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Mentions in Action: Few Word Sentences, O.K.!

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The other day I hastily bought a new winter coat in a large mall with many stores. As I was leaving the mall I noticed another coat in another store that was the dream coat I really wanted. I agonized over having bought the other coat and wondered if my Japanese was up to being able to explain to the salesman in the first store that I wanted to return the coat I had bought. I spent ten minutes trying to figure out polite ways to phrase it and to explain that I had found another coat and would it be all right to return the one I had bought. I finally went back, and found the salesman, raised the bag, and said "Sumimasen...." ("Excuse me..."). And he promptly said, "Ah, kanseru?" ("Oh, cancel?") and took the bag and gave me back my money. We did in two words what just took me 139 words to explain to you. The context was worth the other 137 words.

Introduction

Ever had trouble getting some students to talk? Perhaps the trouble lies partially in their belief that they have to talk in long completely correct and grammatical sentences. Perhaps part of the trouble lies in tasks that teachers give that may not have a rich enough context to support short utterances.

This article describes activities that provide rich contexts and give instructions to students to use only a few words, or "mentions," so that they will interact and perhaps have their belief systems challenged. While I know the activities are extremely useful for coaxing language from shy students who have been through years of non-communicative language learning, as many Japanese have, they can also be a useful reminder to fluent students that often a few words are enough.

Let me give you one more appropriate analogy before going on. I used to teach a lot of tennis to pay for my studies. Most tennis teachers would start teaching their students at the back of the court with the long ground strokes. Most students would hit a fair amount of home runs, doing little good to their fragile tennis egos. I, instead, first brought my students up to the net and had them put their rackets up in front of their faces. I would hit the ball as closely as possible toward their faces and theywould just move their rackets the few inches necessary to meet the ball. Because they were right by the net, when they met the ball it would come back over and I

could hit it back to them again. Immediately there was an exchange. Immediately they could get the joy of "playing the game" of doing what all tennis players love in the game—the exchange. Then they were hooked and would work much longer and with more courage on the difficult ground strokes. However, I always made sure they did a bit of net play during every lesson, so that they would renew that feeling of really interacting. Doing activities with "mentions" in language learning is like "bringing them to the net" so they can enjoy what language is really used for.

Some Background

Bernard Py (1986) defines "*mentions*" as restricted utterances that act as a minimally adequate means for the transmission of comparatively complex messages. He notes that non-natives sometimes use mentions as calls for help, hoping that the native speaker might fill in the rest, as in the following example:

NNS: Dinner?
NS: Oh, you wanna go ta dinner?
NNS: Yes.
NS: O.K. Wheredaya wanna go?
NNS: Pizza?
NS: Do you wanna pizza restaurant ... or an Italian restaurant?
NNS: Itiarian? [Not understanding word]
NS: You know, Italian, like, from I-ta-li-a.
NNS: Ah Itaria!
NS: Yeah Italia. So whadaya want ... a pizza restaurant or Italian?
NNS: Itaria. . . Itarian?
NS: *Italian* restaurant?
NNS: Itarian restaurant. Yes.
NS: Great! Let's go.

When you are learning a new language, you soon realize how difficult it is to put words together into long sentences to say the most simple things. At the beginning, very often just one- and two-word utterances can work for whole sentences when the context is rich enough. In fact, native speakers use them all the time. The Japanese unknowingly refer to the use of minimal speech in a rich context when they talk about a salary-man only speaking three words upon coming home at night: "dinner", "bath", and "bed". However, one only needs to think of a surgeon asking for tools, a bus driver calling out stops, or of a person ordering fast food, to see that mentions are really used in every language when the contexts are rich enough.

In Class

Several years ago I was teaching obligatory English courses to Japanese economics students who had had seven years of grammar-translation courses and were

quite reluctant to talk. I asked them to interact in a variety of simple exercises while I observed. Those who tried to use complete sentences (the ones that they had memorized to pass their entrance exams) were mostly silent. They spoke using three-minute long six-word sentences; the pauses were long enough to forget what the topic was and plan your next three vacations. The most interactive students were those who were using single words and partial sentences. I wondered what would happen if I made one- and two-word sentences the rule. So I did.

Exercise One

The first exercise consisted of telling students to have one-word sentence dialogs and to exchange as much information as possible. I demonstrated this with a student in front of the class. Only one word was allowed. It went something like this:

Hello.
Hello.
Name? (pointing)
Minoru.
(pause)
Name? (pointing)
Tim.
Hungry? (hand on stomach)
No.
Thirsty?
Yes.
Tired?
Little.

I wrote the dialogue on the board afterwards and I asked them to have similar conversations, and for each person to write them down as well. After they had done this once, they changed partners and did it again. By the second time, they became really active. They even displayed laughing and normal conversation-like noises that I used to hear only before class began. Suddenly, years of pent-up frustration at knowing so many words and not being able to use them exploded into laughter, gesture and fun conversation. They were actually using English to communicate with each other! They were finding "meaningfully personal uses" for what they were learning. For example, one girl pointed at a boy as she asked her partner "Pretty?"

Many of these learners had unconsciously been following a rule that goes something like, "You have to use a lot of words to be clear and not sound stupid and childish." Not only is this rule false, it probably slows down one's language acquisition immensely. Ideas can be expressed in just a few words if the context is rich enough. And often the fewer, the better.

In later classes I tried the following two exercises and have found they also work really well. It's important to actually demonstrate what you want with one of the students so the others see how easy it is.

Exercise Two: TIME

Give them a rich context that they know about. For example, write on the board, "What were you doing yesterday at _____[time]?" The asker (one partner), however, is simply to say the time, "6 a.m.?", "7:30?", etc. and their partner simply says one or two words explaining what they were doing *at that time* yesterday. So the conversation might go:

Student 1: 6 a.m. ?
Student 2: Sleeping
Student 1: 7 a.m. ?
Student 2: Still sleeping
Student 1: 8 a.m. ?
Student 2: Eating

After a few minutes they switch roles. There can be many variations of the same exercise using days of the week, months, years, etc. You can further liberate their language accessing by allowing them to use their imagination, as in, "What do you think your teacher was doing yesterday at _____ (time)?" And they make it up from their stock of known vocabulary (and laugh at their "sleepy" or whatever teacher).

Exercise Three: OPINIONS

Give students some area for a context, sports for example: "What do you think about _____[sport]?" One partner says the name of a sport, and the other gives their opinion. Part of one conversation I overheard went something like:

Miki: Baseball?
Yuki: Boring.
Miki: Sumo?
Yuki: Interesting.
Miki: To do?
Yuki: Me?
Miki: You do it?
Yuki: No, watch! [much laughing]
Miki: Oh, only watch.
Yuki: Mochiron. ["of course"]
Miki: Of course, ...

Of course, you can give them other categories, like hobbies, school subjects, movie stars, etc. Also, you may notice some of them going over the one- or two-word limit as they get excited and more spontaneous. And that's O.K., except for two things: 1) their partners may also begin wanting to have long sentences and not be capable of doing it; 2) they themselves may not realize how powerful mentions are and may not learn that they can be very useful. As you circulate and

observe, you can gently remind the more fluent to "play the game" of only a few words. (Sometimes I wish I could get some native speaker colleagues to play the game!)

Mention exercises seem especially appropriate to students who have learned language for several years and have a lot in storage but have never really spoken it. It activates this passive language first in small chunks instead of going for complete fluency all at once, which is unrealistic and may produce frustration.

Theory

We know from first-language development (Ferguson and Snow, 1977) and interlanguage studies (Corder, 1981) that children begin with short one- or two-word utterances and that these become longer the more proficient they become. Corder aptly talks about the "transitional competencies" that speakers have and that they hopefully pass through as they continually develop. Insisting that students speak in full sentences right away would be similar to insisting that babies do the same with their first language. Yet many materials imply that long sentences are the way you communicate in English.

We know that written texts typically have longer phrases than oral communication because the context needs creating, while in oral communication there are contextual elements that we take for granted. It seems that in societies (such as Japan) where written texts are the principal material in the foreign language classrooms (instead of authentic listening materials), students (and teachers) may over-generalize long formal written language to the spoken medium and thus become monitor-over-users (Krashen, 1985), frustrating their natural tendency to communicate in simple utterances.

Responding to Possible Criticisms

Some teachers, especially those in traditional educational systems, may fear that these activities 1) encourage the use of faulty or inappropriate forms, 2) lead to fossilized substandard forms, and 3) may make students sound like children. If these are the worst things that could happen, I would gladly accept these results rather than have my students remain completely unable to communicate out of an obsessive desire for complete, faultless, native-like forms. True, they will use some faulty English, but, more importantly they will USE IT! Mistakes are inevitable and part of the learning process. If these forms are fossilized, at least we've gotten that far and prepared the ground for de-fossilization should they go abroad. They may also sound a bit like children. So what? I wish my halting Japanese sounded as good as a child's. These pseudo problems can be worked on, but are too often excuses for not doing anything. Too much education keeps a baby from crawling while lecturing it on how to be an elegant dancer.

In most settings, people are praised for their willingness to try, no matter how little. Freezing up because you aren't sure if your verb-tense is correct, means never starting. An old aphorism goes, "Winners are people who don't stop trying; losers are those who never start." I fear that many students never start because they think they have to be perfect. We can still be adult and respected when we use reduced forms, and we can communicate many things with the help of the context. For many of my students, seven years of traditional English study has left virtually nothing operational in face-to-face encounters. Mentions seem to stir up this dormant language and their natural communication strategies. If students continue their language learning, these one-word utterances become two- and three-word utterances, formulaic idioms, and pat phrases. These exercises therefore are steps, logical and natural, along the way to more complete and complex expression. When students have the opportunity to be in the native environment, these restricted utterances will allow them to interact and generate more input and interaction (Krashen 1985). They will allow speakers to participate, integrate, and learn more. These exercises make English something useful.

Conclusion

It's no fun hitting the ball over the net if it never comes back. Mentions are often all we need. And it could be that practicing them will help our students learn to be more communicative. Just imagine. Your next class. Just ten minutes. Fun!

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