Fishbowl: A Speaking Activity

By Michael Cholewinski

Much has been written about the difficulties associated with student silence in foreign language classes in Japan (McDaniel 1997; Nakamura 1996; Yoshida 1996; Yum 1988). Any EFL teacher who has taught in Japan has dealt with this problem, and many have spent long hours researching ways of creating lessons that foster communicative responses from their students. While there have been some successes, many students still do not speak in language classrooms. Many consider the teacher, the type of lesson, or the student responsible for this situation.

Although the way in which a lesson is structured and presented can have an enormous impact upon a student's participation, the initiative to speak must come from the students themselves. If the goals are to make long-term, rather than short- term; inroads into this educational problem and to give students the confidence to speak, perhaps we need to take another look at the relationships that exist between the students and the activities being used. This involves the teacher, the lesson, and the student.

Fishbowl

A communicative conversation activity called Fishbowl offers some encouraging insights into ways of solving this learning barrier. Very dynamic and intensely demanding at the cultural and the conversational level, this activity casts new light upon issues dealing with reticent communicative English students. It also lends itself to a better understanding of the kind of elements that might go into an effective, long-term approach for solving this problem.

The Description

The following is a description and analysis of the Fishbowl activity:

- Arrange classroom chairs in two concentric circles facing in, with no vacant seats.
- Have students take positions voluntarily if possible.
- The individuals in the inner circle have the freedom to speak, but those in the outer circle must remain silent.
- If an individual from the outer circle wishes to make any comment, change the topic, or simply be in the inner circle, she/he must stand up, tap an inner circle member, and change seats (a non-negotiable act). Conversely, an individual in the inner circle cannot leave until selected by someone from the outer circle.
- There are no rewards or punitive measures for participation or non-participation. Individuals are free to do as they please as long as they follow the stated rules.
- Depending upon language level, number of participants, time availability, and teacher goals, the activity can last from thirty minutes to over an hour.

Whether or not conversation is occurring, the influences at play create a very dynamic environment. The seemingly passive individuals in the outer ring do influence each other and those in the inner circle as they occupy observer positions. Likewise, the center individuals (See Figure 1 below) influence everyone listening since they either speak in English or remain silent. Furthermore, those in the center more directly influence each other because they can speak, and

initiate communication with another member, thereby creating a need for responses. Finally, any individual who changes seats influences others by taking the initiative.

Discussion of the Activity

Twenty-nine 18 to 21 year-old male and female Japanese students (English majors) took part in this activity from which the following data were gathered. The activity was conducted four times over a two-month period with two separate groups of students. Students were aware of being videotaped and were given the option and opportunity to discuss their thoughts about the activity, both orally and in writing, each time the activity finished. That English is spoken during the activity is important, but what is most germane to this study is what students said about themselves and the activity.

During Fishbowl there are usually many periods of silence. Although little seems to be happening during this silence, in fact, much is occurring, as individuals build up the courage to move, speak, or formulate something to say.

When asked how this silence made them feel, most students responded negatively: "I do not like silence." "It made me feel unpleasant." "I felt that I had to say something." When inner-circle individuals were asked if they had wanted to escape from the circle, many answered affirmatively: "Yes, because I could not think of any good topics." These comments imply that students felt a great deal of expectation to do or say something.

On the surface, the activity does not seem to demand much from the participants since they are seated in speaking and nonspeaking zones. However, this configuration produces a very dynamic, often times tense atmosphere, one that gains a great deal of its energy from students' perceived expectations and their uncertainties about participating and speaking. In almost any communicative language situation, these factors create a great deal of tension.

Among the many sources of uncertainty inherent in communicative language situations, the following questions usually stand out: Who will or should speak? When should someone speak? What should or should not be said? Who is watching or listening to whom? Some methodologies or activities attempt to reduce tension that these expectations and uncertainties cause because it is an unnecessary discomfort for the learner. However, Fishbowl focuses the tension back toward the students who are then given opportunities to cope with it constructively.

Forms of Tension

Once students become familiar with the arrangement, they quickly adapt to and learn ways to cope with the tension. While students display the more involuntary outward forms of tension, like fidgeting, sweating, and laughing, during the activity, the main goal is to get students to become aware of the benefits of coping with these signals by concentrating on their speaking during the post-activity sharing sessions. When asked if speaking or laughing reduced their tension, many students answered in the affirmative: "The students' laughter made me more talkative." Further, in roughly 70% of the written responses students mentioned that they felt either "relieved," "relaxed," or "safe" after they or others had broken the silence.

Student awareness of the benefits of reducing their tension through oral communication and laughter creates a success-confidence-motivation cycle that can then help reinforce a more self-assertive learning style.

These student responses confirm that more lies behind the assumed acceptance of silence in Japanese ESL students than meets the eye. That silence existed in this language activity does not necessarily imply that students accepted it. On the contrary, students unanimously reacted negatively to it. That the silence persisted amidst such tension confirms that the power of cultural behavior is very strong.

This activity is difficult for many students. Self-initiated conversations, self-governed turn-taking, risk-taking, and exposure to very direct, constant peer scrutiny clashes with much that is culturally and educationally ingrained in students. What is also evident in the student responses is that these same students showed their willingness to overcome these obstacles if given the opportunity.

Feedback Results

According to Gattegno (1976), mastery of an item of information takes place as the uncertainty about it is reduced. Thus, it stands to reason that if one does not actively face one's uncertainty, one cannot expect to reduce it to any great degree. Uncertainty tends to make individuals cautious, which can unfavorably influence efficient communicative language experimentation. By creating a level of fear, language production is inhibited.

In feedback from Fishbowl, we learned that three general sources of tension affected students: language ability, public performance, and evaluation. All can be addressed in an activity like Fishbowl to help motivate the students' more active participation.

Language ability

An obvious source of tension that causes uncertainty comes from an individual's perception of his or her language ability. A student may simply lack enough proficiency to produce coherent English, be aware of that fact, and remain silent. Several students indicated that this was a source of tension: "I become nervous because I cannot say what I want to say correctly."

Students are also very much aware of their own proficiency levels in each of the four skill areas. Hence, uncertainty and tension may occur when students compare the differences between their various skill capabilities. This then causes self-consciousness to the point of stalling language production, an example of debilitating anxiety.

Public performance

Being in front of others and being expected to speak can be an intense, menacing source of tension and can strongly determine a student's level of participation. Students recognized this in their comments. One said that he wanted to "escape from the inner circle because it was like being a monkey in a zoo." Another noted that he was tense because "everyone was paying

attention to me." These statements indicated how students viewed themselves and how they thought the teacher or other students saw them.

Several students came away from the activity with more positive attitudes: "After I spent a few minutes in the inner circle, I became more comfortable." "I was afraid to sit in the inner circle, but this game helped me speak English."

During the discussion, the majority of students stated that the presence of the video camera ceased to intimidate them once the activity began. When pressed to elaborate, students stated that when they were in the center and were not talking, they were conscious of other students around them, but once they were engaged in a conversation, the other students seemed to "disappear." Most students indicated they tried to focus on this idea when speaking as a means of bolstering their confidence.

Evaluation

Evaluation is another source of uncertainty and tension that can affect students in communicative language situations (Larsen-Freeman 1991; Omaggio-Hadley 1993). In a typical Japanese classroom, the teacher sets the parameters for an activity and then evaluates students' performances, usually by giving grades or correcting errors. However, students also periodically evaluate their own performances by comparing themselves with other students during class activities. This can create negative results.

In the activity Fishbowl, the teacher also sets the parameters by assigning the activity, but it is up to the students to perform most, if not all, of the essential evaluation. This includes peer or self-error correction as well as meeting the objectives of the activity. With thoughtful guidance, the teacher can establish among the students an atmosphere of positive-interdependence whereby these goals can be met (Olsen and Kagan 1992).

Several comments indicated that students scrutinize their peers' or their own actions and utterances. When asked if they thought about other students' abilities during the Fishbowl activity, all but three students answered in the affirmative: "Yes, one girl knows grammar much better than I." The students who mentioned that they did not think about their peers' abilities gave the reason that they were too preoccupied with their own abilities to think about the others.

While self-evaluation occurs in other language activities, it is perhaps more pronounced in Fishbowl. Once students become aware that any attempt to speak carries as much value as a beautifully stated utterance, they relax and focus more on getting something out rather than being overly concerned with the quality of their speech. Just getting students to say something is an essential first step. Moreover, the students who speak, act as models for their peers. Without a doubt, students with less language abilities are still affected by their skill differences, but this new evaluation has a more positive influence, as this comment shows: "I wanted others to hear me speaking. But I also wanted to listen to other students."

Expectations

Closely related to these primary sources of uncertainty and tension is an individual's self-expectation. While unrealistic or false expectations can cause students not to speak for fear of ridicule, failure, or dismissal, ignoring the existence of such expectations can be even more damaging. By acknowledging their existence and providing constructive and supportive avenues for coping with them, teachers can direct students to use Fishbowl productively.

Effects of Culture

All students of language (native and nonnative) have a dynamic feedback system known as an interlanguage (IL), within which language input is received and hypotheses are formed and revised through experimentation, feedback, and reflection (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Omaggio-Hadley 1993). Since the IL does not develop wholly independently of an individual's culture, cultural influences play an important role in how the hypotheses are formed and how the feedback is processed. Thus, for many learners of English, aspects of their native culture heavily influence their overall communicative English proficiency.

If in the language activity, uncertainties produce silence, and silence produces tension, and tension produces discomfort, then the way to reduce the discomfort is to speak. Even the smallest utterance has the potential of producing two very important results. First, it shifts the individual's focus away from the tension and toward the production of English, and secondly, it reduces the discomfort that tension causes by increasing speaker's confidence. Both of these results have long-term potential in that they help to increase student's motivation to speak.

So, in Fishbowl, students are encouraged to reward themselves when they confront the sources of their uncertainties and go beyond them. Furthermore, the teacher does not force the students to act, but facilitates student awareness.

Conclusion

In Fishbowl, the tension caused by students' uncertainties creates an atmosphere that engulfs the whole class and fosters a natural desire for its reduction. Of the options available to reduce that tension, speaking best fulfills the requirement. By speaking, a student can create a heightened sense of accomplishment and   promote self-confidence. Rather than trying to artificially remove this tension, the activity makes constructive uses of the tension as a motivating and conditioning agent.

During the discussion sessions after Fishbowl, students were encouraged to talk about the difficulties they experienced as they participated in the activity. Many of those who joined the inner circle expressed feelings that at first it was difficult to participate in the activity, but that after having done so, it was easier to do it again. Many of those who did not join in the activity the first time expressed their regrets. What is promising is that with each successive performance of the activity, more students wanted to join in.

This activity creates an environment for experimenting with and practicing language. It focuses the student's attention on dealing with cultural hindrances that inhibit language production. It does this by raising the student's awareness through supportive, guided peer interaction. If

students are given opportunities to increase their awareness about these cultural constraints and are introduced to strategies and exercises to take advantage of that awareness, teachers should expect an increase in the number of students who want to use English and increase their English proficiency. If teachers can accomplish this, they will foster in each of their students a pragmatic approach that works with their culture rather than against it.

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Figure 1
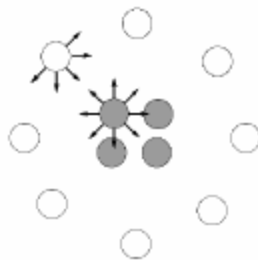
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