

## **Examining Communicativeness of Teacher Talk in Conveying Meanings of Vocabulary: Going Beyond Classroom English to Provide Quality Input**

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Over the last decade, the choice of instructional language in the teaching English as a foreign language classroom in Japan has drawn attention from researchers and teachers due to the policy that encourages teachers to speak more English. This seems to have resulted in increased English in the classroom. However, how teachers talk in the classroom to construct shared understanding has not been examined closely.

The present study explores the degree to which a teacher successfully conveys meanings of newly presented vocabulary items in the classroom through English. In other words, the study aims to pursue the quality use of the target language rather than focusing on mere quantity of the target language use. Nine words were taught to a group ( $n=41$ ) of second-year high school students in three online lessons. In conveying meanings of vocabulary, the teacher tried to elaborate meanings and check understanding in an interactive manner. The students were asked to give Japanese translations on the online questionnaire. The results show the overall positive trend that most students understand the meanings of six words out of nine due to teacher talk. However, it was difficult for students to grasp the meanings of the three words due to the inherent nature of the items, which posed problems for the teacher in elaborating meanings.

Key words: Teacher talk, Interaction, Vocabulary

### **1. Introduction**

Compared to the past, learners of English in Japan today hear more English spoken by their teachers due to the policy stipulating that English lessons should be principally conducted in English<sup>(1)</sup>. This has resulted in increased research regarding how much English is spoken by teachers in the classroom. Numerous phrasebooks have also been published to help teachers to use more classroom English.

However, few studies have attempted to explore how teachers talk in the classroom. It is crucial for teachers to talk appropriately in English to promote understanding through the target language in order to create fruitful English lessons; otherwise, the exercise would be futile as little would be communicated despite the teacher talking in English. This study aims to examine the extent to which students' understanding of the English vocabulary can be facilitated through the target language.

The study was conducted for a group ( $n = 41$ ) of second-year high school students. The author attempted to teach the students English vocabulary by conveying the meanings in the relevant contexts, interacting with the students by eliciting the target words, and checking their understanding of these words. A total of nine content words sourced from the High School English Level Vocabulary (HEV) developed by Ishikawa (2015)<sup>(2)</sup> were taught one by one in three online lessons and four questions were asked via Microsoft Forms for each word. The planned teacher talk was drafted

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before the commencement of the study, and classroom interactions during the teaching were audio-recorded for later analysis.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Current trends in the choice of instructional language in English language teaching

The choice of instructional language in a second or foreign language classroom has long been debated in applied linguistics.<sup>(3)(4)(5)</sup> In recent years, researchers began to cast doubt on the monolingual assumption, which dominated the literature, and the pedagogical value of L1 was recognised.<sup>(6)(7)(8)(9)</sup> As pointed out by Hawkins (2015)<sup>(10)</sup>, Macaro's (2001)<sup>(11)</sup> so-called maximal position is accepted in Japan; namely, L1 should be avoided as much as possible. This causes teachers and institutions to feel 'undue guilt for responsive teaching decisions, inhibiting creative pedagogy, and discouraging teachers from acting as positive and realistic bi/multilingual role models' (p. 29). Each teacher should be allowed the discretion to make a judicious decision as to the appropriate code-switching in accordance with pedagogic purposes.

### 2.2 Shifting the focus from quantity to quality with regard to teacher talk

Triggered by MEXT's announcement of 'More English is better' policy, many surveys asking teachers about how much English they speak during their lessons have been conducted. MEXT (2018)<sup>(12)</sup> reported that more than 63.8% of General Course high school teachers use spoken English in their English Communication I lessons. A large survey conducted by Benesse (2016)<sup>(13)</sup> confirmed these data, reporting that about 60% of senior high school teachers converse in English during their lessons. With regard to when during the lesson teachers use English (i.e. the functions of English in the lessons), Benesse (2016) reported that giving instructions, praising and encouraging students, and asking and answering questions are amongst the most frequent functions of English used by the teachers.

However, as pointed out by O'Neill (1994)<sup>(14)</sup>, we need to start asking 'How do teachers talk in English?' rather than simply 'How much English do teachers talk?', because mere exposure to the repeated ready-made phrases that are used to create an 'atmosphere' of English learning does not necessarily lead to learning opportunities, as little may be communicated. We need to revise the view of assessing teachers' use of English only by its quantity and focus on quality 'by recognising the important relationship between language use and pedagogic purpose' (Walsh, 2002: 4)<sup>(15)</sup>.

### 2.3 Key features of teacher talk to create meaningful communication in the classroom

Understanding new concepts and ideas expressed in the target language has central pedagogical value in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. To achieve this, the target language should be used as a vehicle for communication to build a common ground on which meanings of new ideas and concepts represented by the target language can be negotiated and shared between the teacher and students. Thus, teachers need to talk in a manner that facilitates and assists students' understanding and ensure that that students are engaged in the classroom discourse by going beyond classroom English.<sup>(16)(17)</sup>

Teacher talk differs from classroom English; the latter tends to comprise ready-made phrases and serves managerial functions, for instance making greetings, giving instructions, and giving feedback, whereas teacher talk serves much wider and essential functions, enabling communication by giving examples, paraphrasing, repeating, expanding and deepening ideas, and so on<sup>(18)</sup>. Teacher talk can potentially create a rich classroom discourse in which meanings of new

words, sentences, and texts are explored and negotiated with students.

Classroom discourse orchestrated by the teacher entails interactions, namely chains of question and answer<sup>(19)</sup>. Interaction between the teacher and learner is typically initiated by the teacher asking questions<sup>(20)</sup>. To generate lively interactions, teachers should not simply clarify meanings in the relevant contexts, but also interact with students by eliciting and checking their understanding in English. This is achieved by asking questions, because only then can teachers hold students' attention and draw out their responses, encouraging them to participate in the joint construction of classroom discourse. Checking students' understanding involves asking simple 'yes/no' questions, often called concept (check) questions<sup>(21)</sup>.

Another important feature of teacher talk, especially when presenting new linguistic items, is situational presentation<sup>(22)</sup>. When presenting the meaning in the target language, simply stating dictionary-like definitions is not enough for learners to grasp the meaning. To help them visualise the meaning, teachers should provide a scenario/situation in which the target word is clearly contextualised.

Figure 1, which is based on the above discussion and the author's personal experience in the Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) course, illustrates the essential elements of teacher talk while teaching language.

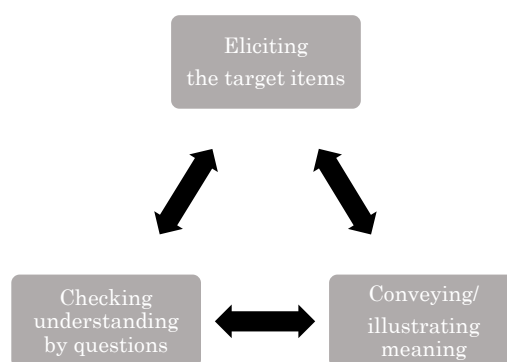


Figure 1 Essential Elements of Interactive Teacher Talk

Figure 1 indicates that a teacher can start with any of the three phases of teaching and follow up with the remaining two. Typically, eliciting and checking understanding precede situational presentation. This is because some learners may already be conversant with the target item, and beginning with eliciting and checking understanding can help teachers ensure that their students remain active. The order, however, is liable to vary depending on the word being taught and on the on-the-spot decisions made by the teacher. Below is a sample draft for 'benefit', which starts with concept check questions (questions that can be answered if the students know the meaning of the word), and then proceeds to the clarification of the meaning in the context of the health benefits of consuming chocolate. T and S denote the teacher and the students, respectively.

**T:** When I say the benefits of something, is it a good thing or a bad thing?

**S:** Good thing.

**T:** Yes. So, what are the health benefits of chocolate, for example?

**S:** Delicious.

- T:** Yes, it is, but how good is chocolate to your body? In what way?
- S:** Blood...
- T:** Yeah, blood pressure. What does chocolate do to your blood pressure?
- S:** Mmm...low blood pressure.
- T:** OK, good, it helps us lower our blood pressure.

## 2.4 Research questions

The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which the learners understand the meaning of new words when taught interactively through teacher talk in the target language. In other words, the study aimed to examine the communicativeness of teacher talk. The following two research questions are pertinent.

RQ1: To what extent do students understand the meanings of target words when they are taught interactively through the target language?

RQ2: What are possible reasons for varying degree of conceptualisation of the words?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Teaching English vocabulary in the classroom

The study was conducted as an online lesson taught by the author using his own teaching context. The classroom comprised second-year high school students ( $n = 41$ ) majoring in international business. It contained 40 girls and 1 boy, and the main coursebook is *PRO-VISION English Communication II*.

Using part of the classroom time, the author intended to teach the meanings of three words to the students over three lessons. For this purpose, nine words were randomly selected from HEV developed by Ishikawa (2015)<sup>(2)</sup>. While teaching those words, the author tried to follow the procedure explained in the previous section for teaching vocabulary through the target language, namely, by asking questions either to elicit target words from the students or check their understanding of the meaning followed by its vivid illustration in some scenario. For each word that needed to be taught, the author devised the anticipated teacher–student conversations for the teacher talk in advance, which were later altered depending on the spontaneous interactions with the students.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire consisting of four questions was administered online using Microsoft Forms after each online lesson. The students were asked to answer four questions for each word. Question 1 was ‘Did you know the word “X”?’ (Answer choices: ‘I already know what the word means’, ‘It looks/sounds familiar but I don’t remember its meaning’, ‘I didn’t know the word’.) Question 2 was ‘What do you think the word means after learning what you did in this class?’ (The students were asked to provide a Japanese equivalent). Question 3 was ‘How useful do you think the teaching was?’ (Answer choices: ‘The teaching helped deepen my understanding of the word’, ‘I found the meaning was different from what I had expected’, ‘I think I was able to grasp the meaning of the word’, and ‘I couldn’t understand what the word meant’). In the last question, the students were asked to note down any other comments. For Question 2, the author judged if the students’ answers in Japanese were close enough to the meanings of the target words. For instance, when the students answered 「被害」 for ‘victim’, they were judged to be incorrect because the word refers to ‘someone who has been hurt or killed by someone or something’.<sup>(23)</sup> Another example involved the

students answering 「経費」, 「お金」, 「貯金」, or 「財産」 for 'budget'. The responses were incorrect because they did not match the exact meaning of the target word though some overlaps exist, as all these four Japanese words are associated with money. Some students provided longer explanations for the meaning, such as 「ほかの人と共有して使うお金」. As long as the meaning matched the target word, it was judged as correct even though the students did not write 「予算」 exactly. All the interactions were audio-recorded for further analysis.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 RQ1: To what extent do students understand the meanings of target words when they are taught interactively through the target language?

Three bar graphs (Figures 2–4) were generated to summarise the results for each question. Figure 2 reveals whether the students were already aware about the target word. For example, 48.7% of the students had known the word 'effect', whereas only 4.8% responded in the affirmative for 'former' and 'survey'. This part of the data is notable because it is important to consider the students' pre-existing knowledge when examining the extent to which the teacher talk contributed to their understanding of new words. Figure 3 shows how many students correctly grasped the meaning of the target words presented in English. The overall result was positive because, on average, 82.9% of the students grasped the meanings correctly.

Amongst the nine words, 'budget' was the most difficult word for the students to understand, followed by 'former' and 'charge' and 'victim'. Note that this result does not distinguish the students who had already heard these words from those who had not. This aspect is examined more carefully in the next analysis.

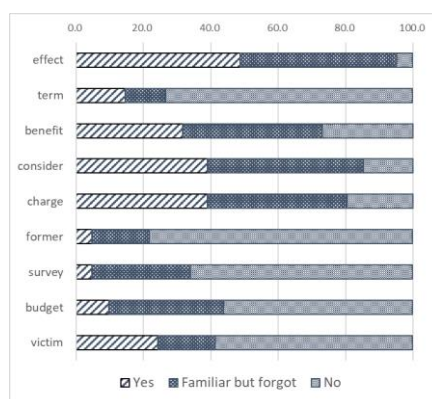


Figure 2 Results of Question 1: Did you know the word?

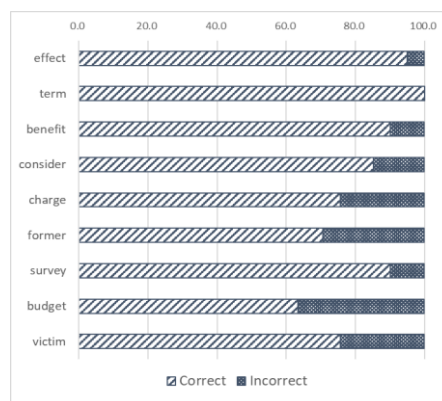


Figure 3 Results of Question 2: What do you think the word means after leaning?

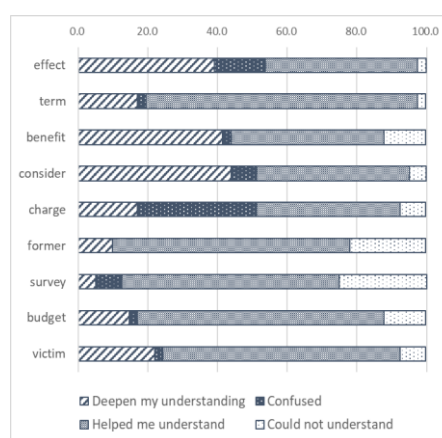


Figure 4 Results of Question 3: How useful was the teaching?

Question 3 was intended to assess the students’ perceptions after the teaching, and the results are shown in Figure 4. For most words, the predominant answer was ‘I think I was able to grasp the meaning of the word.’ For example, for the word ‘victim’, 21.9% answered that the teaching helped expand and deepen their pre-existing knowledge, while 68.2% answered that they thought they understood the meaning of the word in English via teacher talk.

These three graphs provided the basic data for each word. However, further analysis was necessary to address the research questions comprehensively. To obtain a more accurate picture of the degree of teacher talk communicativeness, a cross tabulation was performed, as shown in Table 1. Table 1 combines the information depicted in Figures 2 and 3. It helps us to analyse how many students from the two groups, namely those who had known the words previously and those who had not (including those who had forgotten), understood their meanings.

Table 1 shows that the words ‘effect’, ‘term’, ‘benefit’, ‘consider’, ‘charge’ and ‘survey’ garnered high scores, as more than 80% of the students who had not known them previously could correctly answer what they meant. It is worth noting that the students who had not known the words earlier could correctly grasp their meanings; this demonstrates that the meanings were successfully conveyed through teacher talk in English. For example, ‘term’ was easier for students to understand because the word was exemplified in the context of the everyday school life as you can see from the following excerpt of the transcript of ‘term’. The author started interacting with the students via concept check questions, but they failed to function as intended because Student 1 (S1) had not heard the word previously, leading the author to clarify the meaning of the word by explaining it in the context of school. Consequently, all the students

grasped the meaning due to their familiarity with the context.

<Term>

**T:** When you were a junior high school student, how many terms did you have? S1?

**S1:** Term?

**T:** So, when you were a junior high school student, how many terms did you have a year, one year?

**S1:** What is term?

**T:** OK, term is the, for example, in junior high school, the first term finishes before summer vacation, and your second term starts after summer vacation and finishes after Christmas. Yeah? And your third term starts after your winter vacation. How many terms did you have when you were a junior high school student?

Table 1 Cross Tabulation Reporting How Many Students from the two Different Groups (i.e., those who had heard the words previously and those who had not) Grasped the Meaning of the Words

Target word	Variable	Correct		Incorrect		Total
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
effect	already known	20	100.0	0	0.0	20
	forgot/had not known	19	90.4	2	9.5	21
term	already known	6	100.0	0	0.0	6
	forgot/had not known	35	100.0	0	0.0	35
benefit	already known	13	100.0	0	0.0	13
	forgot/had not known	24	85.7	4	14.2	28
consider	already known	15	93.7	1	6.2	16
	forgot/had not known	20	80.0	5	20.0	25
charge	already known	9	56.2	7	43.7	16
	forgot/had not known	22	88.0	3	12.0	25
former	already known	2	100.0	0	0.0	2
	forgot/had not known	27	69.2	12	30.7	39
survey	already known	2	100.0	0	0.0	2
	forgot/had not known	35	89.7	4	10.2	39
budget	already known	4	100.0	0	0.0	4
	forgot/had not known	22	59.4	15	40.5	37
victim	already known	10	100.0	0	0.0	10
	forgot/had not known	21	67.7	10	32.2	31

#### 4.2 Q2: What are possible reasons for varying degree of conceptualisation of the words?

Compared to the six words mentioned in the previous section, ‘former’, ‘budget’, and ‘victim’ scored relatively low, with the lowest value (59.4%) recorded for ‘budget’. These words could have been challenging for the students to understand possibly because of the nature of their meanings. For example, of the students who could not understand ‘former’ correctly, some answered 「歴代の」 or 「昔の」, both of which have meanings similar to ‘former’ but are different in reality, as they imply all past occurrences. For ‘budget’, the wrong answers included 「経費」, 「お金」, 「貯金」, and 「財産」, all of which are associated with money but are slightly different from 「予算」. This suggests that in some cases, synonyms whose meanings overlap to a certain extent with that of the target word, were regarded by the students as the target words. For example, 「お金」 is a superordinate of 「予算」, and this similarity may have increased the cognitive burden and caused confusion for some students.

The inherent difficulties in meanings of the words discussed above also affected the author's illustrations during the teacher talk. The author was unable to fully eliminate the other interpretations for these cognitively demanding words, and as a result, the students could not narrow down the meanings sufficiently to arrive at an accurate understanding. The following are the excerpts of the teacher talk for 'former' and 'budget', both of which began with concept check questions and were followed by clarifications of the meanings in the relevant contexts. Some students remained uncertain about the meaning(s).

**<Former>**

**T:** OK. So, who was the former president of the U.S.? Do you know?

**S1:** I don't know.

**T:** OK, so who is the president now in America?

**S1:** Trump, Mr Trump.

**T:** Mr Trump. So, who was the president before him? Any idea?

**S1:** Obama *san*.

**T:** Yes, Mr Barack Obama. OK? So, he was the former, former president of the U.S....

**<Budget>**

**T:** Budget means the money, budget means the money you can use for particular purposes. Right? Is that your personal money? S1?

**S1:** Mmm...I don't know.

**T:** OK, yeah, for example, budget is shared with a group of people. Let's say, for example, your family, okay, your family has a budget, the money you can spend for one month or something. Is that usually a large amount of money or a small amount of money?

**S:** Could you say that again?

...

**T:** S2, are you in the baseball club, aren't you?

**S2:** Yes.

**T:** So, with your budget, baseball club budget, what do you buy with your budget?

**S2:** A bat, balls, or something.

**T:** Or something, yeah, okay, good. Everybody, budget is the money shared with lots of people, family, or even country, yeah? Japan has a large sum of money as a budget we can use.

The results demonstrated that sharing the meanings of new words verbally was challenging but worthwhile, because although the students may be unclear about the meanings after the teacher talk, they would probably try to clarify the meaning later, for example by checking a bilingual dictionary. The possibility of ambiguity while communicating in a foreign language is always present. Nonetheless, it is essential to provide quality input via teacher talk to maintain student engagement while they are negotiating with meaning in classroom discourse. This is because most students are typically not accustomed to listening to and attempting to grasp even simple explanations of items and events around them in EFL environments.



## 5. Conclusion

The present study examined the extent to which teacher talk in English successfully functioned as a vehicle for communication in an EFL classroom to demonstrate the effective use of the target language. The key to successful teacher talk lies in asking questions and making situational presentations to engage learners in interactions and facilitate the negotiation of meaning in classroom discourse.

The results of this study showed that most students understood the meanings of six words out of nine due to teacher talk, but it was quite difficult for them to grasp the meanings of the remaining three words due to the inherent nature of the terms; this aspect was also challenging for the author in performing the teacher talk for the students. Further studies are necessary to investigate the potential of teacher talk in seeking the appropriate use of the target language to maximise learning opportunities in the classroom.

## 6. Acknowledgement

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