Walking a Tightrope in Content–Based Language Classes : The Use of Clear Boundaries to Prompt Students to Improve their English

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In order to maintain motivation within any classroom it is essential to keep students wanting to learn more. This paper describes several ways to increase and sustain student motivation in the English language classroom. This technique may be used in classes designed to improve English linguistic ability and spoken fluency for the international tourism and international service industry. In addition, this paper further describes a complex participation system that was developed and designed for use in university classes.

The principal components of this pedagogical system are explicit because in the beginning of the term students are clearly told that they will be graded on how much they participate in class and that participation will constitute a large percentage of their course grade. In this context, participation means speaking in English using complete sentences and volunteering to speak out during class. Essentially, volunteering is comprised of raising ones hand to speak, providing answers, guessing, offering suggestions, doing presentations, volunteering opinions, asking questions, being open with ones thoughts, not waiting to be called on by the teacher, furnishing information, and coming to the board to share information. Students are informed that they do not have to speak correctly, however, they must speak English as much as possible. In order to have a discernible, quantitative record of their participation, students must understand the following concepts and execute various procedures.

The most important class principle is that mis-takes help you learn. In the language learning classroom mistakes are natural. Guessing and using your imagination makes participating easy. If learners take a chance and make a guess they will receive volunteer points. Any time they use a sentence with four words or more while speaking to the teacher or to another student it will count as a positive experience in the language learning process. When learners volunteer at any time points will be given. At the end of each lesson the point total will be counted by the teacher and this will be utilized as a daily participation grade. This volunteer system supports and encourages students to become active and effective participants in oral language classes. This technique is also intended to help teachers who have difficulty developing classes in which inactive students partake in the learning process. The objective of this participation system is :

". . . to create an atmosphere in which teachers work with the group mentality from a reverse perspective ; that is, to make everyone volunteer and expresses themselves in class. This technique uses students' collective thought to help meet the objective of activating student participation by actually making independence the basis for conformity. In essence, then, the non–participating students become the nails standing out. The system also encourages students to overcome their standard cautious, reserved character in the class while practicing the skills which are necessary to become active classroom

participants : independently interacting with each other , the teacher , and the material " (Johnson, 1996 page 279).

Hopefully, with a higher level of interaction and thus a significantly higher level of communication in the classroom, students' participatory behavior and confidence will be enhanced, increased, and nurtured. One goal of this technique is that the students' increased self – assurance will amplify their motivation to better understand their learning situation and the world around them. As Williams and Burden stated :

"Motivation can be construed as : a state of cognitive and emotional arousal which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal" (1997 page 120) (also see : Higgins & Tanaka, 1999).

Scarcella and Oxford write that "motivation decides the extent of active personal engagement in learning," and then go on to state that "because motivation is so very important in language learning, instructional activities and materials must be exciting, stimulating, and interesting to learners" (1992, page 52 – 54). Therefore, within this volunteering framework all of the themes and activities are not only engaging and fulfilling for students, they are accessible and attainable.

To read about language teaching theories or approaches is useful but this may not give readers a visible understanding of what one can do in a classroom in order to move students forward in their learning of language and culture. To obtain a more pragmatic understanding of how to implement this type of participatory volunteer procedure in courses the reader should survey and observe a class in which a lesson is explained and then examine what ensues. This is a useful method for interpreting what occurs in the classroom, as explained by Larsen – Freeman, she writes that :

". . . observing a class in this way will give the readers a greater understanding of these particular methods than if they were to simply read a description of it. After observing the lesson we will infer the principles on which the teacher's behavior and techniques are based" (1986, page xii).

Introduction and Intent of the Activity

In all language classes it is essential to create an atmosphere in which students have the opportunity to have focused grammatical practice while maintaining freedom to experiment with the language. The goal is to design activities and tasks which give students the opportunity to discuss content they are familiar with, to be supported by clear time frames, and to have the freedom to express themselves. Students should never be limited to producing a single answer. To begin this activity, the teacher asks students to talk with their partners and write down in English where they would like to work in the future. She gives them a six minute time limit and the pupils easily complete this task. The instructor writes on the board : 'In the future, I want to work at the airport.' She points to the sentence and ask if anyone would like to volunteer to read the sentence. A few assertive pupils raise their hands and the teacher picks a student in the second row. The pupil reads the sentence without difficulty and the instructor reminds her to mark down one point for volunteering and one point for speaking. The teacher then points to the sentence and tells them that the English language has a natural rhythm and pace to it. The students look somewhat confused. She asks if anyone wants to volunteer to tell us the rhythm of the English sentence. A few students volunteer, the teacher chooses one. As the pupil slowly reads with acceptable rhythm and intonation the teacher places marks within the sentence, 'In the future/I want to work/at the airport.' The student marks down her volunteer and speaking points while the instructor asks the entire class to practice the sentence together, telling them they will only work with this for a few min-

utes. As the group practices, the teacher brings them through the sentence slowly, phrase by phrase, then faster until it resembles natural, melodic speech. She informs the class that they will be volunteering for four minutes and it will be important to participate at this time to get as many points as possible.

The teacher then erases the words 'at the airport,' leaving 'In the future, I want to work at' on the board. She asks them the question again, 'OK, where do you want to work in the future?' All of the students raise their hands and the instructor quickly picks a pupil. The student replies, 'In the future, I want to work at a hotel.' Another student says, 'I want to work at a travel agency.' The teacher quickly asks her, looking at the sentence on the board, 'When?' the student quickly says 'In the future, I want to work at a travel agency.' All of the students have their hands raised, the instructor chooses various pupils, and they give their answers. As time runs down she tells the class that they only have one more minute to volunteer and picks a pupil who spoke previously. The student says, 'Yesterday I worked at a restaurant.' The instructor selects a few more pupils and moves on to another activity in which students brainstorm about their future careers, international tourism, and the international service industry. After their responses are written in their notebooks a time limit is set and the pupils replicate the volunteering process. With ten minutes remaining in the class the teacher informs the students that they are short on time and it is time to take attendance. The students write down, in pen, on their volunteer form how many volunteer and speaking points they have earned today. As she calls each student's name, they report their scores for the day which is then recorded on their attendance cards. This provides a daily record of participation.

Cultural and Teaching Observations of the Lesson

Several important characteristics about the volunteer method and how to work with it can be seen in this activity. The technique uses a quantitative point system to coincide with the students' previous educational socialization process. The environment is safe in that the class moves from working with the group to focusing on individuals. The activity works with the grammar, rhythm, and intonation of the language, has clear time limits, uses a structured attendance procedure, and incorporates student–generated material. To coincide with the structured grading system which students have experienced for many years prior to the university, the technique incorporates a clearly measurable system. It is important to emphasize that during every class students keep a record of their participation in two categories, volunteering and speaking, and report the results to the teacher at the end of each class. Volunteer points are credited when a pupil volunteers in any way. Speaking points are given when a sentence in English is used which contains four or more words. This rule was created to help students overcome the habit of giving one or two word replies. The tendency of giving one or two word replies may be because of their anxiety over making mistakes. The method of using the volunteer point sheet requires students to keep a quantitative account of their progress themselves which shows how they performed last week and how they may have advanced or how they may have regressed.

This technique also creates an atmosphere in which students must take on considerable responsibility. Learners are engaged in the procedure, noting their participation while reflecting on the classroom activity. They are clearly aware that their volunteer points are recorded for every class by the instructor. One of the primary class rules is that pupils must have their volunteer sheet each class or they will be unable to mark their daily grade. To further the concept of individual responsibility during the course, the class progresses by asking students to volunteer more and more, and proceeds to working with opinion statements. The language and the topics are relevant for the use of English for the international tourism and the international service industry. The activities used within the system are organized sequentially by degree of difficulty and they are also organ-

ized based on various tourism situations systematically. Bennett's notions that the focus of educational tasks need to vary based on the level of development of the student is taken into consideration (1993, pages 2–3). In this way, as the students get into the habit of openly participating and offering opinions, the topics become progressively more challenging linguistically.

In order to help students become comfortable with volunteering and expressing opinions, one of the main tenets of the technique is to maintain clearly defined time limits during classroom activities. This is advantageous and beneficial because when students have explicit limits they are willing to participate with a higher level of motivation. Volunteering begins to take on the feeling of a game. The learners are able to involve themselves completely with the topic, realizing they will only have to do this activity for a short period of time. It is important to note that even if the entire class is still volunteering after the allotted time, the teacher should conclude the activity. To maintain motivation it is essential to keep the learners wanting more.

Within each time limit in this specific type of volunteering approach, the instructor uses several techniques which allow students to gain more confidence while trying to engage themselves with the material. Initially the class looks at and practices a considerable amount of language in groups because it is important to work in a setting in which students are accustomed to while practicing as a collective whole. The way the class works with the language also has a definite purpose. For example, working with the rhythm and the intonation of proper service English is a powerful tool in bringing out an awareness about another complex meaningful aspect of the language. In contrast to some of their former English language studies, students are not simply focused on grammatically translating or repeating a sentence. The instructor is forcing an awareness of pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, and various nuances of the language that learners might not have experienced previously. By working to improve linguistic competency students gain more realistic and natural control over the material, a control that will further assist in their confidence to participate and finally assist in their ability to work in the international tourism and international service industry using English.

Student–generated material involves the students with the activity for several reasons. The questions are safe, the language is controlled, and the themes are familiar. In this instance, the topic of careers is not a socially complex issue to talk about, and students do not seem to have any reservations about discussing it. Supported by the notion of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980 ; Savignon, 1983), the self generated material that they use is supported by a clearly defined grammatical structure that they are able to practice in the group as well as individually. There is also a realistic connection between them and the content. In addition, the class attendance policy encourages students to participate using a regular activity that incorporates focused grammatical structure or patterns of polite speech necessary for service English. Role call and attendance takes place at the end of each class. The teacher calls a students' name and the student reports her points to the instructor for that specific day using a specific grammatical structure that is written and subsequently erased from the board. As students indicate their scores, everyone in the class is able to listen to each other, thus reinforcing the social pressure to participate. Strain also indicates that "creating conditions in which unity emerges as the natural state of human existence" is a very important factor (1999, page 26). Pupils do not want to stand out by having a low score or a score that greatly differs from their classmates. This process further encourages them to be active. In order to modify the attendance procedure each week, teachers can often change the order of the students or alter the grammatical form. As with all aspects of the technique, the class moves from simple focused structures to longer more involved patterns. In the beginning of the term, in order to give students more of an incentive to speak in class, teachers can ask them to multiply their speaking points by their volunteer points. This process will increase motivation as score

levels may become significantly higher. For example, if a student has five speaking points and fifteen volunteer points she will have a total of seventy–five points for the day. This process stimulates students to speak more because if a student has forty volunteer points while only having zero speaking points her score will be zero ; but if a student has fifteen volunteer points and ten speaking points, she will earn a total of 150 points. As the term progresses, instructors can end each class by telling students to write down their points, in pen, on their volunteer sheet, inform the students that she is taking attendance, but will collect the numbers the next class. This will ensure all students maintain regular attendance. At the end of the following lesson she may use and introduce various structures such as 'Last week I had twelve speaking and seven volunteer points and today I have sixteen speaking and twenty volunteer points' or 'Last class I had nine speaking and seven volunteer points but in this lesson I earned eleven speaking and thirty volunteer points.' or 'On October 18, I had six speaking and nineteen volunteer points, but today I have twenty–two speaking and forty volunteer points.' or 'Although I had five points last week, I only have three today.' As the students become more accustomed to interacting and expressing themselves in front of the class in this fashion, teachers should shift the focus from the number of points students earn each class to translating those participation points into daily grades, using the traditional system of A, B, C, D or F. Students could then be encouraged to say, 'Today I deserve a B because I earned eleven speaking points and twenty volunteer points.' or 'Today I should get an A because I gave a lot of information, asked many questions, raised my hand, and participated!' By using such strategies, teachers are helping students practice different   styles of language while making them more aware that they alone are ultimately responsible for their own grades. By the end of the term the use of letter grades seems very real to the students and they become aware that they are actually receiving a grade for their actions, not just points per se. In the ongoing guidelines for teachers,

several basic components that are essential for a successful volunteer system need to be reemphasized. Within each lesson, teachers should design activities with explicit time boundaries while attempting to raise students' awareness about various aspects of the language, such as accent, intonation, rhythm, and inflection.

In addition, within this approach, each class maintains the aforementioned attendance policy in order to promote the use of the language while giving a comprehensible indicator of student progress. The quantitative results of the system are valuable to mention to further clarify the interaction within a typical class. Specifically, examining the volunteering component of an activity, such as raising hands, most students participate on a daily basis. Of those who volunteer, there may not be an especially large discrepancy in the amount of points learners earn on a given day ; approximately ninety percent of the students should fall within a close range of each other. Although each week the specific number of volunteer points may vary due to different activities, there should not be such a wide range of scores amongst the students. For example, if the high number of points from one class is thirty–five volunteer points, on the average, over ninety percent of the students should be within ten points of this score. Although the volunteer points seem to be somewhat consistent, the speaking points may vary, with the higher–level, less–reserved students scoring higher. The reason for this is twofold. One significant reason is that more–assertive students commonly use longer sentences with four words or more, thus qualifying them for speaking points. The second reason is that during pair or group activities, when the teacher is walking around the room to help and monitor pupils, assertive students often raise their hands and ask clarifying questions about the activity thus qualifying them for even more speaking points.

Recommendations and Suggestions for
Teachers Using a Participation–
Volunteer System with a Useful Analogy

For teachers who plan to incorporate this system into their teaching and classroom, there are several concepts that are fundamental for its effective use. As this system may conflict with some social or cultural norms regarding the unrestricted articulation of ideas, it should be implemented using a steady, gradual process. In order for this progression to be implemented, it is extremely important to support the students while giving them clear guidelines of what is expected of them. Depending on the students' cultural background, it is important for the teacher to be aware that asking pupils to actively volunteer and participate in front of the group, while expressing their thoughts, does not coincide with their previous socialization process in Japan, and therefore, can be incredibly daunting. Lustig and Koester show that giving students "the conceptual tools for understanding how cultural differences can affect interpersonal communication" (1996, page 4).

Although it may seem like an extreme analogy, there are some important parallels to be made between a teacher who implements this technique in a university setting in Japan and an instructor who teaches a course on how to walk a tightrope. As with teaching both skills (volunteering in class and tightrope walking) students must go through a slow, manageable, escalating process; it is not something to initially leap into without sufficient practice. By examining the process both teachers must experience while teaching such skills, the importance of the systems' development becomes quite clear. On the first day of class, the tightrope instructor does not ask the students to dance across a thin wire, without a net, high above the floor; just as the language teacher, on her first day, should not ask the students to discuss personal opinions about history or current events. These situations could invariably place the students in jeopardy and possibly destroy the students' trust in the teacher. This may also deter stu-

dents from ever attempting to walk the wire or, in the case of the language class, from ever participating again. The high–wire instructor, first, has her students practice walking on a modest balance beam, only inches off the ground, focusing on how to stand straight. She guides students along the perceptible, low beam, asking them to notice where their feet are. When they walk they should recognize how the pressure moves from their heel of their foot, then notice when weight proceeds to the middle toe. After this, students slowly arrange one foot in front of the other, until they manage to walk the full length of the beam. Similarly, the language teacher brings students through a gradual process, allowing them to volunteer, guiding them to change their habits of passivity, while learning about expressing themselves. As each tightrope lesson progresses, the beam they practice on becomes gradually thinner, while at the same time, the teacher is raising it above the floor. After a period of time, students progress, master the beam, and switch to walking on the high–wire. At first, it is slightly elevated off of the ground, but students are completely supported by a safety harness and a safety net. Both high wire and language students are exposed and may feel vulnerable, therefore they should also feel that they are being supported. Although students are not able to perform like an accomplished master immediately, and naturally make errors, there are no negative consequences except for some feelings of mild anxiety. As the academic term progresses, the students gain more and more confidence and learn important skills. They are then given the opportunity to attempt more challenging aspects of what they are studying: e.g., walking on higher, thinner wires or (in the language classroom), discussing refined, complex topics, or while studying English to prepare to work in the international tourism and the international service industry. If students manage to perform well at a lower level, the teacher allows them to practice, and gradually will move the standard of the lesson upward. However, if the students cannot accomplish what the instructor has asked, or if the students show signs of inhibition in trying, the level

may easily retreat to a lower, safer level. The teacher's role is to support the students and to allow them to practice at a lower level before expecting them to accomplish what they are too anxious or unable to attempt.

It is very important for teachers to be concerned with what the class is actually capable of, not what they want or think they should be capable of. Teachers may notice that when they devise somewhat complicated activities, in which students need to expose themselves more, volunteering does not work effectively. The students are not able to maintain the self–assurance to work with such high level material initially. As educators, it is important to be aware of this fluid concept, to acknowledge what is occurring with the students, and to revert back to simpler activities when necessary. When implementing a volunteer system instructors must be willing to endorse the significance of this process. Educators must also recognize the students' levels while modifying activities to best serve the situation and to most effectively facilitate learning.

Our Teaching Experiences while Using the Volunteer–Participation System at the University Level

It is important for teachers who use a volunteer–participation type system to be aware of the time involved in moving students to a level where they may actively participate. It is a slow, but rewarding process. This is very important and Higgins and Tanaka clearly point out that students must "overcome cultural obstacles" and "connect to the power of a deeper motivation" (1999, pp 15–16). We have had several classes that have gone through this process and succeeded in growing accustomed to an open style of participation in a few months. After this time, almost all of the students disregarded the point system entirely, simply chose to participate, and gave themselves a letter grade for each class. We have had other classes in which the majority of the students were unable to reach this level. Although they participated and involved themselves with the

course content, they seemed to find security in the structure of the point system, and were not able to progress to the next step. For teachers who plan to incorporate this system we will reiterate another element : within every activity it is essential to maintain clear time limits. If teachers try to extend the amount of time for students to volunteer, beyond the limits originally stated, problems may occur. If students have the chance to volunteer for longer than the allotted period of time, we have found that learners do not always volunteer with as much enthusiasm as they are capable of. This is because students do not feel that they have had any real time limits, and they think they may have to continue to raise their hands indefinitely. This greatly reduces the feelings that participating is a type of game or contest. If teachers inform the class that they are going to be able to volunteer for two minutes, this is exactly what must occur. Even if every student is vaulting from her seat, instructors should stop the volunteer activity when the established time expires. If the motivation level and the energy level is lively and forceful, teachers should simply stop, regroup, slightly modify what they would like the students to do, and give the pupils another opportunity with another set time limit. Succeeding this momentary intermission, teachers should institute a longer time frame in which pupils can participate. By remaining consistent with the rule of time limits, teachers are inciting students to want more. More notably, teachers are being honest and building trust in their relationship with their pupils. This improves the level of rapport in the class and improves the overall classroom atmosphere.

Reviewing the General Guidelines and Approaches For Using The System

Teachers :
1. Teachers provide clear time limits for each activity and maintain these restraints religiously. If the entire class is still volunteering after an allotted time, i.e., four minutes, stop the activity anyway. To sustain and increase motivation

it is beneficial to keep learners wanting more.

2. Teachers constantly address the meaning in the words, stress, rhythm, and intonation of the language.

3. Teachers spend minimal time with error correction in the midst of a volunteer activity.

4. The instructor observes the students' reactions and energy levels while they are participating and while the students are working with the material.

5. Teachers make use of skills students already possess, (i.e., the ability to read) and move on to teaching what they do not know.

Students :

1. Students are encouraged to create and use self–generated material whenever possible.

2. Students learn or relearn how to correctly raise their hands completely above their heads.

3. Students are aware that they are responsible for participating and will be rewarded for their actions in class.

4. Students need to take responsibility for their own grades based on their level of participation.

The System :

1. The technique uses a consistent, strict attendance policy.

2. While using the volunteer–participation method, allow time for focused practice for the whole class, small groups of students, and for pairs of students.

3. The interaction within the system is to be thought of as a productive form of competition.

4. While using the technique, especially in the early stages, each activity has clear parameters and goals.

5. Activities are set up so that students have an alternative choice of answers and they can volunteer more than once.

6. The system is part of an ongoing process to be worked with to some extent every class. It is not a technique to be used once or twice and discarded.

Concluding Remarks, Comments, Issues and Questions for Further Study and Intense Research

As teachers, our primary responsibility is to help students learn. In this case about language and culture concerning the international tourism and international service industry. We believe that in order for students to learn about specific notions of culture and language it makes sense for them to do so experientially while being involved in a class setting in which some of the interaction resembles a culturally contrary setting. Notions about intercultural communication, intercultural training, education, ideas related to the relationship of culture, and social reality pointed out by Barnlund, 1989 ; Condon, 1984 ; Hofstede, 1997 ; Stewart & Bennett, 1991 ; Trompenaars, 1998 ; Bennett, 1993 ; Cushner & Brislin, 1996 ; Gaston, 1992 ; Kohls, 1996 ; Kim, 1988 ; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1985 ; and Watzlawick, 1984 need to be clearly understood by the educator. In addition, the educational environment that we establish in these classes is not only composed of language and culture, but is also organized to give students the chance to express themselves freely. As we examine the system presented here, we have been questioning how to alter the class design and, basically, how much to provide interactions with the whole group? An important question to consider, is how to modify the system and implement activities in which students can work in pairs or small groups, but still incorporate the participatory, volunteer technique.

We should further ponder about how this participatory behavior will transfer to other EFL/ESL or content based classes in the future. Indeed, we believe that this participatory behavior does raise a powerful level of awareness that students can take to other classes, that is, they know that individually they are capable of this style of interaction. Whether they choose to adapt and embrace an open participatory style of behavior is a choice students will have to ultimately make for themselves. However, as language educators we should recognize that those

sauntering across the participatory high–wire may reap astounding rewards from their capricious journey. Learners may occasionally stumble, but without intelligible guidance, they most certainly will fall.

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