Feature Article

Enhancing L2 Interactional Skills Through Interactive Pair Presentations With Small-Group Discussion

Sakae Onoda Juntendo University

This article discusses the benefits of pedagogical strategies designed to enhance students' interactional skills in an undergraduate English teacher education course. It presents a model of pair presentation with small-group discussion and shows the positive effects of this approach on students' interactional skills based on their feedback as well as teacher assessments. In this unique design, pre-service EFL teachers learn about teaching approaches and their theoretical underpinnings, present the main points of a chapter in the textbook, and engage peers in small-group discussions, with participants interacting as they express their interpretations, opinions, and learning experiences regarding specific aspects of the presentation. In this study, an experimental group went through the above-mentioned sequence of tasks over one academic term, while a control group also presented the main points of a chapter in the textbook but followed this up with a teacher-led interactive session designed to clarify participants' understanding of key concepts by engaging them in small group discussions. Results show that pair presentations with guided small-group discussion raise participants' intrinsic motivation for authentic interaction and facilitates collaborative learning, in turn enhancing their oral fluency, a critical interactional skill. Limitations of the study, pedagogical implications, and options for future research are also discussed.

How undergraduate English teacher education can be improved given inherent constraints has long been discussed in Japan. For example, Onoda, Miyashita, and Yoshino (2017) noted that most undergraduates who complete an English teacher education program can obtain a teaching license. Additionally, Wakabayashi, Kosuge, and Kosuge (2016) reported that newly qualified teachers hold preconceived views of teaching based on their own learning experience, most likely influenced by grammar translation. Thus, pre-service English teachers

may not be strongly motivated to acquire advanced English interactional skills.

Pre-service teachers' lack of advanced English skills may also reflect Ministry guidelines on the teaching of English (MEXT, 2009), which require them to take only two English teaching methodology courses, with a primary focus on Japanese-language instruction and a limited focus on English skills (including speaking and listening), for which instruction may (or may not) be delivered in English. Additionally, they are required to study subjects related to pedagogy, including counseling, educational psychology, and principles of education as part of an already crowded curriculum (Sano, Saito, & Yoshida, 2016).

This requirement derives from a philosophy of teacher education whereby teachers' responsibilities include not only teaching their specialized subject but also duties as homeroom teacher or club activity adviser. In brief, teachers must take care of everything in their homeroom students' lives as in a family unit (Sarja, Nyman, Ito, & Jaatinen, 2017). This close relationship forms the core of school education in Japan. Consequently, the undergraduate teacher education curriculum is not primarily geared toward improving the English skills of future teachers (Sato, 2012; Onoda, Miyashita, & Yoshino, 2017).

This lack of advanced English skills also derives from the fact that many university entrance exams do not test productive skills. Unless students acquire these skills in university, even those who enroll in English teacher education courses will not develop them adequately (Sato, 2012). Unsurprisingly, the English skills of undergraduates in such courses in Japan lag behind those in other EFL settings (Sano et al., 2016). One example is the Teacher Education Department at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland (personal communication, Prof. Riikka Alanen, September 7, 2017; Kontoniemi & Salo, 2011). Both Japan and Finland demonstrate educational success, albeit differently. In both countries, teachers are highly valued socially, and learning EFL is emphasized as early as Grade 3 (Sarja et al., 2017). Where they differ is in how institutions select students, using interviews, discussions, and essay writing as opposed to standardized reading, grammar, and listening tests. When admitted, Finnish students' English skills exceed C1 on the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) (Little, 2006), and they need to take no further English classes.

A closely related case is that of English language teaching in Taiwan. With both English proficiency and teaching skills now emphasized, pre-service teachers take more English-related courses than in Japan and must use English as an instructional and interactional language (Tokyo Gakugei University, 2016). Additionally, those with English proficiency below CEFR B2 may not graduate from teacher education programs (Ministry of Education, ROC, 2019).

In comparison, undergraduate English teacher education courses in Japan struggle to produce qualified pre-service English teachers with advanced English skills. These skills, including interactive pair presentations with small-group discussion and their effect on L2 interactional skills development, are discussed next based on participants' feedback and teacher assessments.

Interactional Skills

Although the definition of interactional skills varies, it generally consists of the ability to produce co-constructed understandings and is therefore roughly equivalent to communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). For effective interaction to occur, participants must demonstrate sociolinguistic, grammatical, discoursal, and strategic competence (Ellis & Shintani, 2013), thus making speaking fluency and accuracy critical (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Segalowitz (2010) suggests that messages that are not reasonably fluent, accurate, or natural require speaker and interlocutor to make extra efforts to understand them, thus hindering cognitive processing in both interlocutors. Consequently, messages may be interpreted negatively, interrupted for better understanding, or simply misunderstood (Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2007).

L2 teacher education (Sato, 2012) considers that pedagogical endeavors improve oral fluency and interactional skills in pre-service English teachers. However, research in approaches to their improvement remains limited (Onoda, 2013; Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim, & Thomson, 2010), even in settings where task-based teaching has been adopted (Ellis & Shintani, 2013; Rossiter et al., 2010).

Components of Oral Fluency

In response to this challenge, L2 literature (Nation, 2013; DeKeyser, 2007) indicates various strategies designed to enhance L2 oral fluency. These include automatization of language items, repetition, and pushed output. Below, I outline how these can contribute to oral fluency development.

Automatization. Automatization denotes the ability to effortlessly retrieve meaningful chunks of language from the mental lexicon (Kormos, 2006; Segalowitz, 2010). L2 studies indicate that automatization can be achieved through repeated encounters with or retrievals of language items (Nation, 2015; Schmitt & Carter, 2004). This matches the L2 speech production model developed by Kormos (2006), according to which improving oral fluency consists of enriching the mental lexicon and facilitating instantaneous access to it. Strategies designed to promote these key cognitive processes include repetition and pushed output (Nation, 2013).

Repetition. For automatization to occur, meaningful chunks of language must be internalized through repeated practice (DeKeyser, 2007). L2 literature shows that effective vocabulary learning depends on repeated retrievals of new words (Nation, 2015). This is supported by connectionist theories (e.g., Ellis, 2002), which posit that repeated access reinforces neural connections to a specific mental lexicon, while less active neural connections fade away. Similarly, Anderson's (1993) skills development theory posits that combining meaningful language chunks into larger units enables learners to automatize, thus yielding fluent and accurate language use.

Pushed output. Swain's comprehensible output hypothesis (1985) suggested that to acquire an L2, it is necessary not only to be exposed to comprehensible input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) but also to engage in comprehensible output. Swain argued that output helps learners acquire the L2 through three functions: noticing and triggering, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection. However, without pushed output, learners fall back on what they know and avoid using what they cannot use confidently, thereby failing to expand their linguistic knowledge. Thus, learners should engage in activities that address unfamiliar topics and tasks and include pushed output, which requires them to

make their receptive knowledge productive (Nation, 2014; Onoda, 2014).

Improving Oral Fluency. Among approaches to developing oral fluency found in the L2 literature, one of the most promising is the four strands of teaching (Nation, 2015). These consist of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development activities. By integrating these four strands, learners gradually take fluent and accurate control of the language, thereby communicating effectively. However, given the English skills of participants in teacher education courses in Japan, instruction should focus on meaning-focused output and fluency development because both affect automatization through repetition and pushed output (Nation, 2014; Onoda, 2014).

Nation (2015) also recommended that linked skills be used for oral fluency development. Here, a single topic is focused upon for an extended period, with learners engaging in a sequence of tasks using different language skills. For example, students read a news item, summarize the main points along with their reactions, present these to peers, engage them in discussing key questions raised in the text, moderate the discussion, and elicit opinions and suggestions based on these. However, research on the effects of linked-skills activities on oral fluency development remains limited (Nation, 2014; Onoda, 2012).

Nation (2015) also argued for the use of issue logs for oral fluency development. Here, students individually select a topic of interest, search social media for a piece on that topic, and prepare a summary, two discussion questions, and their opinion on the issues it raises. In class, they form pairs, take turns in reporting their summary, elicit their partner's opinions of the discussion questions, and record these down in the issue log, repeating the process with three different partners over several class meetings.

Another promising approach relevant to undergraduate English teacher education consists of presenting a chapter from a textbook on second language acquisition theories and their applications to teaching followed by a small-group discussion drawing on linked-skills activities. Justifications are as follows: (a) students are familiar with tasks integrating the four language skills; (b) they find linked skills useful and engaging (Nation & Newton, 2009; Onoda, 2013); and

(c) the final speaking stage requires them to produce and listen to the same key language features repeatedly, which facilitates deep processing. Through this activity, learners not only see improvements in their English skills but also gain confidence in discussing topics in English.

This interpretation is supported by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), which postulates that humans seek to satisfy three innate desires: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This drives them to take action, including in language learning as learners are motivated to take control of their learning while communicating in English, ultimately feeling competent and confident in using English. An important point is that the effects of confidence and self-efficacy on academic achievement are well-documented, including in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), with self-efficacy being a strong predictor of academic achievement (and vice versa). Accordingly, this study attempts to answer the following research question: Do the interactional skills represented by oral fluency of pre-service English teachers improve when they engage in interactive pair presentations with small-group discussion?

Methods

This study investigated the effects of interactive pair presentations with small-group discussion over one academic term. Data regarding L2 oral fluency gains were collected from speech rate (i.e., number of words per minute excluding reformulations, replacements, false starts, and pauses; Bei, 2010) obtained from story-retelling tasks, which are known from L2 literature to be generally reliable (Lennon, 1990; Segalowitz, 2010).

To support the interpretation of the results through triangulation, interviews with randomly selected participants were conducted shortly after the story-retelling task at the end of the research period. Participants were interviewed individually and asked about the effects of the activities. Each interview lasted approximately 10 minutes.

Participants

Participants consisted of senior English majors enrolled in English Teacher Education Course 4 at a university in eastern Japan, with 15 class meetings in the 2014 fall term (n = 21) and 15 in the 2015 fall term (n = 21). This is an elective course for students seeking to obtain a secondary school English teaching license. Participants had taken Courses 1, 2, and 3, learning basic teaching skills and completing a mandatory three-week teaching practice, including interacting with students as homeroom teachers, supervising club activities, and teaching English to students with diverse proficiencies and motivations.

Approval was granted from university administrators for using students' TOEFL and story-retelling test data. Written informed consent was obtained from participants after the nature and purpose of the research was explained to them in class. Explanations and consent forms indicated the following: (a) participation in the study would in no way affect their grades; (b) personal information, including names and test scores, would be unidentifiable were the study to be published; and (c) they could opt out of the study at any time. No participants asked to withdraw, and all agreed to submit their TOEFL and story-retelling test data.

Data obtained at the beginning of each term (fall 2014 and fall 2015) revealed the following English proficiency levels: 2014 group: M=545.45, SD=55.65; 2015 group: M=554.25, SD=78.18, as measured by TOEFL ITP. Regarding oral fluency scores (measured by a story-retelling task described below), scores were: 2014 group: M=70.81, SD=4.23; 2015 group: M=70.24, SD=4.15 (Table 1). Given the small sample size, Levene's test indicated that equal variance could be assumed (TOEFL scores: t=-.49, p=.68; story-telling task: t=-.28, p=.79).

Two t-tests compared the TOEFL and story-retelling scores of the two groups using Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type 1 error (Green & Salkind, 2005) across the two comparisons. A p-value of .025 was required for significance. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups (TOEFL scores: t = -49, p = .63 > .05; story-retelling scores: t = -.24, p = .66 > .05). The 2014 class was therefore designated as the Control group, and the 2015 class as the Experimental group. No statistical outliers were identified.

Table 1
Tasks Included in Interventions

Tasks	Groups			
	Control group	Experimental group		
Common Tasks	Reading the textbook and answering reading questions (R & W)	Reading the textbook and answering reading questions (R & W)		
	Creating an outline and giving the presentation (W, R, S, L)	Creating an outline and giving the presentation (W, R, S, L)		
Different tasks	Teacher's interactive session including a group discussion (L & S)	Leading a group discussion (L & S)		

Note. L = listening skills, S = speaking skills, R = reading skills, W = writing skills

Pedagogical intervention

The control group students read the designated textbook out of class (Nation & Newton, 2009) along with a worksheet that included reading questions. In each class meeting (90 minutes), two pairs of students took turns to present the main points of two different chapters, including questions to the audience (20 minutes per pair) followed by teacher-led interactive sessions in which the teacher elicited questions the presenters had missed and clarified students' understanding of the main points. The teacher worked on engaging the audience in discussing questions relevant to the key concepts discussed in the chapters, moderated the small-group discussion, and elicited ideas and opinions based on these concepts (25 minutes each: 50 minutes).

The experimental group students read the same textbook and worksheet. In each class meeting (90 minutes), two pairs of students presented the main points from two different chapters and set discussion questions to the class to deepen their understanding of these points (20 minutes per pair). The pairs then engaged the audience in discussing questions relevant to the key concepts discussed in the chapter, moderated the discussion, and elicited ideas and opinions based on these concepts (25 minutes per pair). (Note that the total time both groups were engaged in tasks was kept equivalent in order to measure the effects of different tasks on oral fluency development as fairly as possible.)

Measuring oral fluency. Studies of oral fluency adopt different definitions of the construct. Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) categorized three main measures of fluency: speed (number of words spoken), breakdown (total pause time and frequency of pauses), and repair (number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts). Among these, speed fluency (speech rate, or number of words produced by participants in one minute) was found to be highly reliable (Lennon, 1990; Segalowitz, 2010) and was therefore adopted here to measure L2 oral fluency in both groups.

Various task types designed to measure oral fluency are used in research. One particularly promising instrument is the story-retelling task, which is discussed below.

Story-retelling tasks. L2 literature indicates that depending on their definition of oral fluency, researchers employ different tasks to elicit speech production, including reading or picture description tasks, interview tests, and group discussions. However, Segalowitz (2010) indicated that a particularly accessible metric is the story-retelling task, for example, showing participants pictures and asking them to describe the scene within a time limit, a task found to be reliable by Lennon (1990). Similarly, Onoda (2012) found that university students enjoyed and actively engaged in such a task. Because it also offers pedagogical benefits, the task was well suited to the current research purpose.

Participants were given a familiar news story in their L1 (approximately 500 Japanese characters) and asked to read it silently for five minutes. They were allowed to take notes of key words and main points, including what happened, when and where it happened, and what were some of the causes and consequences. They were then asked to report their conclusions and give their opinion about it in English in three minutes. Their renderings were audio-recorded, and the speech rate (total words spoken per minute excluding reformulations, replacements, false starts, and pauses) was calculated and discussed with a Japanese colleague with a doctorate in testing in applied linguistics, a track record of quantitative publications in language testing, and long experience of teaching university students.

As discussed in the previous paragraphs, the story-retelling task was

administered to each group at the beginning and end of the research period. Thus, all participants engaged in two story-retelling tasks covering different topics and elementary school English education.

To determine how fluency developed over the period, transcripts of the preand post-tests were compared for each participant.

To triangulate the quantitative results and to permit an in-depth analysis of participants' perceptions, interviews were conducted in Japanese with five randomly selected students from each group after obtaining their informed consent. There were three males and two females in the control group, with TOEFL ITP scores of 515, 520 535, 550, and 575, and two males and three females in the experimental group, with scores of 525, 537, 547, 570, and 585. Translations of interview transcripts were checked and confirmed using the backtranslation approach with the help of the colleague mentioned above.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative results

This study investigated the effects on L2 oral fluency development of a pair presentation with small-group discussion in an experimental group. This was compared to a pair presentation followed by a teacher-led interactive session in a control group. The rationale for this comparison was that fluency is a critical component of L2 interactional skills. Descriptive statistics for story-retelling test scores are presented in Table 2.

As a necessary procedure for statistical analysis using pairwise comparisons, it was confirmed that the sample met all assumptions for using a *t*-test (Green & Salkind, 2005). No outliers were identified, and skewness and kurtosis were deemed acceptable.

A *t*-test was conducted to investigate whether the experimental group significantly improved in oral fluency over one term compared to the control group. Results indicate that the mean of the experimental group (M = 89.21, SD = 4.8) was significantly greater than that of the control group (M = 73.50, SD = 4.1), t(20) = 4.3, p < .01. Effect size (Cohen's d = .21) was small (though non-negligible) even based on Takeuchi and Mizumoto's (2014) less restrictive

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Story-retelling Task Scores

	Story-retening test				
	Control group $(n = 21)$		Experimental group $(n = 21)$		
Tests	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	
M	70.81	76.50	70.24	89.21	
SD	4.20	4.10	4.10	4.80	
Skewness	0.75	-0.55	0.78	-0.71	
Kurtosis	0.78	-0.69	0.97	0.48	

Story retelling test

.20 norm for the application of this test in applied linguistics, given that other researchers, including Plonsky and Oswald (2014), suggest that Cohen's d should equal or exceed .4 for a small effect size.

Interviews

To permit in-depth analysis of participants' perceptions regarding the above results, interviews were conducted with five randomly selected students from each group. Sample responses are shown in the Appendix.

Control group. Students in the control group felt that rehearsing presentations contributed to more accurate and fluent speech production. Also, pre-set questions guided presenters in understanding the main points and helped them organize their presentations.

Regarding the teacher's interactive follow-up session, the teacher's explanations were considered helpful in clarifying students' understanding of key concepts. In addition, students were motivated to interact with the teacher for clarifications.

Experimental group. Regarding presentations, students felt that writing an outline and rehearsing were effective. In addition, reading questions guided presenters in understanding the main points and helped them organize their presentations, a comment shared with the control group. Importantly, presenters benefited from creating questions, guiding group discussions, and eliciting

students' ideas. This activity kept them talking and (re)using key ideas and words. Consequently, they felt confident about conducting a discussion session and communicating in English. Although participants had different interpretations of some key concepts, they were encouraged to talk about them at length and to understand others' ideas and confirm their own. In doing so, they often used words from the textbook and came to understand what they meant. In addition, they understood the value of integrating the four language skills and of processing the same information and language items repeatedly because this strengthens their productive skills (writing and speaking).

Participants' feedback also revealed a picture of learning processes, suggesting that these activities helped them learn new language features, including vocabulary and sentence structures as they carefully processed these features through multiple skills. Close analysis also reveals that these processes include factors critical to improving learners' oral fluency, including automatization, repetition, and pushed output.

Inter-group comparison. Feedback from control group participants suggests that the teacher-led interactive session was valuable in making them notice and clarify their misunderstandings and in motivating them to study second language acquisition in greater depth. However, regarding spoken language use, not all learners actively interacted with the teacher, probably because there was a mixture of whole-class and small-group sessions and perhaps because some students may already have understood the key concepts. While control group participants, who engaged in the teacher-led interactive follow-up session, showed improvements in oral fluency and interactional skills, compared to the experimental group, the degree of automatization appeared less deep or robust as that resulting from the small-group discussion.

In contrast, the quantitative results show that the interactive small-group discussions had profound effects on oral fluency improvement. Participant feedback also indicates that, perhaps due to the small number of participants, group discussions stimulated active language use and encouraged learners to interact because if the same ideas were repeated and elaborated upon, if they remained unclear, their meaning was negotiated among group members. This

generated deep processing of language units, possibly because discussions intrinsically embed automatization-promoting factors such as repetition and pushed output (Nation, 2014; Onoda, 2014).

Support for these conclusions comes from affective and social perspectives on language learning. As self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) predicts, interactive pair presentations with discussion affected the three critical factors humans need to satisfy: competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and this may have motivated students to take control of their learning while communicating in English. Ultimately, learners wished to feel competent and confident in using English. This interpretation is substantiated by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which argues that to enhance learners' self-efficacy, teachers can do some or all of the following: a) help learners experience personal mastery through repeated successful experiences; b) allow them to observe peers in overcoming challenging tasks and achieving success; c) provide for positive peer and teacher feedback; and d) reduce anxiety during learning.

These theoretical underpinnings hold true for interactive pair presentations with small-group discussion, as feedback from the experimental group indicates. As presenters, they read the chapter repeatedly, summarized the main points, and rehearsed their presentation to make their delivery natural and fluent. The time and energy thus devoted may have contributed to their sense of responsibility in conducting small-group sessions because for the session to be successful, each pair needed to understand key second language acquisition theories as well as their practical applications to teaching and then prepare discussion questions that required deep thinking and encouraged the audience to discuss them more deeply. These discussions thus motivated presenters to rehearse extensively because they needed to think deeply and to actively discuss the questions. In turn, pressure to conduct discussions positively affected their preparation.

During this preparation stage, students in the experimental group engaged in conscious repetition and pushed output. This not only helped them deliver speech naturally but also built up confidence in interacting with classmates. Although the control group engaged in similar processes, there was no need for them to create questions. Thus, they were under no pressure to prepare or

rehearse as intensively as the experimental group, working instead in a more relaxed manner, based on the researcher's observations as well as student feedback.

This holds true for small-group discussions, where presenters exercised control by setting discussion questions, moderating the discussion, and eliciting ideas and opinions, thus keeping the entire procedure under control and relating to audience members on a personal basis while building positive relationships by eliciting opinions. Ultimately, participants became highly motivated to learn about second language acquisition theories and their applications to teaching and became more willing to share their ideas with the presenters, thereby creating a cooperative atmosphere, a positive marker of good performance. Thus, the presenters' desires for competence, autonomy, and relatedness were met, making them more confident and motivating them to engage in the task because they could socialize during discussions and take part in their own way. Through negotiation and repetition of key concepts and words and as a result of being pushed to express their ideas, they reported in interviews that they felt a growing sense of competence. Overall, the experimental group's improved performance shows the value of automatization promoted through two key strategies: pushed output and the deep processing generated by the repeated use of language items embedded in interactive pair presentations with small-group discussion.

Conclusion

Interactive pair presentations with small-group discussion were effective in improving L2 oral fluency and interactional skills in university English majors. The approach, which includes repetition and pushed output, encourages learners to process key language items in all four skills, thus promoting deep processing and facilitating automatization.

However, caution is needed as sample size was small and participants were relatively motivated English majors who planned to become English teachers. Moreover, instead of measuring L2 interactional skills, the study measured oral fluency as its critical component. Investigating larger groups or different types of participants and adopting different definitions of interactional skills might lead

to different results. Replication studies should be conducted in order to verify the present findings.

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Author bio

Sakae Onoda is Professor of English Education, Faculty of International Liberal Arts, Juntendo University. His research interests include English teacher education, materials development, developing listening, speaking, and writing fluency, improving interactional skills, facilitating self-regulated language learning, and enhancing vocabulary acquisition and use by EFL learners. sakaeonoda@gmail.com

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Appendix

Comments

Control group

- S1: It was a good exercise for us to rehearse together a few times before the presentation. It helped us use new expressions more easily and speak more smoothly, accurately, and fluently.
- S1, S2, S5: The reading question worksheets prepared by the teacher were very helpful in understanding the main points and organizing the presentation. I read the main points many times and tried to express them in English.
- S3: It was good to ask the teacher about what was not clear, but not everyone asked him nor wanted to interact with him.
- S1, S2, S4, S5: The teacher's explanations helped us clarify our understanding and also notice our misunderstandings.
- S1, S2, S4, S5: I usually asked the teacher to clarify my understandings because the teachers' interactive session helped me understand the key concepts described in the textbook because he explained them in easy English and using familiar examples.

2. Experimental group

- S6, S7, S8: It was effective to write an outline for our presentation and rehearse several times before the presentation.
- S6, S7, S8: In general, people sometimes had different interpretations and ideas and it was very useful for us to exchange and confirm these different ideas. We talked a lot to really understand other people's ideas and tried to understand the words they used.
- S7, S8: In answering the discussion questions, sometimes we used the words and phrases used in the text, and it gave us a good chance to discuss what they really meant in practical terms.
- S7, S8: The discussions were very effective. I noticed my misunderstandings and learned about new ideas and experiences from the other group members. This encouraged us to interact with one another.

- S7, S9: It was a great learning opportunity for us presenters to give discussion questions, moderate and guide group discussions, and elicit students' ideas. I had to keep interacting with them using key ideas and words. It helped me understand how to use them in combination with other words.
- S6, S8, S10: As a presenter, I felt a sense of achievement in conducting a discussion session, and now I'm very confident in communicating with others about second language acquisition.
- S7, S9, S10: It was good practice to use new words when talking to my classmates. In fact, I felt more confident in interacting with others using them.
- S8, S10: It was good to listen, read, write, and speak about the same information because it helped me remember some important words and phrases, with this knowledge strengthened in writing and speaking.