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## Practice-Oriented Paper

# Verbal Classrooms: Fluency Activities Through Structure Control Practice

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This paper describes an approach based on the principles of Skill Acquisition Theory which aims at helping students acquire spoken fluency and grammatical control through a system of practice called the Verbal Classrooms approach. In this approach, students move from the most basic aspects of spoken language to complex structures through a series of dynamic and dialogic activities. These activities encourage smoothness of speech, an increasing rate of speech, eye contact, and grammatical accuracy all in a fast-paced and lively classroom environment. The results of a survey of 159 Japanese university students with beginner to low-intermediate English proficiency who participated in the activities over several weeks is also provided, showing evidence that the approach is both enjoyed and seen as effective by university-age Japanese learners of English.

本論は、スキル習得理論に基づき、学習者の口頭言語の流暢性と文法制御習得の支援を目的とした実践システムである口頭教室アプローチの手法について解説する。このアプローチでは、学生は一連の動的で対話的な活動を通じて、口頭言語の最も基本的な局面からより複雑な構造へと移行する。これらの活動は、速いペースで活気のある教室環境で、アイコンタクト、スピーチの流暢性、スピーチの速度、および文法の正確性のすべてにおける向上を促進する。また、数週間にわたり活動に参加した159人の日本人大学生の調査結果も提示され、このアプローチが大学生世代の日本人英語学習者にとって、楽しく効果的であると評価されている。

ることの証拠を提示する。

Verbal Classrooms (VC) (Cruz, 2017) are exercises based around the concept of Structure Control (SC). SC describes grammar-centered phrases and sentences that an instructor gives students for pair-based spoken exercises. These “structures” start off as one- or two-word utterances but gradually progress towards longer, complex grammar structures and, eventually, independent conversations. Verbal Classrooms are carried out within a dynamic, fast paced, speaking-centered teaching and learning environment where Structure Control can be practiced. Students are not required to use any materials such as textbooks or handouts, but instead immediately practice, in pairs, short structures, and variations thereof, that the instructor presents. Quick partner changes, rapid turn-taking, and an intense din as all students in the room engage in simultaneous interactive exercises - these characterise the approach to language education that is described throughout this paper.

## **A Historical Positioning of Verbal Classrooms Within Theory**

The audiolingual method was a popular second language-teaching method in the 1940s and 50s. In his book *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner (1957) proposed that the act of learning a language was based on the function of reacting to verbal stimuli, first as a receiver, and later as a producer. In other words, Skinner viewed language learning as a behavior that could be reinforced. The audiolingual method had this model of language learning at its foundation. Students were presented with correct examples of grammatical forms and were required to memorize them with no explicit instruction. The belief was that with sufficient and repeated exposure to a structure, students would eventually be able to produce it spontaneously. However, Chomsky (1959) criticized that view by stating that the act of speech was far too complex, entailing the potential of generating an infinite number of patterns, and that a theory that viewed it as a simple stimulus and response would be insufficient for effective linguistic development.

As a result of this analysis, language teaching methods that depended on a

behaviorist model, such as the audiolingual method, fell from favor and were replaced by more communicative techniques. Arguably the most famous of these, communicative language teaching (CLT), which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, proposed that communicative competence is more important than grammatical accuracy. Communicative competence is defined by Canale and Swain (1980) as the combination of three critical domains: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. They contended that, although an understanding of a grammatical structure was important to language learning, an understanding of the appropriate context in which to use the structure was equally important.

There was also some speculation during the early stages of CLT that explicit teaching and practice of grammar was unnecessary. Krashen's (1977) famous input hypothesis proposed that the key condition for language learning to take place was simply exposure to language input that was slightly above the learner's level of competence. From this it can be inferred that language immersion programs like the ones found in Canadian public schools of the time period, in which anglophone children were taught regular class content in French without explicit reference to the grammatical structures (Baeyer & Baeyer, 2002), would be a perfect example of this theory being put into practice. However, Swain and Lapkin (1991) found that students in these programs, though able to develop a functional ability to comprehend and use the French language, often lacked the grammatical competence that is a key aspect of communicative competence. This led to a successful reform of the French immersion curriculum to include a *focus on form* component that gave students explicit grammar instruction along with authentic communication in French. The Verbal Classrooms method of language teaching emerged from these fundamental developments in language teaching and learning.

## **Foundational Theoretical Elements of Verbal Classrooms: Skill Acquisition Theory and the Generative Principle**

As the development of the *focus on form* approach in Canadian French immersion illustrates, although the communicative aspects of language learning are indeed important, the formal grammatical aspects of the target language cannot be ignored. To this day, however, questions remain concerning how to introduce and practice grammatical forms in a way that facilitates the development of students' overall communicative competence. DeKeyser (2007) adaptation of skill acquisition theory (SAT) to the language-learning context provides a foundation for the main principles of Verbal Classrooms that are explained in more specific detail later in this paper. Fundamentally, SAT aims to provide meaningful practice to students through three distinct stages: the initial representation of knowledge, initial changes in behavior, and the eventual spontaneous production of the target language.

In the first stage, involving the initial representation of knowledge, the schemata of the Japanese university students' four years of high school English language study is activated. At this stage, students are not expected to use the language competently, but they are primed for the use of the language through structured and controlled practice. In the second phase, characterized by initial changes in behavior, students are given chances to use the structure in controlled tasks that vary in their complexity and demands on the student's linguistic flexibility. Moreover, students are encouraged to combine structures to fulfill a communicative purpose. In the final stage, students are asked to use what they have practiced to complete a communicative task and are expected to produce the language required to complete that task spontaneously.

It is important to note that some of the terminology that explains the stages of SAT, especially "behavior", harkens back to the early behaviorist concepts that defined the audiolingual method. This is because there are aspects of the audiolingual method that are indeed useful, especially in the early stages of acquiring a new structure. Controlled practice is effective in the initial stages

of learning for familiarizing students with the structures of the target language. However, a critical break that SAT makes from the traditional audiolingual method is that it emphasizes the importance of meaningful practice. DeKeyser (2007) makes the key distinction between language behavior and language-like behavior. In order for the former to be achieved, there needs to be an element of communicative purpose in the language activity.

One criticism of controlled practice is that it can be too limited in scope and not take into account the vast variety of structures that can be used to achieve a single communicative purpose (Chomsky, 1959). However, as Butzkamm and Caldwell's (2009) *generative principle* illustrates, pattern practice can be extremely effective because although the capacity to generate sentences is infinite, it can be accomplished from the finite grammatical competence introduced through pattern practice. Nonetheless, pattern practice should only be the initial stage in language learning and students must move from pattern practice to more flexible and communicative forms of language use.

In the following section, a detailed description of the Verbal Classrooms method is given, highlighting its close connection to the theoretical underpinnings of skills acquisition theory. This will be followed by a discussion of the results of a survey which aimed to elicit student opinions about the effectiveness of the approach in a modern-day Japanese university setting.

## **Outline of the Verbal Classrooms Approach**

Verbal Classrooms are arranged physically such that students are seated in rows from the front of the room to the back, facing each other in pairs. Target language structures are written up on the board at the front of the room, which each pair will practice in dialogue for around a minute at a time. Students in one row will regularly move to the adjacent seat to create a new pair, with new language structures often being introduced and practiced.

In the very first lesson, students are introduced to the seven basic subject pronouns of I / You / He / She / It / We / They. In pairs, students practice saying only these, in order, taking turns (Student A: "I". Student B: "You". Student A: "He". Student B: "She". Etc.) (Fig. 1). After a few rounds, students shift positions

**I**  
**You**  
**He**  
**She**  
**It**  
**We**  
**They**

*Figure 1.* Seven Pronouns for Initial Verbal Classrooms Practices.

to create new pairs, and at the instructor's prompt, they then carry out the same exercise in the new pair for several more rounds. Fluency is promoted in that students are required not only to memorise the order of these seven familiar pronouns; they are also expected to establish and maintain eye contact, and not read from the board. They are encouraged to self- and peer-assess by seeing who can respond fastest, maintain eye contact best, and say the pronouns in order with the fewest mistakes in the loudest voice. Thus, an interactional dialogic classroom dynamic is established.

Having established these basic elements, grammar structures are introduced which will begin to engage the students in cognitive processing of the language, while still focusing on the development of fluency as the primary goal. A simple two-word subject-verb structure comes next. The instructor writes the conjugations of the 'be' verb on the board: I am / You are / He is / She is / It is / We are / They are (Fig. 2). Following the same procedures, students now alternate, taking turns, between these structures (Student A: "I am". Student B: "You are". Student A: "He is". Student B: "She is". Etc.). Again, after several rounds through the list, students shift partners and cycle through the structure a few more times. The ongoing partner changes ensure that they are constantly practicing with different people, and are always fully engaged. Physical movement from seat

**I am**  
**You are**  
**He is**  
**She is**  
**It is**  
**We are**  
**They are**

*Figure 2.* (To) Be Conjugation

to seat keeps their minds refreshed. There are no opportunities for students to disengage, to check their phones, or to nap.

Similar structures that include only minimal conjugations can be practiced at this early stage. I do / You do / He does / She does / It does / We do / They do, is one such example, as are conjugations of have/has, and simple verbs such as I go / You go / He goes, etc. Reversing the ‘be’ and ‘do’ conjugations so as to create question structures is also an appropriate early variation (Am I? / Are you / Is he? / Is she? Etc.).

Though these simple structures seem well below most university students’ level, the positive effect of practicing them in this fashion should not be underestimated. Despite having ‘knowledge’ of the rules of conjugations and subject/verb agreement, even competent students are challenged by being asked to maintain performance of the exercises in dialogue while maintaining eye contact, clear enunciation, and quick response times without textual aids. After a sufficient amount of practice, more words and/or variables are added to the structures, such as adverbials, possessive pronouns, or object pronouns. As structures become more complex, the other elements of Verbal Classrooms such as eye contact and speed become more challenging.

After these initial foundational structures have been established, the

**I am\***  
**You are\***  
**He is\***  
**She is\***            **\*sleepy**  
**It is\***  
**We are\***  
**They are\***

Figure 3. (To) Be Conjugation with Adjective

**I am\***  
**You are\***  
**He is\***  
**She is\***            **\*sleepy**  
**It is\***  
**We are\***  
**They are\***

Figure 4. (To) Be Conjugation Past Tense with Object Phrase

instructor can introduce complete clauses and sentences by adding adjectives or appropriate nouns to create utterances as long as a three-, four-, or even five-words; something like “I am sleepy” or, “I go to school”. (Figures 3 and 4). At this stage, the range and scope of possible example sentences from which short exercises can be created is practically limitless, and variations on simple statements can occupy as much time as a teacher deems appropriate.

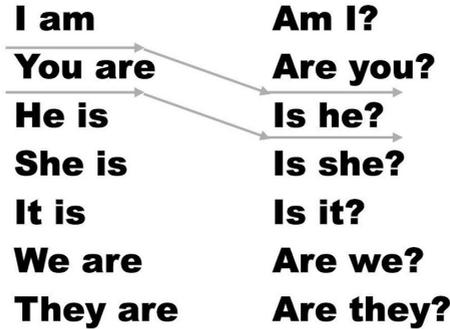


Figure 5. Basic AQp with (To) Be

## The Answer-Question Pattern

With the introduction of the Answer-Question pattern (AQp) the opportunity to produce meaningful dialogue is created. On the board, the instructor writes in two columns: On the left side are each pronoun's sentence structures (such as "I am", "You are", "He is", etc.), and on the right are the matching question forms ("Am I?", "Are you?", "Is he?") (Fig. 5). Nothing new is being shown to the students here, but the manner in which it is applied will almost certainly be new, and can be interestingly difficult at first, especially if they have not had much experience of interacting in English.

As illustrated in Figure 5, the AQp begins with the first sentence, "I am", and progresses down one row and to the right, to the question form of the next pronoun. Thus, Student A's utterance is: "I am, are you?". Student B would respond with the answer form of the "you" question: "You are", and similarly follow it by moving down and to the right so as to ask about "he"; thus - "You are, is he?". The response to this will be "He is, is she?". The students are to give a sentence-form answer using the subject that was in their partner's question ("I am, are you?" "You are, is he?" "He is, is she?" "She is, is it?" "It is, are we?" "We are, are they?"). The pattern continues and loops at, "They are, am I?". This can also be practiced with other variants such as do/does, have/has, and was/

<b>I have</b>	<b>Do I have?</b>
<b>You have</b>	<b>Do you have?</b>
<b>He has</b>	<b>Does he have?</b>
<b>She has</b>	<b>Does she have?</b>
<b>It has</b>	<b>Does it have?</b>
<b>We have</b>	<b>Do we have?</b>
<b>They have</b>	<b>Do they have?</b>

Figure 6. AQP Regular Verb

<b>I study*</b>	<b>Do I study*?</b>	
<b>You study*</b>	<b>Do you study*?</b>	
<b>He studies*</b>	<b>Does he study*?</b>	
<b>She studies*</b>	<b>Does she study*?</b>	
<b>It studies*</b>	<b>Does it study*?</b>	
<b>We study*</b>	<b>Do we study*?</b>	
<b>They study*</b>	<b>Do they study*?</b>	

\*English  
Everyday

Figure 7. AQP Regular Verb with Object Phrase

were. Later, structures with regular verbs can be introduced, with their auxiliary verb-based question forms (“I have, do you have?” “You have, does he have?”) (Figure 6). After the simple AQP has been practiced sufficiently, more complex structures, such as adverbials and objects can be introduced (“I study English every day; do you study English every day?”) (Figure 7).

Finally, the example in Figure 8 is called a “double variable conjugation”, where students must replace two variables in each of both the answer and the question.

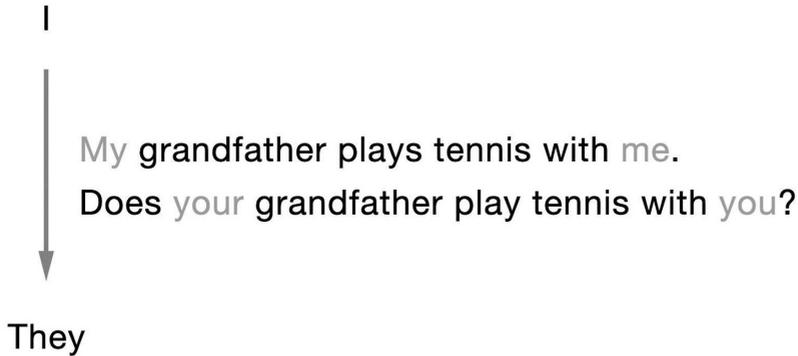


Figure 8. AQP Double Variable Conjugation (simplified diagram)

## Student Perceptions of VC's Effectiveness

In 2019, one of the authors of this study implemented the VC approach as a warm-up exercise in several university classes. Using little beyond the exercises that have been described above, the first 20-40 minutes of each weekly class was spent on Verbal Classrooms exercises. Through around eight weeks of this, it appeared that the students were enjoying the exercises. They seemed highly engaged, and were smiling and laughing while practicing the exercises together. Furthermore, they appeared to the teacher to be making an effort towards performing the exercises with accuracy and speed.

**Survey.** To gain a better insight into student perceptions, a number of research questions were posed which would allow us to determine whether our observations of the students' enthusiasm while carrying out the class exercises could be confirmed by the students' responses about their experience.

1. To what extent are the students enjoying these exercises?
2. Do the students perceive and recognize educational benefits in doing these exercises?
3. Would students prefer to do these exercises more, or less?

A mid-semester survey was prepared using Google Forms, which the students answered on their smartphones during class. Anonymity was guaranteed, and

the students were informed (in Japanese) in a written disclaimer at the start of the survey that participation was optional, and that their answers would be used not only to help decide the future direction of the class, but also to inform their teacher's research. The questions were presented in both English and Japanese. The first and third research questions were asked more or less directly, but the second research question, regarding whether the students perceived educational benefits, was examined in terms of the activities' utility in developing not only speaking ability but also familiarity with grammatical forms and rules. All survey questions asked for responses on either four- or five-point Likert scales. It should be noted that the exercises had been framed by this teacher as "drills" in his class, and thus that word appeared in the survey questions.

The survey was answered by 159 students at two universities in Western Japan. They were from various faculties but were all enrolled in English classes that focused on speaking skills.

## Results of Survey

Question 1 sought to answer the first research question, namely the extent to which the students actually enjoyed the exercises.

Figure 9 shows that eighty-nine percent of respondents reported enjoying the exercises. This was higher than had been expected, even given their apparent

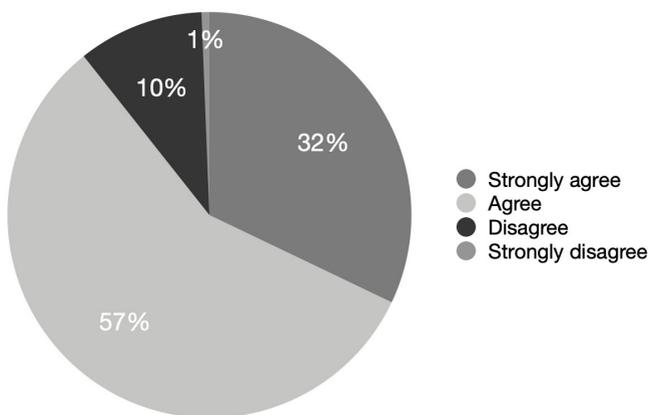


Figure 9. Q1 - Do you agree? "I enjoy doing these drills in class."

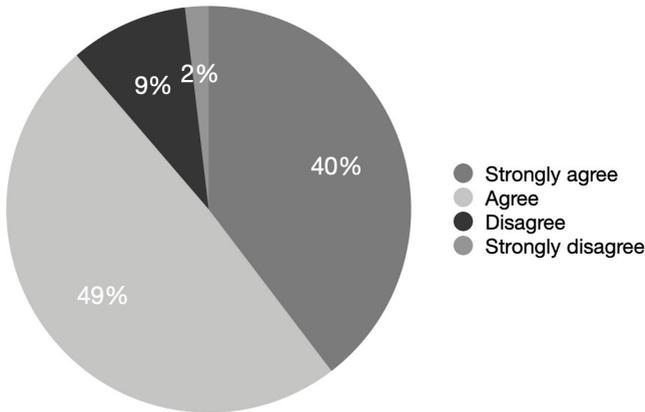


Figure 10. Q2 - Do you agree? “I think these drills are useful practice for speaking English better.”

enjoyment during the exercises. The concern that the students might not express quite as enthusiastic an attitude towards the exercises in an anonymous survey as they did when engaged in them with their peers was abated.

Question 2 was intended to answer the second research question in terms of student perceptions of the exercises’ value as speaking practice.

Figure 10 shows that eighty-nine percent of respondents perceived the drills as being useful for speaking practice.

Question 3 followed up by asking students whether they perceived benefits from the exercises in gaining familiarity with English grammar.

A similar finding is shown in Figure 11, namely that eighty-eight percent of respondents found the drills helpful in understanding grammar. This is a noteworthy result given that grammar study is not usually considered an enjoyable task. It is a validation of the speaking-based approach to grammar development.

Question 4 sought to inform the teacher’s planning for future lessons, and to serve as an evaluation of the decision to allow the drills to continue sometimes upwards of thirty minutes.

The clear majority of students were happy with continuing to spend a sizable proportion of the class time on these exercises. Only 17% of respondents wanted

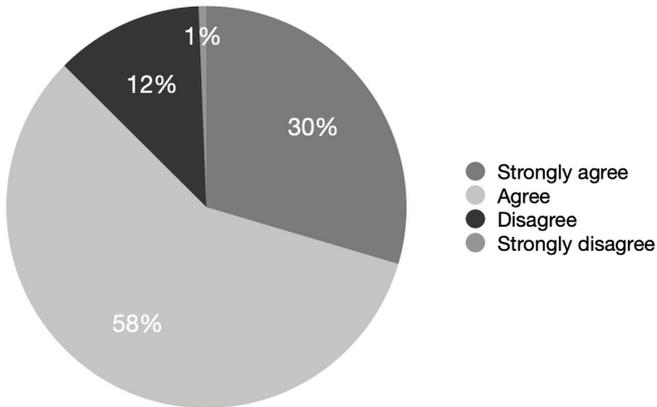


Figure 11. Q3 – Do you agree? “I think these drills are useful practice for understanding English grammar better.”

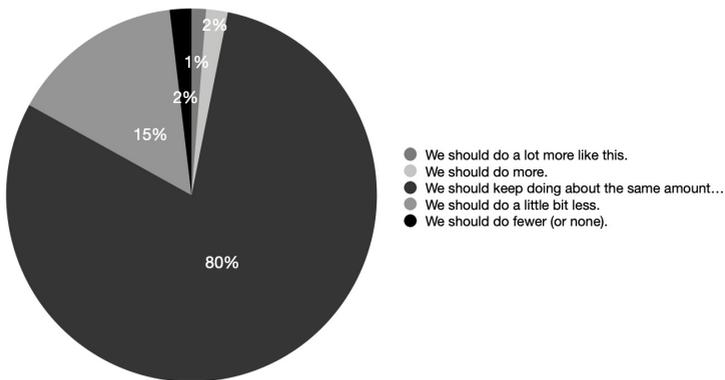


Figure 12. Q4 - Should we do more, or fewer drills in class?

to spend less than about 30 minutes on them each week. The teacher had been allowing the drills to continue for a duration that the students deemed suitable.

## Discussion of Survey Results

The survey was administered to help the teacher make plans for the remainder of the semester’s classes by ascertaining students’ perceptions of the value of Verbal Classroom activities. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Students clearly

enjoyed the approach and appeared to be seeing all the benefits of it that had drawn the teacher towards implementing it in the class. Moreover, the students saw the activities as very beneficial for developing their speaking skills and also their understanding of grammatical forms.

These findings suggest that teachers can reasonably expect students to find an approach such as this enjoyable and worthwhile. The extent to which the approach helps to establish automaticity and fluency, however, cannot be discerned from the present study. Future studies will aim at discerning the actual effectiveness of the approach by tracking student progress in both spoken production and grammatical accuracy over a period of time in comparison to a control group.

Despite the Verbal Classroom approach's obvious movement away from Communicative Language Teaching, it should not be considered a regression to audiolingual or behavioral methodologies, but rather an approach to fluency that encompasses the best and most efficacious elements of Skill Acquisition Theory. The close connections that the approach has with SAT, the tight focus on short grammar structures, and the enjoyment and utility that students in the study found in their experience of the exercises, all validate the approach as one that teachers might well utilise to some extent in their classrooms.

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