

Oral Exam, Participation Points and a Survey of Student Learning Style Preference for English IA2 at Takuma Campus

Kazuma FUJII* and Robert JOHNSTON**

Abstract

Kagawa National College of Technology, Takuma Campus has started team teaching classes in English IA2 since this year. In these classes, there are two classes per week: one is a class by a Japanese English teacher, and the other is a class by a Japanese English teacher and a native speaker of English. This practice is implemented with the purpose of giving the students a chance to listen to English spoken by a native speaker and to speak more. As the first practice in this style, an oral exam and participation points have been introduced to make this class more effective. In this paper some educational insights for better oral classes are given, based on the results of a questionnaire survey.

Keywords : Oral Class, Oral Test, Participation Point, Name Card, Team Teaching

1. Introduction

At Kagawa National College of Technology, Takuma Campus, until last year, the “English IA2” first year high school English course in its entirety has been taught by Japanese English teachers. Classes are held twice per week (one class hour is 45 minutes), and are aimed at improving the students’ speaking and listening abilities. A Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology authorized textbook for high school oral communication has usually been used for this course although the school does not necessarily have to choose this kind of textbook.

From this year, a native speaker of English (one of the researchers) started teaching English IA2 in a team teaching style during one of the two classes held each week. This is a new format for the Takuma Campus so much consideration was needed as for how to grade, how to teach, and how

to construct an engaging environment that promotes proactive student participation in classes from the beginning. In this paper, an explanation of the background as to how and why this class style has begun at Takuma Campus is given. Some devices implemented to improve the class, focusing on the oral exam and participation points are also presented. In addition, some educational insights for better oral classes are given, based on the results of a questionnaire survey.

2. Background

The subject English IA2 is an integration subject with English IA1, which mainly focuses on English grammar, and is graded as “English IA.” Each of the subjects has two credit values but the credits are not given separately. The total grading for English IA is given to the students and they get four credits if they achieve a passing score.

As mentioned in a previous section, the two English IA2 classes were taught by Japanese English teachers until the last academic year.

* 沼津工業高等専門学校 教養科

** 香川高等専門学校詫間キャンパス 非常勤講師

Although listening and speaking activities were sometimes given, having an oral exam was realistically very difficult taking into the fact that Japanese English teachers typically have three or four classes, each of which has about 40 students. As a result, only written test was usually done to measure the students' improvement on English communicative skills. If a native teacher of English taught this class in a team teaching style environment, the number of students that each of the teachers must evaluate would be halved and there would be the possibility for administering oral exams and giving students timely feedback.

In addition to this, there arose requests from students' parents or guardians that they want a native teacher in an English class because they have already had some of the classes at Takamatsu Campus.

These are the backgrounds that a native teacher of English has started teaching at Takuma Campus. In the next section, we would like to introduce an oral exam and participation points as the examples of devices that we believe make the classes better.

3. Oral Exams and Participation Points

3.1. Oral Exams

As was mentioned before, English IA2 has two classes per week. One is by a Japanese teacher of English, and the other is taught in a team teaching environment. So it was decided to have two kinds of examinations. One is a 50-point written test to assess the achievement of the classes by the Japanese English teacher, and the other is a 50-point oral exam for the team teaching classes.

The oral exam has two variations. One is memorization, in which students must memorize six dialogues or conversations from the textbook that had previously been covered during class. The other is a skit. Students are to make an original skit by themselves, referring to the dialogues or conversations in the textbook. The students are to form a group of three or four people and are offered the choice of either of the exam options. Students are required to work together and practice for the oral exam on their own time.

This results to about 10-12 groups for each class, and each group is assigned a designation from Group 1 to Group 10 (12). The odd number groups are examined in Lecture Hall #4, and the even number groups are examined in their classroom. A five-minute examination time for each group was allocated. Each group has four minutes if they are a group of 4, and three minutes if they are a group of 3. For the evaluation, a rubric was prepared (see Appendix) and used to evaluate student performance according to the given criterion. Examinations were also video recorded for reference and to assure fair teacher grading. Examinations were done within normal class hours, usually the last class before the quarterly written tests. That is, four oral exams were given during the year.

The figure below shows the ratio of skit to memorization that students chose for each exam. Henceforth, "Spring 1" is for the mid-term exam of the spring semester given in June, "Spring 2" is for the term-final exam of the spring semester in September, "Fall 1" is for the mid-term exam of the fall semester in December, and "Fall 2" is the term-final exam of the fall semester in February.

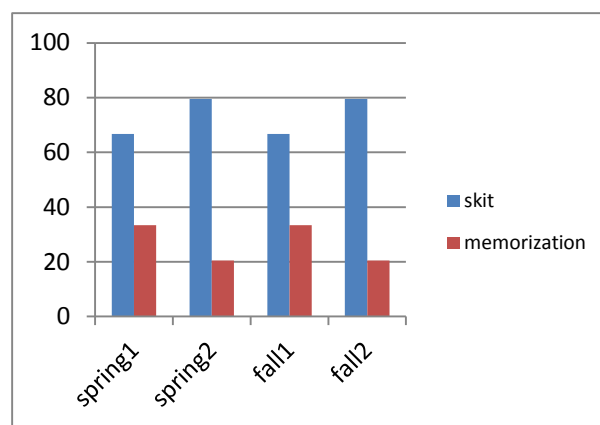


Figure 1 Skit to Memorization Ratio

As can be seen from this figure, about 60-80% of students chose the skit option while only about 20-30% students chose memorization as their oral test option. This ratio appears almost static from the first to the last test. This may partly be due to the fact that students were encouraged by the teacher to try the skit option as it would give them

the opportunity to create their own dialogue about something that they were interested in. It was the researchers' aim that empowering the students in this way would encourage deeper meaningful thinking about the sentences/phrases used and thus promote a more lasting impression/permanence in long-term memory.

3.2. Participation Points

To achieve this aim, name cards were introduced. As Figure 2 shows, students were to make a name card, on which they write their names and student numbers on the front of the card and paste a participation record sheet on the back of the card. When students volunteer an answer or demo a textbook dialogue, they receive a point in the form of a seal on the participation record sheet. Students are also sometimes selected by a teacher at random to answer and also receive a mark when they get a correct answer. The highest number of points accumulated by a single student during the year was 40, while 6 out of 124 students remained at 0. The average number of points accumulated per student was about 5.6.



Figure 2 Name Card

These points are easy for both students and teachers to understand and these points serve as the participation points. Students were informed during the first team teaching class that the participation points counted toward their grade, and as such were encouraged to actively participate during class. It was felt that this has actually

served as a good tool to motivate the students to participate positively as can be seen in Figure 3.

Furthermore, by using name cards, a native teacher can call them by name, which can sometimes be a great pleasure for the students. However, as a point of improvement, the name cards should have been made bigger with stronger paper. The paper this year was so weak that a name card cannot always stand like the one in Figure 2, and because of the size, the teacher sometimes cannot read the names on the cards especially of the students sitting near the back.



Figure 3 Class State

4. The Results from Questionnaire Surveys

How do the students feel about these new trials and how do the students' feelings change? To examine this, two questionnaire surveys were conducted at the end of the spring and fall semesters, that is in October and February respectively. In this section, by showing some of the results of the surveys, the effects of the new trials in English IA2 will be analyzed.

4.1. Student Response to Oral Examinations

A survey was conducted on whether or not the students felt that oral exams effectively improve their English communicative skills. Figure 4 below shows the students' response for this question at the

end of the spring semester and Figure 5 shows their response at the end of the fall semester.

These figures show that more than half of the students strongly feel or feel that the oral exams are an effective measure for improving their English communicative skills. This rate increased as they progressed through all four oral exams, namely at the end of the fall semester. Although about one-third students replied that they did not know or were unsure as to the effects, it can generally be said that this style of oral exams are acceptable by the students as a whole.

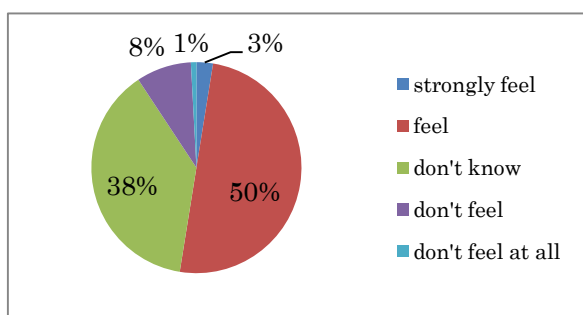


Figure 4 Student Oral Exam Opinion (Spring)

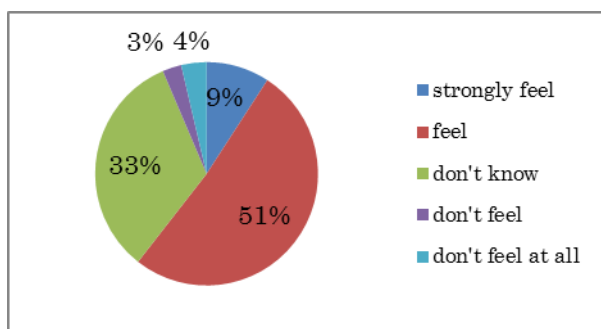


Figure 5 Student Oral Exam Opinion (Fall)

Then for as to why or why not students feel the oral exam is an effective tool for improving English speaking ability, students were asked to write the reasons. Some of the comments arguing for this type of exam that students pointed out are shown in (1) and arguments against are shown in (2).

- (1) a. Opportunity to memorize English sentences that were made themselves.
- b. Increase chances to speak English.

- c. Learn how to pronounce English words.
- d. Practice time to prepare for the exam is productive.
- e. Increase vocabulary.
- f. Learn to put Japanese into English.
- (2) a. Some students just memorized the sentences without thinking about the meanings.
- b. Material was forgot soon after the exam.
- c. Students may mistakenly memorize sentences with grammar mistakes.
- d. It is unfair to grade equally within the same group when the majority of preparation work always falls to one student.

Students were told that when they finish making their skits to bring the skit to the teachers before starting rehearsals. Regarding the comment in (2), a way as to ensure the students have the opportunity to practice with more natural or true-to-life skits needs to be devised.

4.2. Student Exam Form Preference

Until last year, only written tests had been administered in English IA2. The oral exam was first introduced this year, but do students prefer an oral exam as an aid to improving their English communicative competence or do they prefer a written test only?

For investigating the students' feelings about this point, we asked them what test form they prefer for English improvement. Students were asked to select one of those among "oral exam only", "written and oral exam" (this year's style), or "written test only" (testing style used up until the previous year). Figure 6 below shows the results at the end of the spring semester and Figure 7 is the one at the end of the fall semester.

These results show that both at the end of spring and fall semesters most students chose an oral and written exams as the preferred examination form with this rate increasing toward the end of the academic year. The number of the students who prefer only written tests decreased from 23% to 16%,

while the number of the students who prefer only oral exams slightly increased.

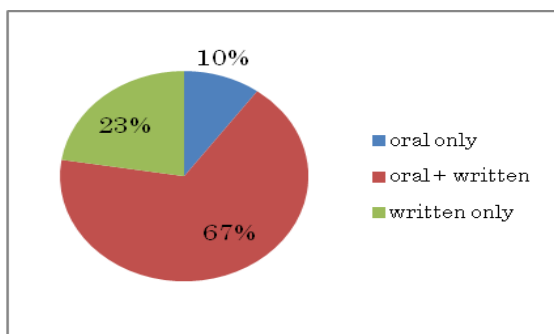


Figure 6 Student Preferred Exam Form (Spring)

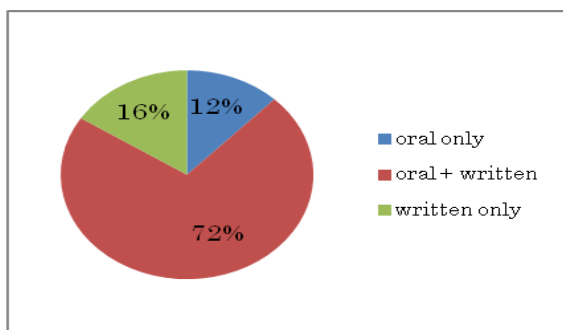


Figure 7 Student Preferred Exam Form (Fall)

These results show that both at the end of spring and fall semesters most students chose an oral and written tests as the preferred test form with this rate increasing toward the end of the academic year. The number of the students who prefer only written tests decreased from 23% to 16%, while the number of the students who prefer only oral tests slightly increased.

4.3. Preparation Time for the Oral Exam

The time that the students spent for creating a skit and preparing for the exam (including memorizing) was surveyed. Table 1 below shows about how many minutes students spent in preparing for each of the exams. For the comparison, they were also asked how many minutes they studied for the fall semester's two written tests. The results are in Table 2.

On average, students spent about 90.5 minutes making and practicing a skit or memorizing dialogues or conversations in the textbook. This

is about 50.1 minutes shorter than the time they spent studying for the written tests in the fall semester. It can be said this time is valuable in that the students practice speaking English, but this is not sufficient for retaining the skit in long-term memory. The teachers need to think about implementing a device for increasing students' practice time.

Test	Time (min.)
Spring 1	100.2
Spring 2	92.1
Fall 1	79.5
Fall 2	90.3

Table 1 Preparation/Practice Time for Oral Exams

Test	Time (min.)
Fall 1	139.1
Fall 2	142.1

Table 2 Study Time for Written Tests

4.4. Participation Points and Grading

As mentioned earlier, we introduced name cards and participation points to make the participation grading clearer and motivate the students to join the class more actively. This was done to promote in students attitudes to try to communicate voluntarily and actively without being afraid of making mistakes. The subject English IA2 focuses on oral communication and this is a reason why participation points were used as a criterion for grading.

However, the figures below show that the students' feelings are not quite the same as the instructors. These are the results of a questionnaire survey of whether students feel the necessity to take participation points into grading.

At the end of the spring semester, only about 30% students feel that participation points have to be taken into account as grading, whereas about 47% do not feel the necessity. At the end of the year, however, the students' feelings changed a little. About 47% feel it is necessary while about 32% do not feel so. About one-third of the students do not

understand why the participation points are important as a grading material. We should have made more explanations about the importance of the attitudes trying to convey their feelings or speak positively. The researchers would like to investigate how to improve this in the future.

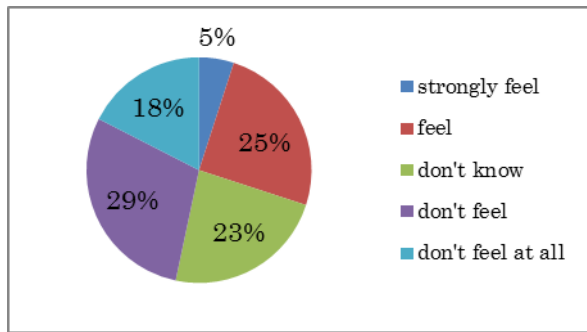


Figure 8 Student Participation Points Opinion (Spring)

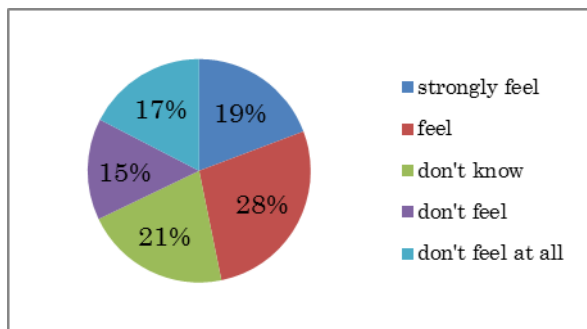


Figure 9 Student Participation Points Opinion (Fall)

4.5. Student Class Form Preference

From this year, the first year students at Takuma Campus have attended English IA2 in the form of two classes per week, one time with a Japanese English teacher, and one time with a Japanese English teacher and a native speaker of English. This is one of the big changes from last year.

As such, how do the students feel about this year's class form? Do students prefer a team teaching class two times a week or two classes by a Japanese English teacher like the previous year or do they prefer the class form from this year? Students were asked about the class form that they feel will improve their English communicative

skills. Students were asked to choose one of those among "two times by a Japanese teacher of English"(only JTE), "one time by a Japanese English teacher and one time by team teaching"(one JTE one TT), "two times by team teaching"(only TT), "one time by a Japanese English teacher and one time by a native speaker of English and no Japanese English teacher"(one JTE one NS), or "two times by a native speaker of English and no Japanese English teacher"(only NS).

The results are shown in the figures below. Figure 10 shows the results of the survey at the end of the spring semester and Figure 11 shows that of the one taken at the end of the fall semester.

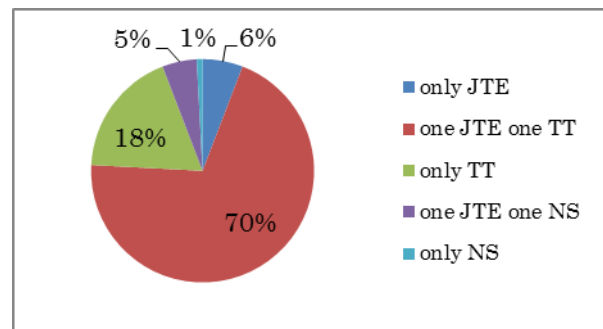


Figure 10 Student Preferred Class Form (Spring)

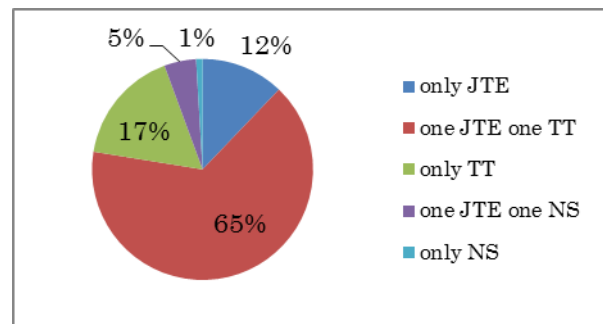


Figure 11 Student Preferred Class Form (Fall)

As can be seen in these figures, students most prefer class form from this year. More than two-thirds of the students prefer this style. The two class team teaching style follows but this showed little change, whereas the only JTE style increased from 6% to 12%.

5. Conclusion

In this paper an explanation of the background

and implementation of the new oral class style at Takuma Campus was presented in Section 2. In Section 3, an introduction of the oral exam and participation points with their purposes is presented. In Section 4, students' feelings towards the oral exam and participation points were examined based on the results of a questionnaire survey.

As Figures 4-7 show, many students feel that the oral exam is an effective means to improve their English communicative skills and also prefer this form of exam accompany a written test over a written test only examination form. In addition, this rate increased as the year progressed. However, as Figure 8 and Figure 9 show, students had to be told why participation points would be used as part of the grading criteria, although this seemed to encourage the students to take a more active role in class as seen in Figure 3.

Finally, some points that demand more attention or further study are as follows.

First, some students (about 4 students in each class) had trouble forming groups for the oral exam. Many of them did not communicate with other students for the purpose of making a group without assistance from a teacher. In this case, the Japanese teacher needed to council those students, find and place them with a suitable group. This occurred during every exam preparation period. Therefore, from next year, students must be told in advance the importance of communication, whether in English or Japanese. Additionally, some steps must be devised for handling those students. Otherwise, it will remain a burden for the teachers.

Second, in some classes, students who raise their hands voluntarily are limited, even though they know the participation points are counted towards their grade. These attitudes are partly related to the students' personality, and this is a difficult problem. In these cases, the teachers will have to devise some other activities that engage all students. By having the students realize the importance of communicating positively, it is hoped that they will enjoy communicating in English with others.

It is the goal of the researchers that this study directs future actions taken in implementing a more effective English IA2 course at but not

limited to Kagawa National College of Technology.

Appendix

Student #	Student Name

Assessment Rubric for Oral Communications I Exam III

Kagawa Kousen, 2011

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1	Score
Grammar	Grammar covered in class was used to communicate effectively.	A few minor difficulties arose from not using the grammar studied in class.	Grammatical errors led to many minor difficulties or one major breakdown in communication.	Grammatical errors severely hampered communication.	
Vocabulary	Vocabulary studied in class was used to express ideas eloquently.	A few minor difficulties arose from not using appropriate vocabulary.	Some difficulties arose due to limited vocabulary and/or bad diction.	Communication was severely hampered due to lack of vocabulary.	
Fluency	Student acted as a facilitator, helping the conversation flow and develop.	Some minor difficulties maintaining the conversation were evident.	Some effort was required to maintain the conversation. There may have been a few long pauses.	Much effort was required to maintain the conversation. There may have been many long pauses.	
Time	Students' oral activity lasted the entire time expected.	Students' oral activity lasted about $\frac{3}{4}$ the total time expected.	Students' oral activity lasted approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ the time expected.	Students' oral activity lasted less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the time expected.	
Voice and non-verbal communication	Pronunciation was clear and inflection and expressions were used to enhance communication.	No serious problems arose, but better pronunciation, inflection, and/or non-verbal communication could have made communication more efficient.	Some communication problems arose due to unclear pronunciation and/or lack of inflection and/or expression. Student may have been difficult to hear.	Pronunciation, inflection, and/or expression confused communication. Student may have been very difficult to hear.	
Total					