

# Effective Language Learning Requires Movable Furniture

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## Introduction

Communicative language learning has finally come into vogue in Japan. Communicative language learning, otherwise known as the communicative approach, "is based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning" (Teaching English). Kyoritsu Women's University (KWU), with a fairly wide selection of classes purportedly focusing on various aspects of communicative language learning, claims to want to be part of this trend, to "promote communication between our students and all who have a stake in the university's role" (Ishibashi). Unfortunately for those Kyoritsu faculty members who would like to employ a communicative approach in their classes, the ways in which a great majority of classrooms are furnished greatly impedes communicative learning activities. The impediment comes in the form of heavy desks arranged in rows, an arrangement more appropriate to traditional, teacher-centered lecturing. While these rooms serve well the purpose of many of the content-based lecture courses offered by the university, they make it extremely difficult, if not impossible to employ any of a wide variety of seating arrangements that are essential to conducting student-centered, discussion-based activities that are essential to communicative language learning.

At Kyoritsu the importance of providing an appropriate learning environment is well understood for classes with a laboratory component, such as dietary science within the Food Science Program, with tables for conducting experiments, sinks, gas outlets and appropriate storage for equipment and materials, or those requiring a studio environment, such as a substantial number of courses offered in the Design Program or Fine Arts Course, with all the accouterment necessary for that type of learning experience. What is not understood is what sort of learning environment is appropriate for classes in which students are expected to acquire and effectively use language for the purpose of meaningful interaction, and for discussion of topics and information related to class texts, activities and materials, in other words, communicative language learning.

## The case for moveable classroom furniture

The impact of the physical layout of a language-learning classroom on the ease or difficulty of conducting lessons is profound. Christopher Hale, Academic Director of New York University's Tokyo-based American Language Institute states, "It's a given that we frequently rearrange the seating during classes. I don't how we'd be able to effectively teach language without being able to do so" (Hale 2014). It is second nature to any experienced language teacher versed in communicative language learning that the arrangement of seating is frequently adjusted, or even dispensed with entirely, depending on the type of learning activity being done. And yet, at KWU this fundamental requirement, that students' seating arrangement be flexible, has not adequately been taken into account during the process of designating which classrooms are used for communicative language training. Neither has this requirement for flexibility in seating arrangement been sufficiently considered when deciding how to equip classrooms in which language training is conducted, thus the preponderance of classrooms set up for lecture style classes.

The problem with the traditional arrangement of desks with regard to language skills development is that this arrangement, referred to by Rosenfeld and Civikly (qtd. in McCorskey, McVetta 2009) as "something like tombstones in a military graveyard," is designed for unidirectional dissemination of information to students by a teacher, a purpose which it serves well because "it minimizes student-student interaction and places the primary interaction focus in the classroom on the teacher" (McCorskey, McVetta 2009). This is exactly what you might want in content lecture class, but is exactly what you would not want in a class devoted to developing language skills, or in any class, for that matter, that utilizes student-student interaction as part of the educational approach. Ur points out that one of the main goals of any language learning class with a speaking component is "that the students should actually talk a lot. As much time as possible during the activity should be used for talk by the students themselves" (1999). Thus, underlying choices of how to configure groupings of learners is the necessity for the instructor to provide a maximum amount and variety of interactive experiences within the time constraints of the class period. Unlike L1 learners, when in a university setting, working with adult or near adult L2 learners, exposure to the L2 is often limited to what can happen in the classroom (Spratt, et al. 2011), thus the imperative to utilize a variety of physical arrangements to facilitate both interactive experiences and mental engagement with the tasks at hand. As shown by Ridling, alternative-seating arrangements, such as those suggested below, "not only foster more frequent use of interactive verbal behaviors, but [...] also seemed to enable teachers to use [those] behaviors in ways that made their lesson presentation more active and collaborative among students" (1994).

For language skills instructors at KWU, having to use ill-suited classrooms leads to restriction of class activities to those that do not include any rearrangement of classroom furni-

ture. This greatly decreases the effectiveness of many communicative learning activities, or for those instructors and students hardy enough to do the physical labor of moving the heavy furniture currently situated in most rooms, there is a loss of instruction and practice time as well as a risk of injury due to the difficulty of rearranging the furniture. An additional problem associated with present furniture is the all too common situation in which students meet in classrooms with far more seating than is required for the class, and thus have the option of physically removing themselves from the instructor, the other (often more motivated) students and the learning activities by choosing a seat as far away from the front of the room as possible. While this is a common behavior, and to some extent understandable given a natural reticence to engage with others we have barely met or do not know at all, the creation of physical distance acts to disengage students from the learning experience, thereby lowering both motivation to learn and actual performance in learning tasks. If there are easily moveable, easily collapsible chairs and/or desks, an instructor would have the option of quickly reducing the seating to match the amount of students, move those students within a closer proximity to the instructor and each other and eliminate the opportunity to exile oneself to the opposite end of the classroom. Other problems associated with the lack of flexibility in room arrangement have to do with students being necessarily subjected to long stretches of unidirectional, traditional lecturing, with attendant deleterious effects on student learning and retention. As that type of classroom experience is all that the room arrangement accommodates, then that is what most instructors are limited to offering.

### **Effective seating arrangements for language skill classes**

Types of seating or standing arrangements commonly used in communicative language learning classes are chosen based on their utility and advantages. The arrangement that provides an absolute maximum of interaction is a pair arrangement. Orienting the seating in such a way as to have those in a pair directly facing one another best facilitates focus of attention on the partner's verbal and non-verbal communication. In a variation on this pattern, arranging the pairs in rows can facilitate the orderly rotation of partners by shifting the language partners in one of the rows either left or right by one person with each repetition of the task (see Figure 1). This type of arrangement is a staple of language skills classes, and is used extensively to provide maximum opportunity to practice speaking, and is especially useful when accurate production of language through frequent repetition of short conversational exchanges is the focus of the activity. Repetition of exchanges done in a conversation pair allows the practice to take place in a more naturalistic context, which is more meaningful, more of a 'real experience' for students.

To conduct a discussion with an entire group together, either a horseshoe or circular arrangement can work well (see Figures 2 and 3). If a visual aid such as a whiteboard, poster or projection on a screen is included in the discussion, the horseshoe arrangement will be bet-

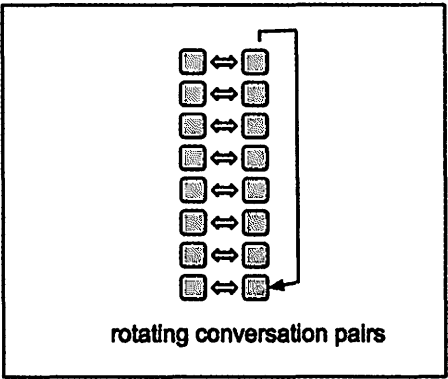


Figure 1 Pair arrangement

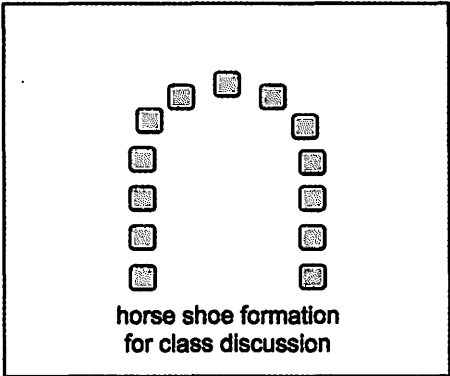


Figure 2 Horseshoe arrangement

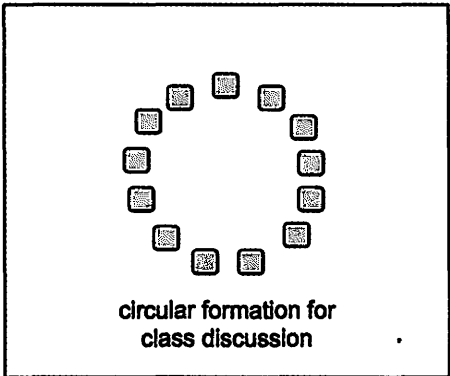


Figure 3 Circular arrangement

ter than the circle, physically orienting all students' visual focus and listening toward the instructor or discussion leader and the visual aid. When using a circular arrangement, the instructor has the option of joining the discussion by placing her or himself in the circle or removing her or himself from the circle and acting as a language resource, moving around the outside of the circle offering assistance where and when it's needed.

Arranging students into groups of three or more is also extremely useful when discussing content related questions, engaging in group problem solving or using a small scale presentation and discussion (P & D) format (see Figure 4). All language skills classes including speaking and listening components are greatly enhanced when students can engage in small group discussions as part of any number of lesson types, including Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP), Task-based Learning (TBL) or any other communicative approach to language learning.

Other useful configurations include seating arrangements that facilitate small-scale poster presentations offered by several class members at the same time with rotating audiences, af-

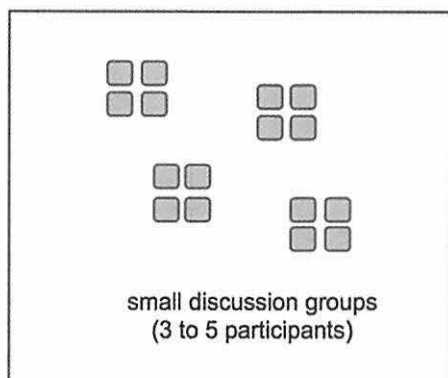


Figure 4 Small group discussion arrangement

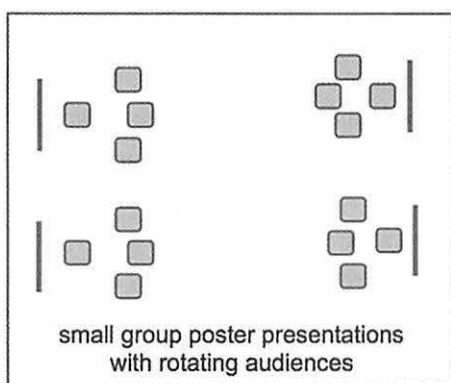


Figure 5 Poster presentation arrangement

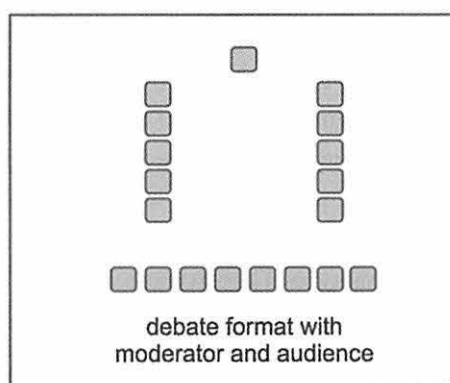


Figure 6 Debate format arrangement

fording presenters the opportunity to hone public speaking and presentation skills through a schedule of repetition and rotation of presentations within a class period. This type of poster presentation is often used in classes such as English Presentations Practice I, when students present their graduation paper topics during the process of writing, or in other classes that make use of a poster presentation format. Debate performance activities can be facilitated by a debate format arrangement that can be configured to include two debating teams, a moderator and audience composed of other students who take the role of evaluators of debate performances. Any class that can incorporate a debate activity, such as English Discussion Practice II, can be done far more easily with an effective arrangement of seating (see Figures 5 and 6).

A communicative approach to learning can also include activities in which classroom furniture is dispensed with altogether, in which chairs and desks are moved out of the center of the classroom creating an open space in which students interact and engage in group activities while standing (see Figure 7). An example of such an activity could be an information jigsaw activity in which students freely move about the classroom, engaging in conversation

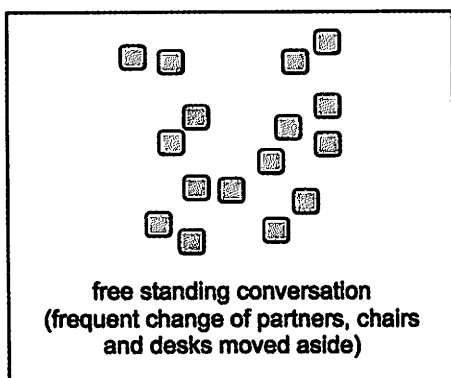


Figure 7 Free standing arrangement

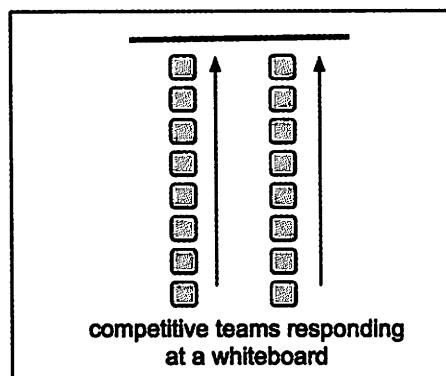


Figure 8 Whiteboard teams arrangement

with multiple partners in order to exchange information and fill in gaps in an information matrix provided in the form of a worksheet. Such an activity can give students practice in repeating question and answer forms, defining key vocabulary and reviewing key concepts and content. Moving furniture off to the side of the classroom and creating an open space also allows better group use of the whiteboard for a wide variety of activities, including forming teams in lines in front of the whiteboard and doing activities which require each member of a team to contribute an additional piece of information to a list as quickly as possible (see Figure 8). This type of activity also is helpful in recalling and reviewing vocabulary and key concepts related to a specific topic. The physically active nature of these types of activities also increases students' ability to concentrate due the positive effects of physical movement, sometime referred to as "energizing activities" on mental activity (Jensen 2005).

While the focus of this article has been the relationship between the types of seating arrangements that can or cannot be made in a classroom and the ways in which those arrangements can or cannot facilitate language learning, the fact is that a broad range of content classes in which a lecture format is the main form of activity could benefit greatly from including occasional opportunities for students to engage in group discussion activities, offering students a regular breaks from long stretches of one-way, teacher-to-student communication, and giving students chances to review lecture material by talking through discussion questions related to lecture material and sharing ideas and understanding of the class material.

### Student reactions to alternative seating arrangements

In order to understand better how KWU students feel about learning in classrooms in which instructors can freely rearrange classroom furniture, a survey was conducted among those students who were participating in the 2014 Kyoritsu Women's University Australia Study Program at University of Queensland (UQ) within the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education (ICTE). The 36 participating students were chosen to survey due to the

fact that they were experiencing language skills classes at UQ in classrooms in which all furniture can and is moved constantly into a wide variety of arrangements, including many of those described above. Thirty-three of the 36 participating students responded to the survey. These students were asked to compare their learning experiences in both KWU and UQ with regard to how the seating arrangements facilitated or didn't facilitate their learning experience.

Among the students responding to the question, "Does modifying the position of desks and chairs and having students stand or sit down in various arrangements in the communication activities at the ICTE make it easier to learn?" positive responses far outweighed the negative, with 29 students offering wholly positive responses, three offering positive responses coupled with a negative comment, and one student offering a negative comment. Positive responses to the above question included points such as being able to stay awake far more easily, being able to develop more and better relationships with other students, being much more active in classes, feeling more relaxed and refreshed, and being able to exchange ideas and opinions more frequently and easily, among others. Negative comments were mostly limited to the complaint that it is somewhat bothersome to move desks and chairs, with one student reporting that such activity made her tired (see Appendices I and II).

With regard to the question, "In teaching communication activities at Kyoritsu, if tables and chairs can be rearranged and students allowed to move around the classroom as is done at ICTE, would it be easier to study?" responses were more mixed, but still showed many more positive responses than negative. Twenty-two students offered positive responses, citing rationales such as being able to more easily study and to have better interactions with other students, among others. A few students gave mixed responses that showed some support for the proposition offered in the question, but also including caveats concerning the time required to move desks and chairs. A similarly small number of students stated that such a situation wouldn't happen at KWU because of space limitations, and three students made no comment or stated that they didn't know (see Appendices I and II).

While student responses were not uniformly positive concerning the use of moveable furniture in their language classrooms, they were numerically far more positive than negative and often evinced strong enthusiasm for study in classrooms in which the furniture can be quickly and easily rearranged to suit the learning activity.

## Conclusion and recommendations

As Kyoritsu Women's University continues to update its equipment and facilities there will be opportunities to reevaluate choices concerning acquisition of appropriate classroom furnishings. Given the numerous advantages of lightly constructed chairs and desks that move on casters and can be easily rearranged to suit a wide variety of classroom activities, it is highly recommended that the flexibility provided by moveable classroom furniture be a primary con-

sideration in decisions concerning acquisition of desks and chairs for use in small to medium sized classrooms, as moveable furniture will facilitate communicative learning through flexible seating arrangements that enhance both learning and teaching.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Survey form — Student opinions regarding ICTE communication activities (focus on classroom arrangement)

Original Japanese form distributed to students

ICTE 学習環境と授業のやり方についてのアンケート 以下の質問にお答えください。

- |   |
|---|
| 1. ICTE のコミュニケーションアクティビティで机や椅子の位置を変形して、立ったり、座ったりすると学習しやすくなりますか？ 理由を教えてください。 |
| 2. 共立のコミュニケーション演習の授業でも ICTE のように机と椅子を動かしたり、体を動かしたりすると、勉強がしやすくなりますか？         |

ご協力、ありがとうございました。

English translation of form distributed to students

Please answer the following questions concerning the way of teaching and learning environment at ICTE.

- |  |
|--|
| 1. Does modifying the position of desks and chairs and having students stand or sit down in various arrangements in the communication activities at the ICTE make it easier to learn? Please give a reason for your opinion? |
| 2. In teaching communication activities at Kyoritsu, if tables and chairs can be rearranged and students allowed to move around the classroom as is done at ICTE, would it be easier to study?                               |

Thank you for your cooperation.

### Appendix II: Student responses to survey

- ICTE のコミュニケーションアクティビティで机や椅子の位置を変形して、立ったり、座ったりすると学習しやすくなりますか？ 理由を教えてください。
  - 動いた方が気持ち的に積極的になれると思いました。
  - はい。ずっと座りっぱなしでないから眠くならない。
  - 机を動かしたり椅子の位置を何回も変えているとつかれてしまう。
  - 学習しやすくなります。周りの人と話しやすくなるし、立ったり座ったりすることで退屈に感じなくなります。

- 学習はしやすいが、少し面倒。
- あまり話さない生徒とも接することができて仲良くなれた気がした。そのために学習しやすかった。
- 学習がしやすいけど、めんどくさい。
- いろんな人と話しやすくなる。
- なります。身体を使うことによって覚えやすく楽しい。
- なります。眠くならない。
- 学習しやすくなる。皆の意見がよりたくさん聞けるから。
- はい。いろんな人と会話することができる。眠くならない。
- 学習しやすいと思う。その方が見やすい位置に移動出来る。しかし、移動に時間がかかり、面倒である。
- 余計な動きをせずに済み、授業に集中しやすくなる。
- Yes. 眠くならない。いろんな人の意見がきける。
- なります。→分かりやすい。眠くならない。
- 学習しやすくなる。ずっと同じ姿勢での授業でないので、眠くなりにくい気がします。
- 動くから眠くならない。
- 座っているだけでなく動いたりすることで脳が活性化する気がする。あと集中力が持続する。
- まだ知らない人と仲良くなれるし、色んな人の意見、考え方が聞けてタメになる。
- クラスの色々な人と意見交換することができるので学習しやすくなると思います。
- 色々な人と短い時間でコミュニケーションをして、必要な情報を交換したり、趣味を共有できたりして、英語力の向上に繋がったと思います。
- 動くことによってがっつり勉強という意識ではなく、リラックスして授業を受けることが出来ている。変形し、グループで考える事で、沢山の意見を聞くことが出来た。
- 固定の席より、他の人とコミュニケーションを取ることができるしジェスチャーを使ったりすることで表現の幅が広がると思います。
- 学習しやすくなる。体をうごかすことでリフレッシュできる。
- 学習しやすい→立つ、イスを移動するなど、半強制的に授業に参加することができる。
- 他の人と会話しやすくてよかった。
- 学習しやすい。話しやすく、楽しく勉強できるから。
- 人との距離が縮まってコミュニケーションがとりやすかった。
- はい。動くことによってねむくならずすむし、いろいろな人とコミュニケーションができるからです。
- 広くつかえる。
- ねむいときにはうれしいけれど少しめんどくさい。
- グループトークの機会が多いのは、学習しやすいです。

2. 共立のコミュニケーション演習の授業でも ICTE のように机と椅子を動かしたり、体を動かしたりすると、勉強がしやすくなりますか？

- 何とも言えない。
- YES! 英語を楽しむことができる。
- 机や椅子をうごかすより積極的に英語を話すようにした方が勉強しやすいと思います。
- はい。
- 積極的にコミュニケーションがとれるようになると思う。
- ならないと思う。
- しやすいけど、時間をもったいないでない気もする。
- そう思います。
- ならない、せまいから。
- ならない。せまいから。
- 勉強しやすくなると思う。
- はい。
- わからない。
- なと思います。
- Yes. はい。
- しやすいです！
- 勉強はしやすいと思う。けれども、机と椅子を動かすのが少し大変。
- 机と椅子を動かすと、人との距離が近く感じていい気がする。
- うーん。わからない。でも私は集中力がつく分、そういった方法で勉強してみたい。あとは共立に来ている留学生と勉強や、UQ student みたいに合流したい。
- 机と椅子は動かしづらいから、体を動かす内容を増やしたほうがいいと思う!!
- 勉強しやすくなると思います。
- コミュニケーションの1つとして、体を動かして、伝えたいことを伝えることで勉強がしやすくなると思います。
- なと思う。共立では2人でのことが多いので、グループで出来たらいいなと思う。
- すべきだと思います。
- 絶対にそっちの方が、勉強しやすい。
- 多分しやすいと思います。
- はい。
- はい。ぜひ、共立の授業でもとりいれてほしいです。
- no response.
- はい。話す相手をこまめにかえることで、よりたくさんの人とコミュニケーションできるので良いと思います。
- そうだと思う。
- ときとばあいによる。
- そう思います。