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Special Section: Lessons from OkiJALT

A Focus on Functional Language

Tokuya Uza

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Introduction

There is a critical need to improve conversational skills for EFL learners. The way to improve these skills is to focus on the functional language at the core and foundation of communicative interaction. Functional, in this sense, refers to basic phrases one will need to master in order to gain the confidence and automaticity needed for communication. Below, a detailed explanation is given for an approach that may assist teachers to handle such concerns.

- Target Level: Beginner to Advanced
- Objectives: Lessen fear about learning English; get accustomed to speaking the English language aloud; acquire the English language instead of simply learning about it.
- Materials: Any class textbook.
- Time: 5 seconds per flashcard on the Verbal Test and 30 seconds on the Written Test in both English and Japanese.
- Speed Reading Test: 10 to 20 seconds
- Keyword: Iteration learning
- Purpose of Verbal Test: By using flashcards and participating in peer work, students will be able to verbalize the acquired phrases instantly without thinking.
- Written Test: By giving a time limit, students will write as fast as they can, and in order to do so, the students must write a lot. By the end of memorizing all the phrases, students may not be able to explain the grammatical structure, but they can gain a 'feel' of whether the grammar is right or wrong. Furthermore, the students may explain what they have learned and mastered in the class.
- Speed Reading Test: By reading a book out loud as fast as possible, the students' pronunciation speed will fit more naturally into the English language.

Uza, T. (2015). A focus on functional language. *OTB Forum, 7*(1), 75-78.

Procedure

1. The teacher must select approximately 100 appropriate phrases from a textbook.

2. Give students the lists of the selected phrases and ask them to write down the phrases on a flashcard, on a one side in English and the other side in Japanese.

3. Give a quiz. Start with 10 phrases and add another 10 phrases per a week. (Note you must be cautious about overloading. When and if students seem overloaded, avoid adding the additional phrases and give the same quiz the next week or take a break.

The basic principle of initiating this quiz is to make pairs and the students test each other. Tell students that cheating will not help their partner to improve their English skills and be very strict about the right and wrong answers. If time allows, you can give students the test five times with different partners and take the individual's average score.

The teacher may begin the quiz either from the verbal test or written test, but it is a good idea for students to decide which one to start from.

Verbal Test (5 seconds per flashcard)

1. Make pairs. (Make sure to make a different pair for each quiz.)

2. Swap the individuals' flashcards and shuffle the flashcards.

3. Teachers should use a stopwatch equipped with an alarm.

4. Set the timer. The quiz time will be 5 seconds per phrase (e.g., with 20 phrases, 20 phrases x 5 seconds = 100 seconds or 1 minute and 40 seconds).

5. Student (A) will give the phrases in Japanese by looking at the shuffled flashcard (randomly in order), and student (B) will translate the given Japanese phrases into

English. During the quiz, while student (A) is giving the phrases by watching the flashcard, student (B) must not see the flashcard.

6. Since time is limited, student can say "pass" if they cannot answer. When the examinee says, "Pass," the tester should move the phrase to the end of the flashcard and retest again until the alarm goes off.

7. When the answer is wrong, the tester should move the phrase instantly to the end of the flashcards and retest it until the alarm goes off.

8. When the answer is correct, the tester must remove the flashcard from the stack.

9. Every paired student begins the quiz at the teacher's signal.

10. When the alarm rings, students must stop taking the quiz. (Have students count the answered phrases later.)

11. Students' scores will be the percentage of correct answers (e.g., 15 correct phrases out of 20 phrases [15 ÷ 0.20] = 75%).

12. When the students' scores are lower than you expect, you may give them two more chances and calculate the average scores. (Let students work with different partners).

Written Test (30 seconds in both English and Japanese)

1. The students will write whole phrases without looking at any materials. (The students must memorize the provided phrases).

2. Remove all materials from the desk. (Allow only writing materials).

3. Teachers should use a stopwatch equipped with an alarm.

4. Set the timer. The quiz time will be 30 seconds per phrase (depending on the length of the phrases; for example, 20 phrases = 20 phrases x 30 seconds = 600 seconds, or 10 minutes).

5. All students begin writing on the teacher's signal. (The teacher starts the timer.)

6. When the alarm rings, the students must stop writing.

7. Swap the individuals' completed paper and check the phrases (i.e., spelling check, translation check, and punctuation check). (Make sure students are not cheating while checking the answer sheet and inform them that cheating will not help their friends).

8. The English phrases can be in random order, but the phrase and the translation must be written as a set.

9. Both the English phrase and the translation must be correct to get credit.

10. When checking the answer sheet, the students can look at their flashcards for confirmation.

11. Students' scores will be the percentage of the correct answers (e.g., 15 correct phrases out of 20 phrases = 75%).

Speed Reading Test (10 to 20 seconds)

1. The teacher must select approximately 10 appropriate-length paragraphs out of the textbook.

2. The length will be approximately from 5 to 20 seconds to complete the reading. (By the time students reach the assigned time, they will have memorized the whole paragraph without noticing it and they may choose not to look at the textbook to increase the speed).

3. Teachers must prepare a stopwatch equipped with an alarm.

4. Set the timer. The quiz time will be 5 to 20 seconds to complete the reading. The time varies depending on the length of the paragraph. During the quiz, students may look at their textbooks. Have all the students stand up and begin reading out loud on the teacher's signal. (The teacher starts the timer).

5. Start with 15 seconds, and if the students were not able to read within 15 seconds, they sit down and their score will be zero. If the students did make it on time, they remain standing and they will go to the next level, which is 14 seconds. Whenever students sit down, they need to remember their time and the scores, e.g., 10 seconds = 100 points.

15+ seconds = 0 points
14 seconds = 60 points
13 seconds = 70 points
12 seconds = 80 points
11 seconds = 90 points
10 seconds = 100 points
9 seconds = 110 points
8 seconds = 120 points

7 seconds = 130 points
6 seconds = 140 points

As you may have noticed, the first quiz will provide bonus points, so students can get a high score. By allowing a high score, it will help to motivate the students.

A student's final score will be the individual's percentage of the total score.

Flashcard quiz = 75 points
Writing quiz = 75 points
Fast reading quiz = 120 points
The total of the score = 270 points
The average of the total = 90 points

Every week, the students will learn new 10 phrases and add to their flashcards. The first quiz will be 10 lists of phrases. The second week will be 20 phrases. The third week will be 30 phrases. When students reach around 40 phrases, the teacher will need to be cautious with the students' stress level. When and if the students' seems stressed out, the teacher must slow the pace of the amount of phrases, e.g., give students a week off from the quizzes. (For the next quiz, the teacher may add additional phrases or just do the same quiz as a review, depending on how well student cope with the volume of work).

The author of this study strongly believes that the learning process can be accelerated by nurturing repetitive behavior. By following the author's instructions, students will be able to acquire the targeted language more naturally. The key is the time in the sense that students are told that they have a limited time to complete the activity, so most of the students practice over and over to attain their goals.

Despite the negativity towards repetitive tasks in language learning activities, some scholars believe that repetition can reap benefits. According to Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2013), "…in the TESOL context, repetitious and repetitive are hardly the most exciting adjectives to apply to a classroom task. Despite the evidence that immediate task repetition led these learners to change and improve their spoken English" (p. 159). Furthermore, Chase and Johnston (2013) divided the learning process into three levels of early English proficiency that include *Level 1: Emerging; Level 2: Beginning;* and *Level 3: Developing*. Based on the early English proficiency levels, the repetition is under *Level 3: Developing* and requires repetition and rephrasing of new material.

In a study by Gashan and Almohaisen (2014), the authors strongly recommended that "…researchers and teachers might find it very beneficial to devote some of their time to design effective task repetition to help language learners improve their oral production" (p. 36).

Azimzadeh (2014) studied the impact of task repetition on accuracy, fluency and complexity of EFL learners' oral production and the results of his study indicate that "task repetition has a significant impact on the development of learners' oral production in terms of fluency and accuracy." (p. 95). In addition, Azimzadeh argued that "performing the same task for the second time with the time interval of one week had a significant effect on the improvement of participants' fluency" (p. 101). The activities described above can assist students in gaining a solid foundation of basic communicative phrases. In some cases, repetition can lead to automaticity in communication.

Notes

1. Begin with 10 phrases and by the end of the semester, the students will be able to express at least 100 phrases instantly.

2. Let the students learn the phrases prior to using the textbook.

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