

Working Collaboratively and Making Meaning with Peers through Talking about Artworks in an English Class

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Abstract: In this article the application of museum gallery talk strategies to learning of communicative English is proposed based on the results obtained from a study the author conducted from an English class in her university in the spring/summer semester of 2018. In a gallery talk at an art museum, participants enjoy viewing and appreciating artworks together by exchanging impressions, thoughts and opinions freely in a dialogue facilitated by a facilitator. The author has been trained as an English gallery talk facilitator at a national art museum in Tokyo and has acknowledged the effectiveness of gallery talk strategies in enhancing not only communication but also collaboration and meaning making among participants. Consequently, the author assumed that students would be able to nurture their willingness to accept differences and meaning making skills along with their communication ability if such gallery talk strategies were incorporated into their learning. In this study nine participant students had dialogue sessions about artworks in English by modeling gallery talks both as participants and facilitators. The data was collected from students' video-taped gallery-talk-style dialogues, their written feedback, semi-structured interviews and the author's observation. The findings indicate that gallery talk strategies were effective not only in improving the students' communication skills but also their ability to accept differences and make meaning together with their peers.

Key words: *Communication in English, Collaborative learning, Accepting differences, Meaning making, Gallery talks*

INTRODUCTION

As the global community is constantly getting closer and more intertwined, people from different backgrounds interact easily with each other in person or through different kinds of social media beyond their own communities and culture. And a huge emphasis has been put on communication ability in languages – English especially in many countries where it is not their first or major language.

English education in Japan has been going through a transitional period shifting the priority heavily toward communicative English skills among other skills such as reading, writing and grammar. For instance, many children go to extracurricular English schools or workshops to get used to English communication or just to have fun with the language or go to full-time international schools to master native-level fluency from early ages.

Communicative English education in all public elementary schools will soon start from grade three – two years earlier than in the current English curriculum in accordance with the nation's ongoing full-scale educational reform [1]. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology aims to complete the reform by 2020 and will continue to nurture school students' English communication ability further beyond into the future. Inevitably, in both secondary and higher education, English curricula have been redesigned to prepare students to be able to communicate in English fluently with people from overseas as global citizens due to the reform [1].

The author's university is surely no exception and offers a wide variety of courses on communicative English skills to students in terms of the topic, course content and means of instruction so that they can approach the skills from different ways. These courses are taught by native or near-native teachers. In most of

these courses, however, it is seemingly concerned that English communication tends to be taught merely as language competence being separated from other meaningful learning skills that could possibly enhance such communication further. If these courses are meant to fully dedicate to students' active participation in the global society in their future, skills such as working collaboratively and making meaning with people from diverse backgrounds and values should also be considered important as Dewey insisted that classroom activities should be designed to be meaningful to students' actual lives and their participation in the local and wider society [2].

As a facilitator of the English gallery talk program at a national art museum in Tokyo, the author has acknowledged the effective roles such programs can play in encouraging collaborative work and meaning making in addition to communication among participants who are from different culture and have different backgrounds, values and perspectives. In this museum's English gallery talks, participants view three artworks together by exchanging impressions, thoughts and opinions freely in a participant-centered dialogue facilitated by a facilitator in an informal atmosphere to appreciate the artworks together. In museums, sites of social occasion as well as places that foster experience and learning, a significant part of their gallery practice is devoted to encouraging participants to talk freely about works of art as it gives great access to meaningful learning experiences [3]. These learning experiences include working collaboratively and making meaning together with peers among others.

In a gallery talk, the interactive exchange is cooperative as participants have gathered based on a tacit acknowledgement that they have a common purpose so that it moves back and forth among them creating a web of connections [3]. Furthermore, each participant is comparing his or her ideas with those of the others, and his or her perspective is constantly transforming throughout the process of a gallery talk [3]. Thus, participants make new discoveries and construct meaning together as they carry out their talk together.

In this study nine participant students from an English class that the author taught in her university both facilitated and joined dialogues in English modeling gallery talks in which they talked about artworks together by exchanging impressions, thoughts and

opinions freely. This study aims to explore possibilities of fostering students' learning skills particularly working collaboratively, especially willingness to accept differences, and making meaning with peers along with their English communication ability by introducing a new approach of incorporating museum gallery talk strategies into their English communication learning.

RELATED LITERATURE

The Importance of Communication

In any social groups, communication plays an important role and it is also essential in educational settings. According to Dewey, society exists by communication or it may fairly be said to exist in communication [4]. Also, he claimed that people form a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common [4]. Today people interact with each other beyond their immediate socio-cultural context in the increasingly interdependent and complicated global community. Since more than a decade ago, OECD in its DeSeCo Project has been advocating the importance of the following key competencies for students to be successful in such community: the ability to use a wide range of tools including physical and socio-cultural ones such as information technology and language respectively, the ability to engage with people from different backgrounds, and the ability to manage their own lives in the broader social context and act autonomously [5]. The Japanese Ministry of Education has been resonating with OECD's DeSeCo competencies [1]. Consequently, the importance of improving students' English communication skills along with nurturing their willingness to work and make meaning together with people with different perspectives and experiences to prepare them for their future participation in the global community was emphasized as the goal of this study.

Learning as the Continuum of Actual Community

To realize this goal, it was necessary to draw students' learning as close as possible to their actual lives and the local and wider community that they belong to. Dewey argued that the classroom should be considered as microcosms of the community in which learners work together to solve problems existing in the community [2]. Consequently, Dewey advised educators use things within the range of existing experience of students that have the potentiality of presenting new problems which will encourage further experience [2]. This view led the author to examine possibilities of the application of museum gallery talk strategies to teaching and learning of English communication skills as gallery talks are common communication practice in museums attracting

many participants in which they communicate with different people and create learning together through talking about artworks. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is one well-known method of such museum gallery talks.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an approach that uses art to foster learners' capacities to observe, think, listen and communicate, and aims to develop communication skills [6, 7]. It introduces instructors how to aid participant-driven discussions of works of art [7]. Central to this approach are the three prescribed questions: *What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find* [7]? The instructor facilitates a dialogue among participants to discuss and understand a painting together by asking the three questions and also responding to the participants by paraphrasing what they say, pointing at the part of the painting in relation to what is being said and linking what each participant says [7]. In VTS, participants can take advantage of the open-ended nature of art to prioritize thinking and sharing ideas instead of finding right answers [7]. In this sense, it is a communication method in which difference in thoughts and opinions is highly valued. The facilitating person is central to the process but not the authoritative source [7].

Everybody is Different

Any community is made up of people with different perspectives and capabilities. Each person has a different way in how s/he thinks and what s/he does. The term "learning style" has been used to describe an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills [8]. Gardner claimed that every individual does things in his or her own way and nobody does so in one single way in his theory of Multiple Intelligences [8, 9]. Furthermore, Gardner stated that as learners engage in their core intelligence(s), other less prominent intelligences can be encouraged [9, 10]. Therefore, multidimensional approach to intelligence can provide learners a wide variety of learning opportunities. When people in a community work together for common ends, they have to be aware of this as working collaboratively with people with a different set or degree of intelligences is beneficial as Vygotsky explained that in his zone of proximal development theory [11].

Constructing Learning Together with Others

Vygotsky claimed that in his zone of proximal development theory there are two levels of development: learners' actual development and potential levels of development [11]. The former shapes learners' ability to perform certain tasks independently without help from others, while the latter characterizes

ability that learners can carry out with help from others [11]. By learning in collaboration with peers, learners can reach out of their actual level of development to their potential level of development [11]. This way of constructivist learning is meaningful and can be achieved in museum gallery talks in which people with different intelligences build up their learning on that of their peers. Students' actual interests and experiences can be used as a rich learning resource. Sharing them in collaboration with peers, learners can reach out of their actual level of development to their potential level of development. Candy described constructivism as a cluster of approaches that knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner [12]. Benson takes Vygotsky's view on the importance of social interaction in which learning starts from the learners' existing knowledge and experience, and evolves through social interaction with others [12]. Through interacting with others, people talk about what they know from previous experiences, discussing what they see, hear and read in relation to these experiences [13]. These discussions are opportunities for people to develop a shared understanding based on past experiences among the members of the group [13].

STUDY DETAILS

Participants

Nine students whose major is English agreed to participate in this study. These students include six senior students, two juniors and one sophomore – all of them were learning together in an English communication course that the author taught in the spring/summer semester of 2018. And the students and the author met for a 90-minute class twice a week throughout the semester. They spent about one month on this study project. None of the students were familiar with museum gallery talks although a couple of them either frequently visited museums or made artworks in their free time. Overall, all of them showed moderate to high interest in art in general.



Fig 1 Visit to the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

VTS+ Strategies

In VTS, the instructor does not provide any information, correct participants' misunderstanding, or make comments as it advises the instructor never be the source of information or opinion as an authoritative figure [3]. On the contrary, some researchers point to the advantage of providing more contextual information about artworks and artists that the three VTS core questions cannot cover [3].

For this study the author adopted gallery talk strategies that are based quite loosely on VTS but also allow contextual questions about artworks and artists so that the dialogue would become richer, more meaningful and prolonged, hence the name – VTS+. The author recommends the facilitator start a talk by asking the participants: *Could you share your thoughts about the artwork with everyone?* This way the facilitator can encourage a freer dialogue among participants allowing them more freedom. All utterance of the participants is equally respected and accepted so that they can interpret the artwork as they like.

The author took all the students to art museums on weekends in mid-June – four of them to the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo and the others to Chiba City Museum – to have them actually experience a gallery talk in front of real artworks as participants facilitated by the author herself in the VTS+ way.

Study Timeline

After their visit to one of the museums, the students had a-month-long preparation in and outside the class for their own gallery talk demonstrations which was scheduled in late July. First, they searched the Internet for, read books and browsed large-sized art books about artists and paintings to select a painting to use in their own demonstration. The students also made a list of questions to ask in their demonstration in addition to the three basic fixed VTS questions and more contextual ones that are related to the artwork and artist in accordance with the author's VTS+ policy for this study. While the students carried out their thorough research on their selected painting and its artist and preparation for their demonstration, the author gave them a sample dialogue session in every class meeting so that they would be able to get themselves readier as their demonstration day neared. They also had several occasions to practice facilitating dialogues using paintings they randomly selected just for their practice purposes.

Students' Gallery Talk Demonstrations

Each student gave his or her 15-to-20-minute VTS+ gallery talk demonstration as a facilitator and joined the peers' as participants as the highlight of the study. The facilitator showed an image of his or her selected

painting on a screen and had the participants gather around the image, creating a mock museum setting in the classroom. The participants looked at the painting silently or chatting with peers for a while before starting a talk about it. Then the facilitator started off his or her talk by first asking the recommended question "Could you share your thoughts about the artwork with everybody?" or other similar open-ended questions. The facilitator's role from then on was keeping guiding the talk naturally by following its flow with reactions, spontaneous comments and questions from the participants, using the three basic VTS techniques of paraphrasing, pointing and linking, asking more open-ended questions or giving appropriate information about the artwork or artist at appropriate timings whenever necessary.

Data

The students' participation, reaction and interaction were closely observed and recorded by the author during the study period. All of their gallery talk demonstrations were video-taped and later analyzed along with semi-structured interviews and post-demonstration questionnaires with the students. All the collected data was analyzed qualitatively. There are four characteristics of qualitative research: the researcher (1) is interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed (2) is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (3) must get involved in fieldwork such as observation, and (4) employs an inductive research approach in which theory is built from observations and understandings gained in the data collection [14].

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes have been prominently revealed in this study: (1) the participant students had opportunities to improve their English communication skills and enjoy working together with their peers (2) they recognized the importance of accepting differences by obtaining different perspectives from their peers, and (3) they constructed learning by making meaning together with their peers.

As most students pointed out communicating with others in the VTS+ strategies created a positive learning atmosphere that is open to any thoughts and ideas and allowed the participants to feel relaxed or get motivated to express themselves freely and interact with others actively. Student C said, "Art gives us a lot of freedom to express ourselves as we wish to" in her interview while the author received similar comments from other participants in this aspect as well. In such environment, the participants were highly willing to explore their imagination and creativity that made their communication enjoyable, meaningful and prolonged.

According to student M, it was enjoyable to share ideas in interaction with others as people these days have few opportunities to do so in their busy daily lives. Not only did the students of this study enjoy communicating with others, they also learned useful tips to improve their communication skills. For example, student C found it necessary to be open to and interested in others while student K said that it was good practice for him to convey what he wanted to say making it understandable to others. Student MS learned different techniques to encourage her participants to speak and manage silence in her demonstration.

As artworks can be interpreted in different ways, people show different tastes, impressions, thoughts, opinions and understanding about them. Student C wrote in her feedback that everyone feels different about every artwork– even against the artists’ intentions – so, any interpretation is possible. Student MT felt secure in all the dialogues including the one she gave as a facilitator that all ideas would be accepted equally and would not be rejected. Art is not a test that leads you to “the” correct answers as student D put it. In their demonstrations, the participant students gained new perspectives and became interested in approaching and understanding artworks from someone else’s view point. Student S shared her excitement when participants gave unexpected ideas about the artwork in her dialogue demonstration and others then added unique comments to them so that the dialogue was carried on in a quite interesting way. The dialogue facilitator has to consider himself or herself and participants equal – as fellow learners – to create a positive atmosphere to embrace differences by not teaching but guiding them as students R and S recounted.

In addition to accepting differences and gaining new perspectives by communicating with peers through talking and exchanging ideas about artworks, the participants actively constructed their own learning by making meaning together. Student MI found it fun to acknowledge that her own mind was constantly being transformed and she was being part of the process of creating learning with her peers as she listened to their different ideas and built her own ideas upon them. Student MS claimed that as her imagination was stimulated by understanding artworks from the perspectives of her peers, she was able to demonstrate new ways of looking at the artworks that further contributed to the learning with them. Student M added that interaction like gallery talks are opportunities to experience to actually see learning being constructed through interaction with others and be part of the very process. Furthermore, student MT pointed to the importance of group work especially when group members have difficulty understanding some artwork as they can gradually come to understand it by being

inspired by and learning from others’ ideas to transform their own understanding.

CONCLUSION

The author identified the following prominent themes that provide evidence of how talking about artworks with peers by modeling gallery talks positively affects: (1) one’s communication skills (2) willingness to accept differences and (3) meaning making ability as summarized in the discussion. This study indicates that museum gallery talk strategies can be applied to communicative English classes as they can meaningfully help students develop skills that could nurture their English communication ability further and encourage their active participation in the global society in their future.

However, more research on the effectiveness of this type of study has to be done, preferably on different kinds of groups of learners or larger groups of learners, to investigate its validity as it was a study limited to a particular small group of students this time. Also, it cannot be denied that these students had to spend a lot of time to prepare for their dialogue session especially on their research on their selected paintings and artists. More time could have been spent on talk practice instead. Also, as art could be sometimes a little too abstract to talk about, participants actually needed more guidance on what kind of painting would be suitable or tips about how to facilitate talks in advance.

Finally, the author would like to end with one impressive remark from one participant student. Student C said, “if everybody in the world experiences such peaceful talks as museum gallery talks in which differences in thoughts and opinions are highly encouraged and understands how they really create a peaceful learning atmosphere, the world will definitely become conflict-free.” According to Otaka, the definition of dialogue is a collaborative open-ended exploration of its participants’ interests and enquiries and this kind of dialogue necessitates equal relationship among its participants [15]. In this study possibilities of incorporating gallery talk strategies into an English communication class were discussed. However, their possibilities should not be limited to such classes as they would be quite meaningful in creating a harmonious atmosphere by dialogue in any situation in which diverse people live together and communicate with each other.

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