Transcription : A Tool in Aiding EFL Communication

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1. Introduction

In the words of Lado written more than fifty years ago, "The ability to speak a foreign language is without doubt the most highly prized language skill"（Lado 1961：239）. This action research project and ensuing paper were birthed out of a desire to see Japanese EFL students in communication classes develop greater responsibility for their own learning, whilst at the same time enabling them to improve their L2 communication and noticing skills.

Having conducted research in the field of EFL oral communication for a number of years at the tertiary level, the author noted the genuine difficulty many Japanese learners of English had in maintaining a conversation in the L2 for a sustained period of time. After learning from a colleague about *Speaking Homework*（Yue and Provenzano 2010）, a version of this was adopted in her own communication classes. Subsequently, this particular form of Speaking Homework evolved and started to incorporate recordings of the learners' conversations. At the outset, these recordings were used merely for the purpose of the

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instructor to assess and provide feedback on the learners' English. It was then decided to experiment by having the students listen to, transcribe and revise their own authentic conversations. The results of other research conducted in the area of self–transcription had all cited its benefits (Lynch 2001, 2007, Mennim 2003, Huang 2008, and Stillwell et al 2009). Therefore, the author resolved to assess how her learners perceived this transcription and revision activity.

2. Becoming a Noticer

The concept of noticing in the EFL classroom has been written about extensively over the last few decades and plays a vital role in this research project. Schmidt talks about the "noticing hypothesis", and maintains "what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning" (Schmidt 1995：20). There is further elaboration by Izumi and Bigelow who highlight the paramount importance for learners to attend to and notice the particular features of "input" (Izumi and Bigelow 2000：240). As pointed out by Batstone, the aforementioned "intake" entails time since learners are required not only to recognise but also assume the different aspects of the language (Batstone 1996：273). Because of the time involved in mastering this, it is therefore proposed that instructors ensure their students are given sufficient opportunity to practice the art of noticing in order to benefit from it. Just as was done in the classes involved in this current research, Huang suggests that providing a sample of learners' authentic language output is one such way to enable them to focus on "language form" in their communication (Huang 2008：377). Unquestionably, noticing is a complex dimension of L2 learning however. It is important to expound here that noticing has proven to be a block or deterrent in the study of the L2 when learners become overly concerned with form rather than meaning

（Brown　2009：293）. Lynch raises the all–important issue of whether and how L2 learners can be enabled to "become more effective noticers"（Lynch 2001：125）. Nelson confers how Japanese students often demonstrate a more reflective style of learning in the classroom（Nelson 1995：17）. In addition, due to the analytical method of EFL instruction prevalent in many high schools in Japan, it was considered that requesting first–year university students to reflect on their own output and help them to become "noticers" in this action research would not require too great a leap.

3. Weekly Speaking Homework

In order to help students improve their English oral communication skills, the author incorporated the concept of Speaking Homework into her classes. Speaking Homework is an out–of–class activity for students, devised to supplement oral communication classes. Most weeks, learners met in pairs outside regular class time in a location of their choice, and participated in an unrehearsed English conversation on a given topic. The length of each conversation varied according to the ability of the individuals. While a minimum time was given for students with less aptitude to communicate in English initially, those with more confidence, or learners who wanted a challenge, were at liberty to speak for as long as they desired.

Once the conversation finished, students were required to reflect briefly in writing on their spoken output. Each week's reflection section included both new and formerly taught target language features and became progressively more challenging. This section of the homework was primarily to assist the learners in noticing whether or not they were making use of target language forms. See

Figures 1 and *2* for examples of the progression of Speaking Homework.

3.1 Communication Strategies in Speaking Homework

Canale and Swain draw attention to the importance for learners to "cope in an authentic communicative situation and … keep the communicative channel open" (Canale and Swain 1980：25). In order to facilitate the students in this area, classroom communicative activities focused on not only target grammar and vocabulary usage, but also the recognition and usage of communication strategies (CS), and discourse markers. According to Hughes, CS can be used by a language user to "actively … manipulate a conversation and negotiate interactions effectively" (Hughes 2002：91). CS also "serve as substitutes for production plans which the learner is unable to implement" (Ellis 1985：182). In this research, achievement and help‒seeking CS were taught, both of which were also central to Nakatani's 2010 research. Furthermore, three times during the semester, the students' Speaking Homework was recorded.

Figure 1. Noticing Section of Speaking Homework Week 4

I started the conversation well.		I knew enough English vocabulary.	I ended the conversation well.	
I showed surprise.		Did you return a question?	I showed I was listening.	
I showed agreement.		I gave extra information in my answers.	I used thinking sounds.	
I spoke some Japanese.		If you spoke Japanese, what did you say? (Write an English translation too please.)		

Figure 2. Noticing Section of Speaking Homework Week 12

What did you say to start the conversation?	An example of a follow–up question you asked :	How did you end the conversation?
If you were surprised, what did you say?	I said (...) to return a question :	How did you show you were listening?
What did you say to show agreement?	I gave extra information in my answers.（3 As）. For example :	What did you say when you were thinking?
I spoke for ... minutes.	If you spoke Japanese, what did you say? （Write an English translation too please.）	

4. From Planning to Revising

4.1 Step1 – Planning

Since the aim was for learners to use authentic language, all three recorded conversations were spontaneous and the students were not informed of the topics before class. As Nation explains, planning before speaking assists in language production（Nation 2009：117）. Therefore, each student had approximately ten minutes to prepare a Speaking Homework paper（see Appendix I）, to write keywords or short questions. The conversation was not rehearsed nor was there any discussion between the students regarding the content of what they wanted to ask one another. The learners were also told that they were not restricted to speaking only on the given topic, since the course of the conversation might naturally change. Equally important is that the students understood their Speaking Homework paper was not a script, rather a reminder of what they could say to help prevent the conversation ending prematurely.

4.2 Step 2 – Transcribing

In order for the instructor to hear the students' unrehearsed spoken output at

intervals, and also to enable the learners to analyse their own spoken English, three conversations per term were recorded. Unlike the weekly Speaking Homework setting, these conversations were administered during class time, in the second, eighth and penultimate classes of each semester. Each conversation was saved onto an MP3 player and then uploaded onto the instructor's computer from where it was sent by email attachment to the relevant speakers.

In order to foster responsibility for learning in the students, the learners were required to conduct the following after the recorded conversation was complete :

1. Listen to the recording with their conversation partner.
2. Collaborate with their partner and transcribe the conversation verbatim.
3. Make a note of the word count and length of conversation.
4. Submit a document of the transcription to the instructor by email.
5. Take a paper copy of the transcription to the following class for the revision activity.

4.3 Step 3 – Revising

Similar to the method used by Lynch (2001, 2007), Mennim (2003) and Cooke (2013), each pair reviewed their transcription to evaluate their spoken output. Students were given some guidelines to assist them in this process. Firstly, they were asked to identify and underline any target structures which had been used correctly ; this primarily focused on target vocabulary and communication strategies. For the first recording in week 2, this took considerably longer as the learners were not familiar with the concept of "noticing". Therefore a list of items for reflection was presented to each class. After this step

was complete, each pair pinpointed areas in the conversation that they believed could have been improved, either grammatically or by elaborating to make the output more natural. These elaborations included adding target language features, which would make their communication more natural. For example : inserting appropriate follow–up questions or fillers.

Conversely, the revision method differed in one significant aspect from the research conducted by Lynch (2001, 2007), Mennim (2003). In the author's classes the students did not repeat their conversations after completing the revision process. The emphasis of the course was to help students utilise discourse markers and CS in order to have more authentic conversations for increasingly longer periods of time each week on a variety of topics. It was believed that by repeating conversations, the content would become more rehearsed (even memorised) thereby defeating the point of using discourse markers and CS in a natural way. It should be stated, however, in each class the target language taught prior to that class was reviewed, thereafter introducing new target language features. For the Speaking Homework assignments, students were encouraged to incorporate both previously and newly taught target features as naturally as possible into their conversations to help them speak in the L2 for longer. In addition, the learners were asked to think about areas of their conversations from the previous week's homework, which they believed required improvement. This transcription and revision task, like those described by Lynch (2001, 2007), Mennim (2003), Huang (2008) and Stilwell et al (2009), required students to negotiate the form and content of their conversation with minimal input from the teacher so that during this phase, the instructor was an observer and monitor. Once the revision was complete, it was

submitted to the teacher for evaluation and comment.

5. The Survey

5.1 The fundamental objective of this research was to assess :

the extent to which listening to the recorded conversations, transcribing and revising them contributed to students' noticing of

 i. their own L2 usage（both strengths and weaknesses）

 ii. how to improve their L2

This action research project took part in a large private university in western Japan where all non-English majors are required to obtain English credits in order to graduate. Two instructors conducted the classes and collated the data.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Participants

The participants were a heterogeneous group of 184 students, enrolled in EFL communication classes in their first year at a private university in Japan. 175 of the learners completed an anonymous survey in the penultimate or final class of the 15-week semester. The students were from 7 different classes and comprised 73 females and 102 males, who were required to take the class in their first semester of university, after having completed 6 years of compulsory English classes in junior and senior high school.

5.3 Procedure

The survey, comprising 4 statements, was distributed to gauge the students' perceptions of the speaking homework assignment, in particular regarding the transcription requirement. As in previous research conducted by the author

（Provenzano and Yue 2011），the questionnaire was bilingual and utilised a five-point Likert scale. The respondents noted whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the given statements.

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Transcribing and noticing

The statements and results of the survey are listed in Appendix 2. Statements A – D focused on what the students noticed during the transcribing process. The transcribing process varied slightly from Lynch（2001, 2007）and Stilwell et al（2009）. In this research, the students were required to transcribe their entire conversation, as opposed to a segment. In this way, the participants were able to reflect on their conversation in its entirety thereby noticing aspects such as the overuse of particular expressions.

5.4.2 Statement A

Both the listening and transcribing of the conversation were assigned for homework, and therefore completed outside class time. It was evident from the results of the survey, that the great majority of students（80%）perceived that listening to the recording of their conversation had helped them identify some weaknesses in their communication patterns.

5.4.3 Statement B

Almost 90% of the participants reported that producing a written transcript helped them notice how they communicated in English. Despite this step in the transcribing process taking a considerable amount of time for some students, especially those who were not very proficient with computing skills in English,

there was an overwhelming sense in the classroom that it was a worthwhile activity.

5.4.4 Statements C and D – Reviewing the transcript

Statements C and D related to the final step in the transcription process : the revising of the conversations, which was conducted in class time. 73% of the students felt that reviewing the transcript had improved their understanding of how they used CS. In addition, 67% of the learners believed that the reviewing process helped them see how they could improve their English oral communication skills.

5.5 Discussion

As the length of the participants' conversations increased from week to week, the learners' CS usage became more prevalent and their noticing and communication skills increased. However, because the number of students who took part in this research was quite large, it was time consuming for the instructors to listen to and offer feedback on each conversation and transcript. In spite of this, the L2 speaking progress depicted both inside and outside the classroom indicated to the instructors that the learners were benefitting from the activity.

In an ideal situation, the same pairs would have spoken together for the three recordings. Although this happened to a greater extent, student absences, tardiness or class seating arrangements resulted in some participants speaking with different partners for the recordings. Because most students had developed a rapport with their "regular" Speaking Homework partner, if they were speaking to someone less familiar for the second or third recordings, it often resulted in

an audibly more stilted conversation.

Looking through the transcriptions and revisions, it became apparent how the students had varying levels of noticing, which was also reported in findings by McCormick and Vercellotti（McCormick and Vercellotti 2013：417）. The author believes this reinforces the importance of helping train learners to become better "noticers".

Furthermore, it is essential that a distinction be made between the regular unrecorded Speaking Homework（conducted anywhere the students chose）and the recorded versions undertaken in class time. While the instructor gave her students some freedom to choose where they conducted their recording on the condition it was within close proximity of the classroom, several participants reported feeling much more nervous than when they conducted the unrecorded conversations.

Another issue which should not be overlooked is how transcripts, particularly those of L2 learners are not always completely accurate, as Lynch also noted （Lynch 2009：23）. The participants in this research were no exception, although the percentage of students who did not transcribe verbatim was relatively small. Furthermore, the transcripts do not convey intonation, rhythm or any unspoken gestures, all of which are principal facets of communication.

6. Conclusion
Just as Mennim concludes, this study maintains the belief that learners need to take more responsibility for correcting their errors in the L2, and not merely

rely on the instructor's knowledge （Mennim 2012 : 60）. It was anticipated this activity would foster greater responsibility within the students for their own learning, and the survey results clearly indicate that the majority of students re-acted positively to both the self-transcribing and noticing tasks. This corrobo-rated other research undertaken in different EFL settings, presented by Cooke （2013）, Lynch （2001, 2007）, Mennim （2012） and Doqaruni and Yaqubi （2011）. As Brown （2002） pointed out, it appears to be in the learners' advan-tage if they are able to identify both their strengths and weaknesses as they study the target language. Even though the students in this action research were unable to recognise and solve all the language problems in their own con-versations, it is proposed that their enthusiasm for the tasks was associated with studying their own L2 usage in greater depth.

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APPENDIX 1

SPEAKING HOMEWORK

Name :　　　　　Partner's Name :　　　　　Student No.＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

DATE & TIME of conversation :　＿＿＿＿＿　＿＿＿＿＿

| **TOPIC** | **SCORE :** |

GET READY (Before you speak)

Words I want to use :　　　　Communication Tools I want to use :
Questions I want to ask my partner : ☆ ☆ ☆
Things I want to say to my partner (NOT answers to the questions!) : ☆　　　　　　　☆　　　　　　　☆

.... SPEAK ....

REFLECT : Think about your conversation. Write "O" for the things that are true for you. Write "X" for the things that are not true for you. Write short sentences where necessary.

I started the conversation well. What did you say?	I knew enough English vocabulary.	I ended the conversation well. If yes, what did you say?
I showed surprise. If yes, what did you say?	Did you return a question? If yes, what did you say?	I showed I was listening. If yes, what did you say?
I showed agreement. If yes, what did you say?	I gave extra information in my answers.	I used thinking sounds. If yes, what did you say?
I spoke some Japanese.	If you spoke Japanese, what did you say? (Write an English translation too please!)	

APPENDIX 2

Transcribing survey

TOTAL：175　　(73F＝41.71%　102M＝58.29%)

1st year students. *Write (✓) in one box for each statement you agree with.*

STATEMENTS	Strongly agree 大変そう思う	Agree そう思う	Neither agree nor disagree 分からない	Disagree そう思わない	Strongly disagree 全くそう思わない
A. Listening to my recorded conversation helped me identify my weaknesses in my oral English communication. 自分の会話が録音されたものを聞くことによって、自分が英語で話すときの弱点を知ることができた。	61 / 34.86	80 / 45.71	25 / 14.29	8 / 4.57	1 / 0.57
B. Writing transcripts (of the conversations) helped me see how I communicate in English. パートナーとの会話の記録を残すことで、私がどのように英語を話しているのかが分かるようになった。	67 / 38.29	90 / 51.43	13 / 7.43	5 / 2.86	0 / 0
C. Reviewing the transcripts improved my understanding of how I use Communication Tools. パートナーとの会話の記録を見直すことで Communication Tools の使い方に対する私の理解度が増した。	40 / 22.86	88 / 50.29	40 / 22.86	6 / 3.43	1 / 0.57
D. Reviewing the transcripts helped me see how I could improve my English oral communication skills. パートナーとの会話の記録を見直すことで、どうすればオーラルコミュニケーションスキル（英会話スキル）が改善できるかが分るようになった。	43 / 24.57	75 / 42.86	47 / 26.86	8 / 4.57	2 / 1.14

NOTES：
(1) Figures on top rows for each statement refer to number of students who selected that statement.
(2) Shaded figures on bottom rows are percentages.
(3) *Communication Tools*（＝Communication Strategies）refer to term in class textbook.