences" with the L2.

Consequently, it is probably best to choose more outgoing learners to model a student-centered task, those who are less likely to be anxious about performing this role. And to wrap up an activity, it may be best to have learners do this while remaining in their seats – and speaking to each other across the room if they are seated apart. (Note that student presentations and speeches are probably best left for when the learners reach higher proficiency levels, and thus have more confidence in their ability.)

The relevant survey results

The questionnaire question addressing this issue of class-fronted interactions was '2. How do you feel about demonstrating a class activity (with a partner) in front of the class?' The mean score of 1.82 (SD=0.61) (where on the bi-polar scale of *dislike* to *like*, a mean rating of 1.5 indicated a neutral stance), and the accompanying learner comments, supported to some degree, this suggestion to sparingly use class-fronted student interactions.

In the learner comments, those who responded with a 2 or 3 on the scale – i.e., learners who advocated class-fronted interactions – tended to make comments such as: 'challenge myself'; 'build courage'; 'learn to speak publically'; and 'will be corrected if I make errors'. By contrast, those who did not support interactions in front of their classmates – those marking 1 or 2 on the scale – generally explained; 1) it would make them nervous; and 2) they were worried about making errors in front of others. These results tended to indicate that some students like speaking in front of the class and

others do not, generally supporting the idea, presented above, that it is best to choose more confident learners for class-fronted demonstrations.

2. Some methods to reduce student LI use

There are various methods to help reduce or eliminate student LI use in the classroom. These include three strategies already mentioned earlier: 1) explaining how useful speaking to another L2 speaker can be (additionally pointing out the advantages compared with speaking to a native speaker); using a participation mark in the student assessment; and using a language lab; and they also include 2) emphasizing the importance of English to the learners; 3) teaching the learners classroom meta-language and communication strategies; and 4) using tasks that the learners can realistically accomplish.

As the students increasingly get used to expressing themselves only in English, this will boost their time spent on using the language in class, and also prepare them better for real-life L2 encounters outside the classroom where they will rarely be able to fall back on their LI.

Explain the usefulness of speaking to another L2 speaker (over a native speaker)

Explaining the usefulness of speaking to another L2 speaker (e.g., communicative practice, negotiation of meaning, hypothesis testing and noticing gaps in their ability) can help students see the value of speaking in the L2, only, with their classmates. Also point out that talking with native speakers is not necessarily better. This is because a native speaker often has the capacity to guess what a learner is saying if it is not clear. Other non-natives may have less ability to do this, leading to a greater need for the pair to co-construct meaning. Note that this is not always the case, though, for learners with the same LI, as sometimes listeners can understand their interlocutor's unclear L2 utterance when this is a transfer error from their shared language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

In addition, inform your students of another common misperception – that when they speak with a native speaker, the native speaker will correct their errors. This rarely occurs during a conversation – except perhaps when the native speaker needs to use a recast to confirm or query an unclear message (“Oh, you mean ...”) – usually because the native speaker thinks it is rude to do so (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Use a participation mark and a language lab

Incorporating a participation component as a sizeable portion of the learners' grade, and using a language lab are also two simple ways of discouraging LI use. It is important to stress to students that speaking only in English will increase their participation grade. And using a language lab is a wonderful way of policing that they do use English.

Emphasize the importance of English

This probably seems obvious, but it is important to have anecdotes emphasizing to students, especially EFL learners, how important English is, or will be for them, outside the classroom. Most teachers already do this, as it is a powerful reminder that speaking in the L2 in class will better prepare them for such interactions in real life. This also helps to remind them that English is not simply a subject to study at school, but also a vital communicative medium for them in an increasingly globalized world. Sometimes learners from more traditional learning backgrounds, with few L2 communicative needs outside the class, tend to forget this.

Teach classroom meta-language and communication strategies

Listening to Taiwanese EFL learner interactions through the language lab headphones a number of years ago, I found that much of the LI used was to discuss how to actually do the activity. Storch and Ali Aldosari (2010) reached a similar conclusion after monitoring the pair work of Saudi Arabian EFL learners.

Consequently, I have found it most useful to teach the learners common expressions to use in class activities to reduce their need for the LI. These include expressions taught in almost all classes, including: "What does (*word/expression*) mean?", "Can you repeat that, please?", "Do you mean (*word/expression*)?" and "I'm sorry, I don't understand". These are also useful communication strategies outside the classroom and expressions useful in promoting learner negotiation of meaning. You could also include expressions used specifically to help learners conduct various classroom speaking activities, including: "Can you be my partner?"; "I'll ask the first question (then we can take turns)"; "I'll be A and you can be B" and "Let's change cards".

A useful activity to enable learners to practice such expressions is to write different questions eliciting each expression on strips of paper (e.g.

“What do you say when ...?” 1. *you don't know what a word means?*; 2. *you want someone to repeat something?*, and so forth). You distribute a strip to each learner (providing duplicate copies where the number of learners exceeds the number of expressions), then have the learners find a partner and take turns asking and answering their questions. When they finish, they change strips and find another person. This circulates the questions through the class, providing learners with the chance to use most of the expressions you have taught them. (You can also throw in other expressions like: *you love your classmate?* or *you think your classmate is very good-looking?* if you want to make the activity more fun.)

You could also teach other meta-language specific to particular activities. I sometimes use a quiz game activity, so I teach my students expressions they need to conduct this game in small groups: “You/we'll ask the questions first”; “Say that again, please”; “You hit the desk first”; “OK, you answer”; “That's right/wrong”; and “Our/your team gets a point”. It is good teaching practice to anticipate such meta-language needs for different activities.

Besides the communication strategy expressions mentioned above, it is also helpful to have students get used to saying things in alternate ways if their interlocutor doesn't understand them. A useful activity for developing this type of communication strategy involves having the learners describe a word or expression (perhaps from the current lesson) for their partner to guess what it is. Learners can use stem sentences, such as these, to assist their descriptions: “This is a place where ...”, “This is a person who ...”, “This is a thing that ...”, “This word describes ...” and “You do this when/to ...”.

Survey results for four of the above suggestions

Answers to the survey questions addressing four of the suggestions above (Questions 3 A, B, C and D on the questionnaire: to use a participation mark and a language lab, to emphasize the importance of English, and to teach expressions to enhance communication), did not have accompanying open-ended learner responses, so only descriptive statistics are presented here (shown in Table I). The mean score of 2.48 (SD=.60) for the first contention (from a maximum mean score of 3), strongly supported this notion that including a participation component as a sizeable portion of the learners' grade reduces LI use.

Table I: The questionnaire results relevant to use of LI

Question	Mean result (n=28)	SD
3. A. Participation grade	2.48	0.60
3. B. Language lab pair work	2.07	0.72
3. C. English importance	2.39	0.69
3. D. Activity expressions	2.54	0.58

Note: All mean scores are from a rating scale with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 3

By comparison, the result for the second idea, that using pair work in the language lab (where the teacher can listen in to any conversation without the students knowing) reduces LI use, was slightly less supportive of this notion. However, the mean score of 2.07 (SD=0.72) still exceeded a neutral mean score of 1.5.

The survey result for the third suggestion, of the teacher emphasizing how important English will be for the students' futures, also received strong support from the learners (mean=2.39, SD=0.69), as did the result for the fourth idea, to teach the students classroom meta-language and communication strategies (mean=2.54, SD=0.58).

Use tasks that can be realistically accomplished

A final suggestion is to use tasks that your students can realistically accomplish well, given their proficiency level: tasks that are too demanding may encourage speakers to lapse into their LI to convey their thoughts. For example, avoid using activities such as small group debates with classes of lower-level learners because students at this level tend to lack the proficiency to expand on their ideas, and either say very little or, in their zeal to express themselves, sometimes revert to their LI. In addition, while open-ended activities such as discussion questions and role plays are good for developing communication and fluency abilities, sometimes lower-level learners are more inclined to rely on their LI in such less-structured tasks. Often they have less need to use their LI in activities that are more structured, such as substitution dialogues, guessing games or information gap activities. For such learners, it is best to use discussion questions and role plays that can be completed with language structures largely within the learners' reach, or if you choose to use more challenging tasks, after the students have first learned the vocabulary, grammar and expressions needed to help in completing the activities.

3. Suggestions relating to course content

The need to use stimulating, useful and relevant materials

One further message is the need to use materials (topics, texts, tasks and discussion questions) that the learners find interesting, enjoyable and, where possible, relevant to their lives – sentiments shared strongly by Littlewood (2010), and also by Richards (2006), who points out that in current views of communicative teaching, “Meaningful communication results from students processing content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting and engaging” (p. 14). There is a need for a solid core of activities that learners really find useful, and that produce for them demonstrable learning outcomes. For some learners to ‘buy into’ the student-centered approach outlined here, especially those who find such an approach very distant from their previous learning culture, there is a need to show that the approach is both engaging and useful to them.

Books by Folse (2006) and Nation and Newton (2009) provide a variety of interesting speaking activities. Some of the better activities for pair and small group work include information gaps, role-plays and discussion questions, and useful whole class activities include jigsaws, Find Someone Who and dialogue-guided cards activities (see Appendix 2 for an example of this last activity-type). Pronunciation squares are also solid pedagogically (see Figure I); these can be modified creatively using different words and pictures to target various phoneme or intonation sounds that commonly cause your learners problems.

If you want to add listening activities to your conversation class, then in addition to regular comprehension tasks, Vandergrift’s (2007, p. 199) pedagogical cycle can help to improve learners’ use of listening strategies (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010), and transcription exercises can be used to develop listeners’ bottom-up decoding skills (Field, 2008).

The table shows how much Jane and Jan won at a casino, and how old they were at the time:

Jane won \$15 when she was 13 (years old) (Square 1), and \$50 when she was 30 (Square 2).

Jan won \$50 when she was 13 (Square 3), and \$15 when she was 30 (Square 4).

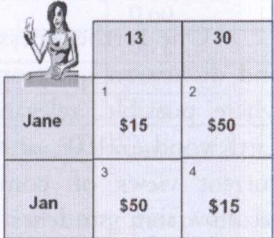
Take turns with your partner asking each other these questions (in any order):

1. Who won 15/50 dollars when she was 13/30?

2. How old was Jane/Jan when she won 15/50 dollars?

3. How much money did Jane/Jan win when she was 13/30?

4. Did Jane/Jan win 15/50 dollars when she was 13/30?



	13	30
Jane	1 \$15	2 \$50
Jan	3 \$50	4 \$15

Figure I: A Pronunciation Squares activity

Need to balance emphases on language, meaning and fluency

It is clear that there are other factors at play in many Asian classrooms, beyond simply learning a language that may mitigate teacher willingness to depart from traditional approaches. One is the desire, in such collectivist cultures, to provide the learners with something solid that they can all learn together in a lesson to enable them to progress at a roughly similar rate. And communicative activities often do not provide the content that fits this idea. Another factor is that education in many Asian countries is also designed to instill an ethos of hard work in learners, which they can then carry into their adult working life (Reddad, 2012). Traditional approaches, where vocabulary lists and grammar rules predominate, suit this notion of hard work as they allow teachers to regularly assign students homework reviewing the materials that have been explicitly learned in class (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005) (followed by tests to ensure the review is done well).

However, the approach recommended in this paper does not exclude a focus on form at all. Nation and Newton (2009), for example, point to the desirability of a relatively equal balance between activities that focus on learning the language, and ones that promote communicative practice and spoken (and listening) fluency, to enhance learner outcomes. Supporting such a view is a large body of research summarized by Lightbown and Spada (2006) indicating that a combination of language-focused learning and communicative practice is more effective at enhancing learner development than if the emphasis is placed on one of these aspects only. A straightforward, and commonly-used, way to combine both in a lesson – as mentioned earlier – is to first teach the relevant language skills (words, grammar, expressions, phonological skills) to then enable completion of the subsequent communicative tasks. However, other places to include this focus on form include after the communicative activities, as is typical of some task-

based designs (Willis, 1996), or directly after a relatively easy introductory communicative activity, with the focus on form based on learner difficulties in the preceding activity, and preparing the learners for a subsequent, more challenging communicative task (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). If the course book you are using does not have enough communicative tasks, then include some of the activities above, with the simplest being to write a list of discussion questions likely to interest your students (questions suitable for your learners' proficiency level, of course).

Durrant and Schmitt (2010) and Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) also provide communicative task-types to build speaker fluency (such as the 4/3/2 activity³) through incorporating the recurring use of formulaic sequences. Such activities are theoretically sound from the cognitive learning perspectives of connectionism (Ellis, 2002) and information processing (Segalowitz, 2003), where repetition of various forms and expressions is said to build learner familiarity with these structures. Such activity types include a language focus, while also incorporating meaningful and repetitive use of the language.

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Appendix I: The questionnaire

I. How useful do you think it is talking in pairs in the language lab (through the headphones)?

你覺得在語言教室裡以兩人一組的方式透過耳麥討論對學英文有多大的用處呢?

Circle your response: **0 = Not useful** through to **3 = Useful**

請圈選答案：0 = 非常沒有幫助 到 3 = 非常有幫助 0 1 2 3

Explain 說明: _____

2. How do you feel about demonstrating a class activity (with a partner) in front of the class?

你對在全班面前(與你的同伴)示範一個課堂活動感覺如何呢?

Circle your response: **0 = Dislike** through to **3 = Like**

請圈選答案：0 = 非常不喜歡 到 3 = 非常喜歡 0 1 2 3

Explain 說明: _____

3. How useful do you think these (A to D) are for reducing your use of Chinese?

你覺得以下每件事(A至D)，對你在課堂中減少使用中文有多大的用處呢?

Circle your response: **0 = Not useful** through to **3 = Useful**

請圈選答案：0 = 非常沒有幫助 到 3 = 非常有幫助

A. Having a large percentage of your grade (e.g., 40%) based on your performance in class.

有一大部分的成績(e.g., 40%)將依據你在課堂中的表現來評分。 0 1 2 3

B. Pair work in the language lab (speaking through the headphones, knowing that the teacher can listen to you at any time – without

you knowing when the teacher is listening).

在語言教室裡兩人一組做活動 (透過耳麥討論，知道老師在任何時間都能聽到你們的談話，但你們不知道老師什麼時候在聽)

0 1 2 3

C. The teacher reminding you how important English is for your future.

老師一直提醒你英文對你的未來有多麼的重要。

0 1 2 3

D. Learning to use expressions to help you conduct class activities, such as:

學會使用能幫助活動進行的英文詞語，像是：

“What does (*word/expression*) mean?”; “Can you repeat that, please?”;

“Do you mean (*word/expression*)?” and “I’m sorry, I don’t understand”.

And: “Can you be my partner?”; “I’ll ask the first question”; and

“Let’s change cards”.

0 1 2 3

Appendix 2: A dialogue-guided cards activity: Whadaya gonna do?

To teach the reduced expression “Whadaya gonna do?”, first provide the students with practice pronouncing this reduced expression (with emphasis on its rhythm). Then give each student a card with a different message written on it (*go to the movies, leave the country in a hurry, and so forth*). For larger classes, copy your card grid two or three times so you have enough cards for all class members. Write the dialog, below, on the board (or display it to the class on PowerPoint), and explain it to the class.

In conducting the activity, the students use the dialog, below, in two conversations (with their roles reversed in the second conversation). After they complete these conversations, they change cards, find another partner, and then continue the activity.

A: Hey (name), whaddaya gonna do tomorrow?

B: I’m gonna [*read card out loud*].

A: Why are ya gonna do that?

B: Because _____.

[*Then continue the conversation.*]

Note that this type of activity can be used to practice a variety of expressions and structures (e.g. ‘Would you mind if I ___?’; ‘How often do you ___?’; ‘What did you do yesterday?’).