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Increasing Awareness and Talk Time through Free Messaging Apps

For many people, mobile phones are a part of modern life. Although the purpose of this technology revolves around language and communication, its application to language learning still appears to be underutilized. This is changing, as the widespread use of this handheld technology offers numerous opportunities to use functions that are ideal for exposing learners to communicative interaction on their language-learning journey.

One beneficial function of the smartphone is its ability to exchange text and multimedia between users, which is a benefit that is enhanced through the availability of free messaging apps that facilitate the exchanges. In order to explore the messaging function of smartphones and how teachers can employ it to promote spoken communication, this article will describe ways to use text, audio, and imagery inside and outside the English language classroom.

To begin, teachers must become familiar with the messaging apps available in their instructional setting. For example, *KakaoTalk* (www.kakao.com/talk/en) is a free messaging app that is part of popular culture in Korea. Along with *Line* (line.naver.jp/en), *KakaoTalk* has witnessed increased popularity in both Taiwan and Japan (Racoma 2012; Yap 2012). While these two messaging apps focus on Northeast Asia, many of the features that I will outline in this article are transferable across messaging apps that are popular in numerous other locations, such as *WhatsApp* (www.whatsapp.com), perhaps the most successful messaging app on a global scale (Yeung 2013). Other popular messaging apps on a regional or global scale include *ChatON* (web.samsungchaton.com); *Tango* (www.tango.me); *Viber* (www.viber.com); and *WeChat* (www.wechat.com/en).

Although these apps are, at their most fundamental level, free text-messaging services, their capabilities extend to group text chats and the sharing of photos, audio, and video. In other words, these free messaging apps allow users to communicate with others in their contact list through text, voice, imagery, or video. It is worth noting, though, that the video-sharing capability still appears to have several bugs, so I will not discuss it in this article.

LEARNING CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

As smartphones and messaging apps become more prevalent, their potential for ready-made communicative activities in the classroom should not be overlooked. For if the language learner is "attached" to his

or her smartphone, it stands to reason that instructors can harness that potential to assist learning.

I first experimented with *KakaoTalk* in a university-level English as a foreign language (EFL) context in 2011 by assigning spoken homework. This attempt to encourage students to use English outside the classroom was easy to implement but difficult to sustain. I initially had students make recordings on the computer and email them to me for feedback. This arrangement did not work efficiently, as students complained of dedicating time to speaking to a computer. Personally, I also found it demotivating to dedicate time to sitting in front of a computer to record my own oral feedback.

Overcoming the demotivating and time-sapping nature of the computer-based audio recording inspired me to use *KakaoTalk* for the same project. The response from students was more positive, largely due to the convenience of being able to use their smartphones for their homework. Likewise, I found it much simpler to listen and respond to student assignments in a timely manner.

Ultimately, the intrinsic beauty of using *KakaoTalk* and *Line* is that in many cases messaging is a tool that students discovered first and it gained popularity and acceptance via their peers. These are not tools that are forced upon students by their teacher for the purpose of study, but tools that form a part of their everyday lives. This factor, together with the ease of implementation, was the birth of the *KakaoTalk* project that has since snowballed into a growing compendium of activities to facilitate communication, both inside and outside the classroom.

GOALS OF THE *KAKAOTALK* PROJECT

The *KakaoTalk* project has several overarching goals at its heart. In essence, the goal is to increase the spoken ability of the students. When faced with the challenges of producing longer segments of spontaneous speech, many students prefer to script their responses. However, West (1960) suggests that when a person reads lines aloud—as in a script—the language is passing from the eye to the mouth with little learning or cognitive interaction taking place; an improvement on merely reciting lines is to read the line silently, pause, look up, and then speak the line. This small adaption incorporates recollection, a suggested step that is integral to uptake and acquisition, particularly with respect to vocabulary (Nation 2001). The *KakaoTalk* project avoids the pre-scripting and recitation of lines by having the students attempt to produce speech that is spontaneous, or as spontaneous as possible.

One of the greatest hurdles in setting EFL students on the path toward spoken proficiency is overcoming the inherent passion for accuracy. Language students frequently require coaching on how to focus on production rather than errors, but such efforts are often in vain as the concept of errors as "natural accidents on the way to interpersonal communication" (Kramsch 1987, 23) is a new one for many. Therefore, an unrelenting focus on errors leads to a number of students having low functional fluency, even while they maintain impressive grammatical accuracy. However, given that communication is the primary purpose for language, low functional fluency levels can hinder communication.

Many learners therefore need an introduction to "meaning" as the basis for their spoken communication. Bygate (2005) suggests that group and collaborative learning builds bridges to greater fluency and accuracy. The suggestion is that group work provides a scaffolded environment in which the learners experiment and co-construct their message. Because the learners will have co-constructed—and effectively rehearsed—their message, the final production will often have a more refined presentation in terms of fluency levels and the overall transmission of the message (Nation 1989).

While transmission of the intended message in a more fluent manner is the primary goal

of the project, a complete neglect of form is unacceptable. Ellis (2008) notes that if form is not attended to, a communicative plateau may be reached. This is very much the inverse communicative plateau that may be reached if attention to form is over-emphasized. It is, therefore, in the interest of learners to find the balance between form and fluency. Finding the balance does not need to be tricky, and the project I am describing entails ease of access to recording devices, which makes the matter all the more simple. Learners are able to focus on fluency and meaning while recording their production before changing hats to focus on form. This method of focusing on form after the fact employs what has been coined "noticing," or "consciousness-raising" (Schmidt 2001; Thornbury 2005; Ellis 2008).

Consciousness-raising is in effect a form of self-monitoring that gives the learner the opportunity to pay attention to his or her utterances in the style of a review. The premise is that in order for language acquisition to take place, attention must be paid to a specific item or language feature. However, Ellis (2008) draws on the Noticing Hypothesis to conclude that noticing can be of assistance only if it is done consciously—and actively. This suggests that learners may need explicit coaching in how to perform such tasks in order for them to be effective.

Guided coaching in the art of noticing can be as simple as delayed corrective feedback, where the teacher monitors students' production during class and makes note of utterances that are in need of correction. In the feedback stage of class, the teacher puts a selection of correct and incorrect utterances on the board and asks students to make suggestions on how they should be corrected, if at all. In this manner, students effectively take charge of their own learning via a form of noticing and consciousness-raising.

Delayed corrective feedback is a common and easily implemented technique, and it provides learners with concrete examples of how their own utterances may be monitored in a conscious manner. The by-product of coupling consciousness-raising and noticing with self-recorded learner production is that learner autonomy is drawn into the equation. For if the learners are made aware that they are able to "check" their utterances after the fact, they are able to continue their language journey beyond the gaze of their teacher—where responsible and autonomous learners become more equipped to take control of the language (Scharle and Szabo 2000).

ACTIVITIES FOR FREE MESSAGING APPS AND SMARTPHONE TASKS

Over the course of several years, I have experimented with smartphones and free messaging apps with my students. These activities have ranged from simple text-messaging and group-chat tasks to the more complex simultaneous interpretation and translation. It would appear that the opportunities are endless, provided that sound pedagogical choices are made.

Three of the most successful and easily implemented activities are (1) Spoken Response, (2) Picture Prompt, and (3) Transcription, Consciousness-Raising, and Noticing.

Spoken Response activity

Having students practice speaking outside the classroom is an activity that is difficult to monitor. However, through the use of a messaging app that allows for recording to take place, the monitoring bridge can be crossed. The basic procedure is to assign students a topic or a question that they must respond to with a predetermined amount of detail, or provide a response that fills a predetermined time limit. I have found two to three minutes to be an optimal length, as this pushes students to talk about their subject in deeper detail than what might be required in a basic response. (For an abbreviated description, see Pollard 2014.)

Topics assigned to the students typically align with the overarching syllabus of the course—either thematic alignment or grammatical

alignment, or a combination of the two (Widdowson 1990). For instance, with an elementary-level class that has a proficiency level equivalent to A2 of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe 2001), topics that satisfy grammatical alignment of the syllabus will make use of structures that are presented during the course.

Suppose one unit covers the thematic area of vacation and the vocabulary related to it, while another unit covers "–ed" and "–ing" adjectives. Combining these two units into a prompt as simple as "How was your vacation?" will push the students to be creative and descriptive in their responses, as they must meet the two- to three-minute response requirement. An additional example may combine, for instance, present perfect tense with superlatives and result in a prompt such as "What is the most memorable thing you have done?" It should be noted that it is not necessary to combine the foci of multiple units into one Spoken Response assignment if you do not feel it is needed. An example where the focus needs little adaption is with "used to," as the prompt "Tell me about your childhood" is often sufficient for a developed and personalized response from the student. As is the case in any of the examples listed, the topics should focus on the target structures encountered in the course while also stimulating the student to personalize and expand on the subject.

A summary of the basic steps that make up this activity follows:

1. In class, the teacher writes the topic on the board—for example, "What is your most memorable experience?"
2. The class then brainstorms ideas, such as "My first bicycle," "The birth of my baby sister," "The time I saw a fire," and so on.
3. After each student picks a subtopic, the teacher asks students to design a graphic organizer according to "Who," "What," "Where," "When," and "Why."
4. The teacher asks students to tell their story to a partner.
5. For homework, students practice the story once more and then record it, using only the graphic organizer as a reference, and send the recorded story to the teacher.

The most important point to emphasize with this activity is that the primary objectives are communication and fluency, and not grammatical accuracy. It should be made clear to students that they must not devise a script; instead, methods such as brainstorming or noting keywords to keep their thoughts on track are encouraged. Students will often rely on a preconceived script to speak in deeper detail on a subject, so it is a sound idea to demonstrate the use of brainstorming, graphic organizers, and speaking on a topic without a script in order for students to receive the greatest benefit (West 1960). An in-class introduction to brainstorming and speaking without a script as a fluency-based activity can incorporate the 4-3-2 technique, as described by Nation (1989). The 4-3-2 technique works on the premise that a student will first speak for four minutes on a topic, followed by an attempt to convey the same information in the shorter time of three minutes; a third recitation in two minutes is the final step. Nation (1989) suggests that not only does the 4-3-2 technique affect fluency development, but it can also develop skills in relation to discourse, which is an important factor when students must speak on a single topic for two to three minutes.

The Spoken Response activity does not explicitly call for the level of repetition seen in the 4-3-2 technique, since only a single audio recording is the submission requirement. However, if you introduce the activity in this manner, it will suggest to the students that, as with the production of drafts in a written project, the spoken rehearsal prior to producing a final recording provides them with a greater return on their overall learning.

There are several options for offering feedback to the students. As the primary goal of the Spoken Response activity is to develop

fluency, it would be counterproductive to over-correct the grammar of a student's recording, due to the demotivating effects that may occur as a result. If you feel that corrective feedback must be given, it is safer to offer corrective feedback focusing on organization, much in the way that is suggested with feedback for written work (Boramy 2010). Through experimentation with these assignments, I would suggest that a productive method is to provide two or three grammatical or word-choice corrections per two minutes of audio. In lieu of corrective feedback, feedback on content tends to work well with lower-level students. In particular, if you can discover common interests and familiar topics, and then provide feedback on content within that realm, the opportunity to develop rapport with the students is often enhanced. Likewise, it appears that offering oral feedback via an audio message helps to develop rapport with students.

Picture Prompt activity

The speaking portion of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (Educational Testing Service 2014) has a picture description task, which is an easily adaptable activity that seems custom-made for smartphones and messaging apps. The fact that these messaging apps send and receive images allows students to have varied and interesting topics at their disposal. The basic activity is the same as the TOEIC task: to describe a picture in detail with a range of grammatical structures and vocabulary, while maintaining cohesion. More specifically, Question 3 of TOEIC Speaking stipulates that 30 seconds of preparation is permitted before a 45-second description must be produced (Educational Testing Service 2014). Because the Picture Prompt activity is used in a classroom setting and not as part of a rigid testing procedure, flexibility is an option. As in the Spoken Response assignment, I would suggest that students take a minute or so to make notes or brainstorm keywords relating to the task before producing a finished product of two to three minutes. The overall structure of the activity is similar to that of the Spoken Response activity in the sense that students are required to speak on a single topic for an extended period of time, with the transmission of a message being the initial focus. The major difference between a Picture Prompt and a Spoken Response assignment is that the picture-based prompt is a visual one that may not be as easily personalized. As a result, the Picture Prompt activity may appear at first glance to be more objective in nature. However, it has the potential to offer more flexibility and adaptability, depending on your context.

One area where the Picture Prompt activity may provide greater classroom discourse is through a small adaptation where students work in pairs or small groups in order to provide an in-depth description of the image. It is through this collaborative process that personalization and genuine communication often arise (Bygate 2005). Generally, the images used in this activity would be photos either taken by the teacher and sent to the students or taken by the students themselves. All images used would ideally be tied to the thematic properties of the syllabus and therefore act as a freer communication activity for the class (Widdowson 1990).

For an example of appropriate images that are directly associated with the syllabus, consider a unit that focuses on people's appearance and personality, together with a unit on the relative clause. An appropriate image in this instance may be a group of people in a café or a similar setting. Images of this nature offer the opportunity to objectively describe the setting, as per the appearance aspect, and also allow the student to speculate on other aspects of the image, such as the possible personality traits of the individuals. An alternative is to have students produce an oral story to accompany the image. A unit on the modal verbs of speculation—*might*, *may*, *could*, *can't*, and *must*—would be particularly suitable as students could be asked to conjecture or tell a story. Images including a group of people in the midst of powerful or emotive

expressions of body language are sound choices as prompts, as the students are able to speculate or construct a story that relates to the image quite openly while also having an opportunity to expand and include their personal twist or interpretation.

As is the case with any classroom activity, it is important for teachers to be selective and use discretion. However, if you want to allow the students to take greater control of their own learning, you can extend this activity by having them send pictures, preferably ones that they have collected themselves, to their peers for verbal description or as storytelling prompts. Taking this further step of using student-collected material as a prompt also assists in making the communicative objectives of this activity more explicit to the students. An additional step could have the students work in a group setting to co-construct a more creative, complete, and in-depth oral story in relation to the shared images; the happy by-product of this group-based task is that students negotiate and communicate in the target language throughout the planning, development, and revision of their oral recording.

A suggested step-by-step summary of the Picture Prompt activity in pair or small group work follows:

1. The teacher places students in pairs or small groups and sends them a photo, or selection of photos, via picture message.

2. Students are given a brief period of time—two to three minutes—to brainstorm their ideas; they can use their dictionaries as required for needed vocabulary.

3. Students then describe their photo(s) and record themselves doing so via their smartphones. A suggested length of time is three minutes, depending on students' speaking ability. Students can record themselves individually, or they may co-construct a recording within their pair or group.

4. Students listen to their recordings, and if they are happy with their attempt, they send it to the teacher. If they are unhappy with it, students are free to attempt it once more. The reason for only allowing one more attempt is to prevent faster-finishing students from being left without a task.

5. The teacher listens to the student recordings outside of class time and offers feedback. Feedback should be based on organization and content and should not be over-corrective. Oral feedback via audio recording is preferable to written feedback.

6. An optional follow-up is to have students make transcriptions of their recordings, and to edit and revise their work in line with consciousness-raising and noticing, as detailed in the Transcription, Consciousness-Raising, and Noticing activity that follows.

It is worth noting that while I have introduced Picture Prompt as an in-class activity, it can be extended to an out-of-class assignment where students find something of interest to photograph with their smartphones. With their self-selected image, they produce an oral recording that meets the two- to three-minute guideline, as detailed. The major difference with Picture Prompt as a homework assignment rather than an in-class activity is that the students must submit the photo in addition to the audio recording to the teacher.

Transcription, Consciousness-Raising, and Noticing activity

The two previous activities stand on their own as pedagogically sound initiatives; however, a twist I like to incorporate is to combine transcribing with consciousness-raising and noticing. Having students listen to the audio recordings they produced for the Spoken Response or Picture Prompt assignment and then make transcriptions moves the primary focus from speaking skills onto listening, noticing, and

consciousness-raising. When students transcribe their audio recordings, they create a written text, with which they are able to switch hats and transition into the realm of consciousness-raising and noticing; these are effectively aspects of self-monitoring (Schmidt 2001; Thornbury 2005; Ellis 2008). This transition also draws attention onto reading skills and a more explicit focus on form.

The primary intention of noticing is to raise the awareness of students in respect to their own spoken production and have them monitor areas for improvement. Utilizing noticing also allows the fluency–accuracy continuum to be partially balanced, as per Ellis's (2008) suggestion. It is worth stating that noticing is effectively performed as a review activity where students access the recordings that they have produced previously, either from another class or from an earlier part of the current class. In this instance, the activity utilizes the messaging app and smartphone as a personal listening device rather than a recording device, which posits that students may also require a pair of headphones for personal use. Students dictate their recorded speech and perform the noticing activities on the transcription they have created, thereby engaging in a student-controlled and -maintained form of delayed corrective feedback.

Depending on the objectives and direction of your classes, it may be beneficial to give further guidance to your students with respect to the areas where they should be paying extra attention. The main premise of noticing is a focus on grammatical accuracy. For example, the first Spoken Response prompt I listed—"How was your vacation?"—covered the thematic area of vacation combined with "–ed" and "–ing" adjectives. Therefore, the focus for the noticing activity when the students inspect their written transcriptions would explicitly be the usage of "–ed" and "–ing" adjectives. However, if the students notice any other errors, they are free to suggest corrections. The second prompt I listed—"What is the most memorable thing you have done?"—covers present perfect plus the superlative, allowing the students to explicitly focus their attention on these aspects.

In addition to grammatical accuracy, however, other areas of accuracy may be the primary focus of your students. For instance, lexical selection may be a core issue in your class or for specific students. If this is the case, you may suggest that students pay attention to the correct word choice during the noticing activities. Likewise, if your class has paid attention to intonation or connected speech, students have the opportunity to focus on these aspects in their recorded production. One way to implement this focus is to have students note the stress or intonation contours of their utterances from their audio recordings. For example, they can notice whether they are successfully using a rising intonation when listing items present in a Picture Prompt recording. The important thing here is to set goals and tasks that are aligned to the class syllabus (Widdowson 1990).

CONCLUSION

The activities outlined above are relatively simple to set up and appear to provide motivation to the language learner, along with introducing and developing the notion of learner autonomy. If our students are aware that they need not be in the classroom in order to practice their English, then that is a step along the path to language proficiency.

Spoken assignments through free messaging apps may not be the answer for every teacher and learner. As is the case with all learning situations, the teacher must make a judgment about the suitability of an activity. While I suggest that audio assignments are motivating and assist with building autonomy, they may also have the opposite effect if the particular teaching context does not offer equality or inclusivity. In the context of Korea, it is rare to encounter a student without a smartphone that has unlimited data transfer capabilities, or an iPod Touch with a wi-fi connection.

However, in other contexts this is likely not to be the norm. It is a serious issue in need of consideration, although there are ways of getting around the challenge with the use of an ordinary mobile phone.

A typical mobile phone still has voice recording capabilities, and many have the capability to receive a photo as a message. Therefore, students will still have the opportunity to record their audio assignments, as in the Spoken Response and Picture Prompt activities, and to receive a photograph, as in the Picture Prompt. They will also have the opportunity to perform transcription and noticing exercises. The major caveat would be not requiring students to return their responses to you, as the costs involved could lead to a demotivating association with English education.

Bearing this in mind, however, language learners often wish to improve their spoken proficiency ahead of the other skills. They may not be aware, though, that they can revise their speaking in similar ways as they are trained to revise their writing. Therefore, if your classroom context permits you to attempt spoken assignments of this nature, then you have the ability to offer your students one of the keys to language development in a fun and friendly manner. At the end of the day, the more motivation and opportunity we can offer our students to communicate in English outside the classroom, the more we have succeeded in facilitating their aspirations of developing their English proficiency.

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