

# Justifying the use of activities based on “The Output Hypothesis”

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## 1. Introduction

It is well known that English language instruction in Japan has been mainly comprehension and translation-based since the Meiji era and it still focuses on written materials. While we strongly believe that great amount of input through reading is essential, we need to keep good balance between input and output by providing students with more opportunities for output as a focus in second language teaching (e, g., Saito, 1996; Yoshida, 2003). In order to develop students' fundamental and practical communication skills as well as improving students' grammatical knowledge, as is required by the Courses of Study for Upper Secondary School Foreign Language, we need to introduce activities which require students real use or output of English.

## 2. Role of output

Swain (1993, 1995), through “the Output Hypothesis,” has proposed the important function of output for second language acquisition. According to the hypothesis, output has three functions: a hypothesis-testing function, in which learners are potentially testing their hypothesis about the target language; a metalinguistic function, enabling learners to control and internalize linguistic knowledge; a noticing a gap function, in which learners notice a gap between what they can say and what they want to say. Swain and Lapkin (1995) mention one more function of output, that is, output enhances fluency through practice. Skehan (1995) also has the

same view, and notes that fluency, the capacity of the learners to exercise their system to communicate meaning in real time, requires learners to exercise their memory-based system by accessing and deploying chunks of language.

## 3. An example of output-based activities

In this section, I am going to introduce an output-based activity which can be named as “Describing something in English” using the textbook *POLESTAR* English Course II. The purpose of the activity is to let students describe some new words in their own English verbally to his/her partner. Procedure is as the following.

1. Students make groups of two and one is to stand facing the blackboard and another against it.
2. A new word from the textbook, for example, “hero,” which is a new word in the section 3 of Lesson 1, is written on the blackboard.
3. A student facing the blackboard describes the word “hero” in his/her own English, and the partner guesses what he/she means. When they arrive at the correct answer “hero,” they can sit down.
4. The role is reversed and they do the same activity with another new word “winner.”
5. After the activity they are required to write sentences they wanted to produce but actually couldn't by using dictionaries or grammar books. (In some cases a teacher may have to explain grammatical rules

students have not yet fully understood.)

In this activity they are directed to use only full sentences in describing the target word without using gestures, which provides them with the opportunity for three functions of output: a hypothesis-testing function, a metalinguistic function and a noticing a gap function. In this lesson students have learned some expressions related to “heroes” and “winners” such as “statues of them were set up at Olympia,” “Men who lived by this ideal through their words and actions became famous,” and so on. Students, while producing output, can attempt to reproduce the expressions they have learned or use their own thoughts and internalized expressions, and in doing so they can test their linguistic knowledge, use metalinguistic knowledge and find a gap between what they can say and what they really want to say. In the post-activity of completing their target expressions or sentences, they can learn new words, expressions and even grammatical rules.

#### 4. Other activities

This “Describing something in English” is one of many output-based activities in which students can benefit from the effect of output. According to students’ proficiency level and the purpose of the lesson, we can utilize many other output-based activities. For example, closed tasks, which are highly structured and have very specific goals with only one possible outcome, such as “Filling in the blank” and “Play-acting,” have a facilitating role in acquiring a target grammatical structure. On the other hand, open tasks, such as “Role-play,” which do not have a predetermined solution, as students have the freedom to decide on the solution, are beneficial to encourage learners to be more communicative (Sato, 2005).

#### 5. Conclusion

The Ministry of Sports, Science, Technology, and Education announced the implementation of “The Strategic Concept for Development of Japanese people who are able to use English” in 2002. English language education in Japan is going through a major transitory period these days. If we are really to develop students’ procedural knowledge and practical communication skills, it is crystal clear that students should be provided with more output-based activities as well as comprehension-based activities.

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