



Note from the editor

Each issue of *ERJ* contains a How We Do It... article to show our readers different ideas of how to run an ER programme. Instead, in this issue Joseph Poulshock and Marc Menish share their idea of how to make use of an ER existing programme to help teach speaking as well.

Media English Dialog Interactive Activities with Information Gaps

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Many readers of *ERJ* are skilled practitioners of extensive reading. They know and have seen how ER can help the reading, lexical, and grammatical ability of their students. This article will show how various ER texts and materials can be used to help improve students' speaking ability. English learners often show the desire to improve their speaking ability, but at the same time they often lack confidence for taking risks and moving beyond their comfort zone for speaking in English. Many of them also have trouble with fluency and the skills that help them string together longer phrases of discourse. These same learners, especially in Japan, usually exhibit stronger skills with vocabulary and reading than with listening and speaking. Fortunately, these kinds of students can begin to leverage their reading skills to improve their speaking skills, and after using reading-based speaking activities, they can do less controlled practice, moving beyond text-based speaking activities and using richer forms of media such as pictures and video as a springboard for improving more natural oral communication.

Background and Technique

These activities have been used successfully with hundreds of Japanese university students. In essence, the activities employ a reading and shadowing technique. Student A reads a phrase from a chosen paragraph, and student B repeats it. Then they work through the chosen text in a call and response kind of pattern. We designed our activities to work in a classroom with a projector, large screen, and a computer equipped with media presentation software such as PowerPoint. Other paper-based variations are possible, but the media version is our focus here. In our approach, the teacher takes a story and puts it into the slideshow format outlined below. However, the story can be an excerpt of any graded reader or text that matches the ability of students. In our case, we use stories taken from the extensive reading website BeeOasis.com. The following describes a text-based activity that we call Media English Dialog Interactive

Activities with Information Gaps, or MEDIA Gaps for short.

1. Show the title slide (Example: *Dancer Extraordinaire: Fred Astaire*). See Photo #1.



2. Show attention getting slides (with pictures from the Creative Commons).

- a. Photo of a ballet dancer. See Photo #2.
- b. Subtitle question: Have you ever studied dance?



Have you ever studied dance?

by shoobydooby

- c. Show similar additional slides with attention getting questions.
3. Show optional Video (downloaded from YouTube)
 - a. Example: show a brief clip of Fred Astaire.
 - b. Ask students what they saw and what they thought about it.
4. Explain the purpose of the activity (see details in the REALISM section below)
5. Give instructions to students.
 - a. Partner A, you face the screen. Partner A, you read a paragraph of a story to Partner B.
 - b. Partner B, you face Partner A with your back to the screen. Partner B, you repeat what Partner A says.
 - c. For example, Partner A, speaks a phrase. Partner B, repeats the phrase. Partner A can speak short phrases or longer phrases. So, if a long phrase is too difficult for Partner B to repeat, then Partner A should speak shorter phrases.
 - d. Continue speaking and repeating back and forth until you finish the first slide.
 - e. Then you will see the Q/A slide. Partner A, you will see a list of questions. Ask the questions to your partner. Partner B, you answer the questions.
 - f. Continue until you finish all questions.
6. After giving the overview in #5, begin the activity by previewing potentially challenging vocabulary. Use a slide for this.

7. Then do the first paragraph of the story as described in #5 above. Partner A reads. Partner B shadows.

8. Do the Q/A slide. Partner A reads the question. Partner B answers.

9. When done with the Q/A, the teacher checks the answers with the class.

10. Repeat steps 6-9 with the next slide and the next paragraph of the story.

During this time, Partner B has her back to the screen. She only listens and responds to Partner A. After one slide (usually a paragraph) and one Q/A slide, the learners switch positions and repeat the process (steps 6 through 9). Note: this activity can also be done with a group of three students. For example, Partner A speaks, and Partners B and C repeat. See Photo #3.

As mentioned, this kind of activity has been done many, many times with hundreds of Japanese university students. Anecdotally, the majority of the students appear highly engaged and animated when doing this activity. Students are fully focused during this activity, using gestures as they speak, and giving each other high-fives when one partner answers a question correctly. This positive energy suggests that this approach to text-based speaking activities may have considerable potential and merit for future research to see how students actually perceive it and if it actually helps them improve their speaking ability.

Educational rationale

Before discussing the media-based activities where students move beyond texts, we need to discuss the educational rationale that supports this kind of text and media-based conversation simulation. We base this rationale on ideas summarized by the acronym REALISM. The following list presents the rationale as it is explained to students.

- Rhythm. Set the speaking rhythm with your partner. Since this is a shadowing activity, the speaker and listener need to match their conversational timing. This simulates a real conversation in that we need to get a good rhythm in normal conversations. This also relates to the point about "amount" below.
- Elocution. Improve your pronunciation. Students need to intelligibly pronounce what they read. If they do not, listeners will not be able to repeat what they hear. The teacher may roam the

room and note problems while listening to pairs. When a slide is done, the whole class can polish weak spots in pronunciation with the teacher.

- Amount. Practice giving “just enough” information. This relates to the point on rhythm, and it is also one of Grice's famous conversational maxims. The amount needs to be just right, not too much and not too little. Like the point on rhythm, giving the right amount also simulates real conversation.

- Listening. Improve your listening and note taking. This activity also serves to improve listening skills. Shadowing is a practical listening skill, and if the pair does it well, the listener can learn to chunk more and more bits of information into fewer chunks. For example, initially a listener might chunk this 13-word sentence into 4-5 chunks: " If you watch/Fred Astaire dance/, you will be amazed/at his grace. As she improves, she might be able to do it in 2 chunks.

- Idioms and Words. Learn and use important words. For these activities, teachers choose stories that are graded into bands of lexical frequency that are appropriate for the level of the students, so the lexical learning load is light, but students have a chance to preview and use words that might be new to them. They also can be tested on these new words at a later date.

- Signals. Use gestures to speak better. This is perhaps the most intriguing part of this activity in that it provides an excellent means for students to improve their gesturing as they speak. As they do this, students realize that gestures help them speak better, and they help listeners understand more.

- Message. Communicate a real message to your partner. Though this is an artificial conversation, it still mimics a real conversation. Moreover, people actually do read to each other at times, and this activity requires speakers to convey an interesting message while listeners understand and respond to it.

Using visual media: Video and photos

For this activity, a demonstration is better than a verbal explanation; nevertheless, the explanation helps clarify the rationale and the benefits that this text-based simulation provides. The following section

describes how teachers can use this same MEDIA Gap format with visual media such as photos and video. These photos and videos can come from the Creative Commons <http://search.creativecommons.org>, or they can come from graded readers. For example, readers in the Cengage Footprint Reading Library series come with photos and videos that could be used. The format is the same in that Partner A faces the screen, and Partner B has her back to the screen. Partner A explains what she sees, but instead of shadowing, Partner B can ask questions and paraphrase what she hears. The following explains and exemplifies the MEDIA Gap process with media.

As opposed to text-based MEDIA Gaps, using pictures and short videos allows students to practice free or less-controlled conversation. The format is the same as above.

1. Here is the format for MEDIA Gap activities with photos and video.

a. Partner A, you face the screen. You will describe a picture or a short video to Partner B.



b. Partner B, you face Partner A with your back to the screen. You will listen and ask questions about the picture.

c. Partner B, you can shadow Partner A, but this activity works fine without shadowing.

d. When pairs finishing talking about the picture, the whole class can look at the picture. If the picture is good, the "reveal" can be a fun moment in the class.

e. To summarize one photo, the teacher may choose one Partner A to explain what she saw in the picture.

f. Then students switch places and repeat the process with a new picture.

MEDIA Gap activities with photos and video work best when they are combined with the text-based activities mentioned above. This puts the pictures into a context and narrative, and the pictures and video also provide a hook for doing the text-based activities. Teachers can use the pictures and videos before the text-based activities, as a hook for example, and teachers can use the videos and pictures after doing the text-based activities. Either way, planning is needed in order to make all the text and visual elements work together smoothly.

Regarding planning, obviously lessons need clear objectives. For the Fred Astaire story mentioned above, the teacher may set objectives as learning about arts, American culture, and high frequency vocabulary. The teacher might also set communicative objectives, such as, to be able to communicate clearly about a cultural topic. For this activity, the writer had these objectives in mind, and he found relative visual media on Creative Commons and on YouTube. Creative Commons allows content creators to use and adapt photos and videos under a Creative Commons license for non-commercial or commercial purposes (depending on the version of the license attached to the media). This is important if the content creator wants to publish these materials legally online. Materials used in these activities were based on visual media under a Creative Commons license.

Besides gathering the relevant and interesting media, the teacher also needs to plan how the media fits with the linguistic goals of the lesson. If students simply explain visual media to each other through this

MEDIA Gap activity, this will give them a good way to practice fluency skills. Thus, if the media serves as a hook for the text-based activity and as a means to practice fluency, that may be enough. However, with visual media, the teacher can plan more carefully, using media to get students to learn and practice various grammar points and linguistic functions. For example, a student can describe a scene in a picture in the present tense and in the past tense.

Conclusion

MEDIA Gap activities are a modern variation of traditional information gap activities. Perhaps one novel aspect of this technique is this. We use texts designed for extensive reading and leverage our learners' reading skills to help them improve their speaking skills. Teachers can employ these techniques with textual, video, and photographic media using presentation software such as PowerPoint, or they can use the same kind of textual and visual media from their own graded readers. For students who lack confidence with speaking freely, this technique can serve as a bridge to help them gain confidence in their speaking and move towards creating their own utterances. It simulates a real conversation for them, and with the visual media, this technique also gives students actual practice in communicating orally and non-verbally since the use of body language and gestures is encouraged. Thus, MEDIA Gap activities make sense, and in classroom practice, students have engaged with this technique, its content, and with each other with energy and enthusiasm.

The ER Colloquium at JALT2011

Tokyo, Saturday, 19th November, 12:10 to 13:40
room 309,

Featuring: John Bankier, Mark Brierley, Emilia Fujigaki, Sandra Healy, Peter Hourdequin, Richard Lemmer, Scott Miles, Greg Rouault, Rob Waring, Mathew White... and the Great Book Giveaway.

Dealing with mixed abilities, mixed motivations and mixed goals; Listening to students' voices: Making ER effective in EFL learning; The reading preferences and habits of Japanese university students; Does reading in volume correlate to increased reading speed? Moodle Reader Quizzes: How do the students respond? Teasing publications out of reading circle research and teaching; Making graded readers: Issues for authors and users; Nurturing academic integrity in extensive listening and reading.