

A Teaching Method for Content Classes: Pair Group Teaching

William Plain

In choice of method and materials as well as approach to teaching, any teacher carries a hidden background of beliefs and assumptions that lead them to choose, or accept, certain modes of teaching. It is important therefore that each teacher attempts to indicate for their own teaching some of the basic principles behind an ongoing choice of methods.

In my opinion, it is important that the learning experiences available to the student be not limited to learning only about a certain subject or developing a specific skill, in this case language use. It is also important that the student develops his learning skills as such, and in particular that he develops a capacity for independent learning and for deciding to make use of learning opportunities. He has to become conscious of the fact that he is an active participant in the learning process and that learning, especially at university level, cannot be equated simply with being fed information by the teacher.

The needs of the student are much longer term than the simple duration of the class that the teacher is preparing. The student needs to acquire a consciousness of the learning process which will help him to continue learning, by himself, far into the future. He will be helped towards this goal if he is able to discover the use of the target language for himself, and often by himself. It will also be helpful for him to discover something about his own inner processes while he is discovering aspects about his learning. Finally, teaching English to students with a long and largely passive background in English study means that most classes can profitably be oriented towards the activation of knowledge already acquired, rather than towards the acquiring of new knowledge.

A RATIONALE FOR GROUPS

In language teaching, the choice of methodology is influenced by the student's school background in another way. It would appear from an examination of the Japanese school system that the Japanese student has had a long training in the development of a 'group spirit', of belonging to and working in a peer group. This may sometimes limit his capacity for individual learning, but it has also given him the capacity to learn efficiently in a group, and to make use of the group to test out his knowledge. As a result, he will tend to exercise a sense of responsibility to the group by helping other members of the group to perform better. He will also do as well as he can himself out of a sense of duty to his colleagues within the group.

Belonging to a group then—that is, a permanent group, not the ephemeral one activity-only type of group often used in EFL—can provide a supportive framework which allows for enhanced learning and peer teaching. I therefore believe that this constant in Japanese society and schooling represents a strength that can be capitalised on, and that it can provide the basis for developing a capacity for active communication in English classes with large numbers of students—in other words, the typical undergraduate English language classroom at the University of Tsukuba.

PAIR GROUP TEACHING

Japanese universities, and comparing classroom communication in Japan with the learning environment that I found in a number of European universities, I have felt the need to create a teaching (and learning!) method which meets the requirements of the specifically Japanese classroom. The Pair Group Teaching (PGT) method which I have developed over a number of years does, I have found, meet many of the requirements for encouraging effective communicative learning in the classroom, while at the same time it provides a form of student-centred teaching which may not be felt as threatening to the more traditional teacher. What is more, experimentation with this method by teachers at the University of Tsukuba who are specialists in areas other than English as a Foreign Language has shown that this method can readily be adopted by "discipline specialist teachers" as well as by those using a traditional "grammar/translation" method of teaching. A teaching 'package' is available which includes practical and theoretical material as well as 'classroom management' software currently being developed to accompany the PGT system. How then does the Pair Group Teaching method function?

Allocation to groups

At the beginning of the academic year, all students are allocated to groups, with an attempt made to create as heterogeneous a group as possible. There will be the same percentage of male to female students as there is in the class as a whole; the groups will be of mixed abilities; if possible, they will also represent a mixture of general interests and stated liking for English. An ideal number would be 5 to 6 students in each group (4 would suffice if absences are virtually non-existent), but there must be an even number of groups in the class. Each group will be assigned to a fixed position in the classroom. Although students are left free to choose their seating position within the group, they must sit with and carry out class activities within that group unless otherwise instructed. Where the university itself organises a placement test to eliminate the problem of an excessive range of abilities, it would be possible to use a system of random placement, based on (mixed) birth dates, height, summed telephone number or whatever other method is preferred, assuming that groups will thus tend to be reasonably heterogeneous. Male-female mix however should be the same for each

group.

Once the groups are established—in the first class if random allocation is used, or from the second class if based on a placement test—an initial period of time will be dedicated to traditional EFL activities designed to help the students in each group to get to know each other, and to establishing group cohesion and identification. To this end, a variety of competitive inter-group activities have proved to be useful. Activities of this kind can be gleaned according to individual preference from any number of EFL teachers' resource books. I have found however that for the teacher unfamiliar with such activities, the students' innate sense of classroom *savoir-faire* allows the permanent group system to be adopted without any special preparation.

Simplicity and repetition

This system is very simple. There are only 3 or 4 segments to the lesson plan, and there is considerable repetition over the year in that the basic structure of every lesson is the same. This means that students establish a rhythm which allows them both to develop a certain responsibility in organising their own activity and to concentrate on slowly building confidence in their ability to function actively. This is an important element for the students to feel that they are actually achieving something in English. Activity-type teaching in conventional EFL often counts on rapid change during the class and variety over a period of time to develop and sustain interest and participation. Such methods tend however to be teacher-centred or at least teacher-orchestrated. Lecture-based teaching itself is of course also highly teacher-centred. In contrast, the system of teaching/learning I am proposing allows the students to take a greater control over their own learning, and to feel that they themselves are responsible for what they have achieved.

Group dynamics

The basis of this approach to classroom management then is the group. This group must be permanent in order for it to take on the characteristics of the traditional social, school or work group to which the student is accustomed. Considerable attention needs to be given at the beginning of the year to ensuring that the groups actually form in this way, and often 'reinforcement' activities will need to be used during the year in order to maintain the group as a dynamic centre for co-operative learning.

It takes a while for a group to form, but often the process is actually visible. When first put in groups, students may sit a little apart. After a very short while, though, those sitting a bit apart will pick up their bags and shift into a tightly knit group. As for the composition of the group, I find that the greater the variety of people in the group the more the group will develop a sense of cohesion, given the greater possibility of stimulating interaction. Mixed abilities within each group are an

important element for dynamic interaction. The stronger can lead and the weaker learns at the same time. Considerable peer teaching can take place within the group where there is a 'resident expert' to refer to whenever in need.

The male/female mix also, with an ideal 50/50 mix if the pattern of class enrolment allows, will provide a stimulus to group interchange which can be canalised into productive language learning. The juxtaposition of boys and girls also seems to allow an exchange of mockery which stimulates the group as a whole. Sometimes one will judge or make comments on the English production of another in a way that will be helpful. A girl will often speak in English while chiding a boy, and he will accept it because it is a girl who is saying it. Often such mixing leads to a lot of good fun—and lots of English.

Choice of text

My classes cover most of the faculties represented in the university. In trying to use faculty-specific material therefore, I often find myself confronted with a text that is appropriate for the students, but quite frankly outside my area of competence in terms of subject matter. I may be dealing with a text on the dynamics of ecological systems, the laws of stress related to bridge building, or approaches to medical practice. I may be able to say quite a lot, but at times the students are able to say even more than I can and I may wish to hand over the class to them.

Many teachers may use this method for teaching literary or culture-based texts. But where the teacher decides to venture out into the unknown realm of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), using this method may be one means by which such specialist texts become accessible. It is not so important that the teacher be a specialist in all the areas he is teaching, but rather that he have at his disposition a range of teaching techniques which allows him to offer a class where his students can be helped to transfer the knowledge they already have into English.

If a teacher using the present method chooses to read, explain or comment the text he is using with a class, he will in any case have his own preferred methods of presentation, and these can easily be adapted. For example it might be appropriate to dedicate one class to teacher presentation of the text, and the following week the students could then make their own presentation to their groups.

A text can however be chosen which is within the reach of the students, relatively unaided by the teacher. Many simplified 'original' texts by Japanese publishers will be appropriate. Texts for pre-adult native speakers, especially suitably illustrated books, may also stimulate the students to self-directed reading and discussion. Depending on the preferences of the lecturer, there are many faculty-specific texts, e.g. with one section per class and graphics as an aid to conversation, which can make an adaptable set text. I have experimented with a range of such texts, generally based on a

content approach to teaching, and often aimed at developing an awareness of global issues affecting our common future. It is for each teacher, though, to offer what he considers to be the most useful for the development of his students.

Dividing up the text

The text to be covered during a particular class is first divided up among the members of each group. To do this, I indicate line numbers or draw an outline of the page(s) on the board, numbering the sections 1-5 or 1-6 depending on the maximum number in the groups. (If there are less than the regular number of students present in a group on that day, I may also have to combine certain sections). Such text division should be normally done at the end of the previous class to allow for preparation at home. I generally indicate the division of sections again at the beginning of the following class and give the groups where someone is absent a moment to reallocate sections. However, if the traditional cries of "jang-ken-pon" which normally accompany the process of choosing the text are heard from most groups, it is a sign that not many have done their preparation at home.

Introductory activity

Instead of taking valuable class time for marking attendance, I have found that some form of introductory 'warm-up activity' can be very useful. I use an activity I call the Paper Ball Game. A ball is provided by crumpling up a sheet of paper. The teacher asks everyone to stand in a circle in their groups, and he then throws a ball to someone in each group as a signal to begin the activity. At the beginning of the course, the teacher carefully and graphically explains that the ball has the magic quality which allows the person holding it to speak only in English, and that in order to free himself of it, he must say something in English. Only when he has done this is he free to throw the ball to anyone in the group he chooses.

Depending on the variations which are introduced each lesson, the utterance required may be a word or a sentence, a question/answer or the continuation of something said by previous students. The student may have as much time as he likes to make a response, or the game may be speeded up so that each student must say something in a very short period of time. There is almost infinite variety in the type of language that can be elicited through this activity.

Teacher presentation of material

The teacher then turns to the text being used in the particular class. It depends on the teacher, and on the materials, as to what way he chooses to present the text to the whole class. Sometimes I find that a simple reading of the text is a sufficient introduction, at other times I will comment, explain,

or analyse the text and even provide a certain quantity of background information to assist appropriate understanding and appreciation by the students. With certain materials, I will actually lecture for up to one third, sometimes even a half, of the class period. The approach chosen will depend largely on the complexity of the text for a given class, and the desire of the teacher to add his own knowledge to that of the text. Where the purpose of the class is "reading/translation", the teacher can similarly present the language and background material before asking the students to work on the text as described below.

Cross-group pairs

In the first class using this system, fixed Pair Groups should be indicated. It is often easiest to organise the seating pattern in such a way that pairs of groups will be sitting close to each other in the classroom. Ideally, Pair Groups will be situated on either side of the central aisle made by joining desks together in groups down each side of the classroom.

I then ask each student to find the partner in the pair group who is working on the same portion of the text as he is. Each 'cross-group pair' will move together easier if for the first few classes all students are asked to stand, and then to find their partner. Some reluctance to moving will be noted in initial classes unless this stratagem is used. A set of instructions may then be: Choose text; number off 1/2/3 etc.; raise your hand; all stand; join with your partner in the other group; change seats! This should be done very methodically for the first two or three times at least, because it is the basis for the smooth operation of the entire class over each lesson in the year.

Each student will first look for the student in his 'pair group' who is doing the same section of the text as he is. Detailed indications will need to be given as to what is to be done during this phase. Basically, they are to prepare to 'present' their text to the others in their permanent group. This preparation may include: reading the text aloud in turn, helping each other with vocabulary, explaining, translating, or adding the student's own personal knowledge of the subject. It will often be found that students invent more ways of dealing with this phase of preparation than methods suggested by the teacher. A conclusion to this activity might be preparing a one-sentence summary, deciding on the main points, etc.

This regular contact with a member of a 'paired group' leads to more dynamic relations in the class and gives the student a sense of greater variety. At the same time, it establishes a regular rhythm of activities, with actual physical movement during the class. This breaks up the class session and gives a certain variety which is experienced by the student as stimulating. Regularly pairing off with a member of the Pair Group enhances communication and adds a dynamic interplay of personalities which is not possible only with fixed or ad hoc grouping. Some students find the fixed group a little limiting, and the random selection of cross-group partners (by means of the

choice of text made in one's own group) extends the 'family' to relations with different people in the neighbouring 'family'.

This is all co-operative interaction, and none of it is competitive. While competition can be used to create quickly some form of group adhesion, it is not a good way of maintaining the group. Competition creates the idea that knowledge is something to be obtained at the expense of someone else. By basing activities on co-operation, students help each other to learn, and this important lesson will be of use to them in their professional relations in the future.

Presentation

The cross-group pairs may take 15 to 20 minutes or even more in a 75-minute class. When it is deemed appropriate to terminate this phase, the students are told to return to their groups and to present their text. Again, indications as to what can be done during this phase should be given on the board. Some possibilities would include: reading the text aloud, helping the other group members towards an understanding of the text, presenting a summary of the main ideas, presenting one's own ideas about the text, and adding general information concerning the subject matter being covered.

Some students use translation as one means of presentation, though this technique tends to limit useful exchange of information and practise of the target language. Translation could perhaps be more useful in the period of preparation in pairs, especially if limited to those parts of the text which are more difficult to understand. If the class is actually a translation class, then obviously this approach to understanding is highly appropriate. In general, however, this is the one part of the class where students can easily be led to make their entire presentation in English only. The teacher will often be pleasantly surprised that this is possible, and actually happens! If the cross-group preparation is set up as "preparing to present your text in English", most students accept the challenge.

If the text is at an appropriate level for the class, or has been adequately presented by the teacher beforehand, the presentation of the text will normally be a period of quiet and concentrated interaction within the group and will often need a good 30 minutes to complete adequately. This presentation to the other members of the group of material which each student has prepared leads each student to communicate freely with other members of his group and to develop a sense of belonging within his own group.

Group and individual report

As presentations start waning, the students can be asked to produce some form of written synthesis of their activity in order to demonstrate their understanding and appreciation of the text.

This can include joining the one-sentence summaries produced by each member during the preparation phase and then adding a final one-sentence summary of the whole text; or it may lead to making a poster, preparing a written summary, or preparing questions to ask the teacher.

If the work being done is more project-based, or implies doing something other than simply working on a text, a 'secretary' may write an outline of what is being done by others in the group. Many variations are possible, and they will depend on the text, the teacher, and the reaction of the class at the time.

Techniques used by the students in studying their text at home, preparing the presentation in pairs and presenting the text in their groups can be suggested by the students themselves. The class can be asked to note over a week all the methods they use, and then put together the ideas from each member of the group. A group report can then be given to the teacher who can collate this information and hand it back to the class as a guide for future use.

As a final step in each lesson, the text for the following class will be divided into sections and each student will be able to prepare his text at home.

HOW DOES THE PAIR GROUP TEACHING METHOD WORK?

One of the basic goals in the choice of a method such as that outlined above is an attempt to develop confidence on the part of the students in their present knowledge of English. For some time there may be less discussion in English than is desirable. The students are however slowly building confidence in their capacity to read, understand, discuss and present their ideas around a text which is in English. It validates English as a medium for accessing information that they can do something with. They learn to manipulate the text and the information, to make it their own, and confront the interpretation of other students. In general, it will be found that, as time goes on, individual pairs and groups slowly start using English more and more in their discussions and their asides.

I generally do not feel that it is necessary, or even useful, to make any direct intervention to ensure that students always use English. It is important for the dynamics of group formation to allow for the slow development of confidence in the student's capacity for speaking English in front of his peers. It needs time for each person to feel sufficiently comfortable in his group before he can possibly take the enormous risk of speaking in English, being judged by others, making mistakes, and not being understood.

The student finds himself caught between an environment he is familiar with, Japanese communication, and one he has long considered to be impossibly foreign and unusable, namely that language long relegated to cramming for university entrance exams. Only by being free to move back and forward between these two inner spaces can he slowly move towards a freer interaction in the target language. Many students will often revert to the more familiar language environment

before slowly feeling confident enough to use the new language.

The teacher, though, is working at creating a classroom environment which is conducive to risk-taking without undue stress, and at creating an expectation that the student will eventually speak more and more in English. He is also giving the student a sense of freedom and self-confidence in knowing that he will not be publicly corrected and humiliated if he takes some time in reaching this goal. It is thus a sign that the student is developing a feeling of control over the foreign language environment when his attempts at understanding and presenting a text in English start to flow over into his willingness to use the target language in all of his interactions within the group.

Source material for Pair Group Teaching

- Plain, W. (1993). Pair group teaching. *Kyoyobu Journal* (Niigata University), 24, 57-70.
- Plain, W. (1995). Learning through silence: Awareness in natural language learning. *Studies in Languages and Cultures*, 40, 177-194.
- Plain, W. (1995). The management of silence: awareness in taught language learning. *Studies in Languages and Cultures*, 41, 81-97.
- Plain, W. (1997). Paradigms, groups and power: the practice of pair group teaching. *Studies in Languages and Cultures*, 45, 85-99.
- Plain, W. (1998). *Adapting traditional language teaching methods for a new communicative curriculum in Japanese universities* (89 pp.). Monbusho Scientific Research Fund Report. Tokyo: Ministry of Education.