
Encouraging Active Participation With Response Cards

William R. Pellowe
Kinki University (Fukuoka)
pellowe@fuk.kindai.ac.jp

Stephen M. Paton
Kinki University (Fukuoka)
paton@stevepaton.com

Paul Shimizu
paulshim@intercompress.com

Response cards are cards that all students hold up simultaneously in response to a teacher's question. Response cards improve student concentration, and encourage a more active engagement with the material. Periodic and judicious use of response cards can help students to stay focused in the classroom. These cards also allow the teacher to quickly gauge the students' understanding of the material. In this paper, we outline some of the research done with response cards, and we provide examples of a variety of classroom activities.

レスポンスカード(応答カード)は、生徒全員が教師の問いに応答して同時に掲げるカードである。レスポンスカードは生徒の集中度を高め、より能動的な教材への関与を促す。レスポンスカードを適宜使用することにより、生徒が教室で集中力を維持することを助けることができる。これらのカードはまた、生徒が教材をどの程度理解できているかを、教師が短時間で推し測るのを可能にする。本稿はレスポンスカードを用いて行われた研究を概説し、さまざまなクラス活動の例を示す。

Too often, students' motivation to listen closely decreases after answering the teacher's question, confident of not being called on again soon. We teachers assume that we are talking to the entire class, thus providing them all with some valuable input, but input is only valuable to those who attend to it. One way to maintain student engagement is with a simple yet versatile tool for the classroom called response cards. Response cards are "simultaneously held up by all students in the class to display their responses to questions or problems presented by the teacher" (Heward et al., 1996, p. 5). These cards could be as simple as pieces of colored paper or "*batsu maru*" ("x and o") paddles available in Japan at 100 yen shops. At various points during the class, the teacher asks

the students multiple-choice questions. The students are all required to answer by holding up one of their response cards.

A high-tech version of response cards are educational audience response systems. Instead of colored paper, the students have electronic clicker devices to send their answers electronically to the teacher's computer system (Banks, 2006; Pellowe, 2010; Pellowe & Shimizu, 2010; Steinberg, 2010; Wertheimer, 2009). In many cases, though, a simple, low-tech response card system can be more flexible than a high-tech one (Pellowe, 2011).

Woolf (1981) reported on using four-color response cards at a medical university in large lecture classes with hundreds of students. Woolf found that the cards helped hold students' attention, while students themselves reported that the response cards help them to stay awake. In an elementary mathematics class, Lambert, Cartledge, Heward, & Lo (2006) found that response cards helped students to participate more, and answer more questions correctly. They also found

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a decrease in disruptive behavior (Lambert, Cartledge, Heward & Lo, 2006). Response cards have been found to increase test and quiz scores, increase participation, increase learning, and decrease off-task behavior such as chatting or sleeping (Randolph, 2007).

For the teacher, response cards provide a clear picture of how well the class as a whole understands particular concepts or details. In science course lectures, for example, if nearly every student answers correctly, the teacher knows that the students have understood the lecture so far, and the teacher can continue with the lecture. However, if many students answer incorrectly, the teacher knows that the students have not understood the lecture very well, and at that point, the teacher can try explaining that aspect of the lecture again.

Types of Activities

In our classes, we use a two-sided response card co-developed by two of the authors (Pellowe & Shimizu, 2010; Shimizu & Pellowe, 2010). Each side has two answer areas at either end (Figure 1). The answer area has a color, a shape and a letter, making it easy to see the students' answers. While this article discusses techniques and procedures used with this specific response card, similar cards or even electronic clickers

would work equally well. Response cards are not intended to be used for the entire lesson time; rather, they are most effective when used periodically and judiciously during the lesson.

Listening Activities

Response cards improve listening comprehension activities. Before listening, students can be given some multiple-choice questions to answer. The students understand that they will all be asked to answer with the response cards, so, in our experience, they seem to pay much closer attention during the listening activity. An example question:

What time will they meet?

A: 2:15

B: 2:30

C: 2:45

D: 3:15

A more challenging alternative is to simply provide the questions:

Why did he have to walk to the gas station?

Afterwards, the teacher shows students the options, and they can choose the one that most closely resembles the information they wrote down:

A: His car ran out of gas.

B: His car got a flat tire.

C: His car crashed.

D: He forgot where his car was parked.

With every student showing their answers at the same time, teachers can see at a glance how easy or difficult the activity was, and whether or not the audio should be replayed. Also, the students know that they are accountable; if they're not holding up an answer, the teacher will be able to see that immediately. In our experience, the number of students who ignore or are distracted during listening activities decreased when response cards were introduced.

Some textbooks contain the following type of listening comprehension question:



Figure 1. A two-sided response paddle

Listen. One of these statements is false. Three are true.

A: They are cousins.

B: They work at the same company.

C: One of them is very tall.

D: They're eating lunch.

Checking this type of question can be tricky. The teacher can ask the whole class each option in turn (e.g., "Are they cousins?"). The vocal, outgoing students will probably chime in to answer, while reticent students as well as those simply not paying attention will remain silent. Or the teacher could ask for a show of hands (e.g., "Raise your hands if you think the first one is false"), but the slow responders might be just following what they see other people doing. These may not be the best way to go, especially if the first sentence is actually the false one. Alternatively, teachers could just ask the class, "Which one is false?" The outgoing students would all say what they thought the answer was. If answers are varied, though, we may not actually know who thought what. We will not know how many students were "voting" for each option. A four-option response card has an obvious advantage over any of these methods of eliciting students' answers.

Grammar

Response cards are also good ways to check students' understanding of grammatical points, either before explanation (to determine whether any explanation is needed) or afterwards (to see how well the general idea has been grasped). The teacher could put about ten problems on the board or on paper distributed to the students, such as:

The Mona Lisa [A: painted B: was painted by]

Leonardo da Vinci.

Textbooks and workbooks often contain grammar problem sections. If these sections include choices, then assigning A-D values for each choice is straightforward. Otherwise, the teacher can assign letter values for the alternative answers.

Speaking Warm-Up

These response cards are also useful to elicit students'

own answers as a warm-up to a speaking activity. The teacher writes a basic pattern on the board, and asks students a variety of questions.

Have you ever _____?

A: Yes, many times.

B: Yes, a few times.

C: Yes, but only once.

D: No, never.

Of course, if the responses can vary between students (such as in this example, or in an opinion survey), there is a possibility that some students will answer randomly, rather than actually considering the questions. To ensure that this is not the case, some of the teacher's questions should be easily verifiable. All students would be expected to hold up "A" to the question, "Have you ever eaten rice?" All would respond with a "D" to the question, "Have you ever flown to the moon?"

Class Applications

Presentation Software

As well as utilizing response cards with published textbooks, spoken questions and prompts, and items on the board, teachers can use presentation software such as PowerPoint or Keynote to come up with their own materials for checking comprehension of any aspect of any part of a lesson. In fact, using presentation software to display questions or prompts, with the answers or responses from which to choose, allows teachers to create engaging materials customized to the comprehension level of each particular class, and to check precise aspects of lesson content at any stage of a lesson.

For example, as a lead-in to a unit on asking information questions in the past simple tense, a series of slides featuring a base verb, and four options for its past conjugation can be produced and run through as a warm-up:

eat

A: eat

B: eats

C: ate

D: eight

These can be presented in any way the teacher prefers; either outside of any context, as in the previous example, or with accompanying graphics, or within short or long texts.

Given the ease of copy/pasting slide after slide and changing only the textual content on each copy, rather than needing to re-do formatting or layout on each one, the teacher is able to produce as many “checking” slides as he or she deems necessary, and has the flexibility in the classroom to use only as many slides as are needed. A single slide, featuring a text box at the top for a question or prompt, the four A, B, C, and D options down the left side, and a text box for giving a response for each one, is a perfect template that can be duplicated and edited as necessary for use at any stage of any kind of lesson.

For example, as a follow-up to the past simple verbs exercise above, the slide can be duplicated, the text boxes edited to easily come up with a more advanced, conceptual version of much the same thing:

What did he eat?

A: He ate an apple.

B: He is ate an apple.

C: He is eaten an apple.

D: He eats an apple.

Should all the students demonstrate an ability to select the correct answer, the lesson can progress.

A significant benefit of using presentation software for such instruction is the ability on the part of teachers to create professional-looking materials of their own, with engaging, interesting, or even amusing content. An image search with Google, for example, reveals a plethora of exciting and funny pictures that the teacher could select to use as the basis of otherwise potentially tiresome grammar instruction. Imagine, if you will, a photograph of Santa Claus riding a bicycle underwater with the aid of scuba gear, alongside a 15-foot shark, used in class to elicit and concept-check the present continuous, or prepositions of place, or indeed any language point; such “silly” content has the potential to engage the students a great deal better than, say, a textbook picture of a man eating an apple.

However, without any mechanism in place for students to engage actively, even the best and most

interesting PowerPoint-based instruction cannot be said to be student-centered, and engagement cannot be guaranteed. Furthermore, teachers have no way of knowing how well their points are being understood. Response cards solve this problem, and go a long way towards turning presentation-software based sections of lessons into memorable, engaging, student-centered, and even communicative activities, despite being screen-based and teacher-controlled.

TOEIC Bridge Test Preparation

Preparation courses for the TOEIC test have long been an object of study in Japanese universities, and many Japanese universities now use the TOEIC Bridge test for placement and assessment. Teachers are therefore faced with the challenge of keeping large classes engaged whilst preparing them for the test. The combination of presentation software and response cards can be easily and effectively utilized in TOEIC preparation classes.

In a large class, with no practical means of checking each student's answers to, for example, a textbook's practice page of ten multiple-choice grammar questions (such as those found in part four of the TOEIC Bridge test), a teacher is left with little option other than to simply inform students of the answer to each item, and perhaps give a brief explanation of why it is the correct answer, before going on to the next item; all the while not knowing whether the explanation was necessary, or even understood. Calling upon individual students to give their answer to an item has the potential to cause embarrassment, and might result in reticence and a slackening of the pace of the class. Instead, by asking all of the students to simultaneously indicate their answers to each question using a response card, the teacher can instantly see which items students are getting wrong (and thus which items need to be explained), and which items are understood by all (and thus can be skipped past without explanation). This is an enormous boost to pace and efficiency.

The thematic content of TOEIC tests is neither engaging nor particularly fun, and most textbooks do, unfortunately, reflect this accurately. This adds to the difficulty of keeping students engaged. Using a combination of response cards and presentation

software, teachers can produce TOEIC-format materials of their own that are unique, engaging, comprehensible, and appropriate for the level of the students in the class.

In part one of the test, for example, in which students see a picture, listen to four statements, and choose the one that best describes the picture, rather than using grainy black and white photographs of uninteresting daily life, teachers can use presentation software to create materials based around interesting, exciting, or funny pictures, to teach the mechanics and strategies of the test without boring students. Presentation software facilitates the production of abundant practice material, and the response cards keep students engaged throughout a lesson.

Part two of the test requires students to choose one of three responses to a question or statement as being appropriate. A common strategy for this section is for the students to listen particularly closely to the interrogative, if there is one, and to choose their answer based mainly on that. An effective exercise for practicing this strategy that is made possible by the combination of presentation software and response cards is to prepare numerous slides that feature the text of only an interrogative and three possible responses, only one of which matches, as in the following example:

Where _____?

A: At 10 o'clock.

B: It belongs to John.

C: They're in the kitchen.

Example after example can be easily made, student responses can be checked using cards, and the lesson can move on at an appropriate point.

The third listening section of the test has students read questions in their test booklet, and listen to short conversations or statements for the answers. Using presentation software for practice of this section, either including or alongside audio recordings, takes away the necessity of printing materials, by having all text displayed on screen, and allows the teacher to customize question items to the level of comprehension of the students. Once again, response cards allow teachers to rapidly gain an understanding of their students' comprehension question by question, and know when

to go into further explanation of an item or to move on. Indeed, if response cards show the teacher that the students are consistently having trouble, then easier question items can be prepared for subsequent classes.

Conclusion

Response cards improve student concentration, and encourage a more active engagement with the material. Periodic and judicious use of response cards can help students to stay focused in the classroom. These cards also allow the teacher to quickly gauge the students' understanding of the material, allowing teachers to know when review is necessary and when it is not. Response cards are a simple and low-tech way to bring about significant changes in one's classes.

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Authors' Biographies:

William R. Pellowe (MA (Distinction) TESOL) has been teaching English in Japan since 1990. His primary research area is CALL. He runs ELT Calendar (www.eltcalendar.com).

Stephen M. Paton (M.Ed TESOL, Cambridge CELTA, Apple Distinguished Educator) has been teaching English for ten years. His research interests include self-efficacy theory and strategies-based instruction.

Paul Shimizu (Cert.Ed. University of London) has been teaching English in Japan for over three decades. He is also an editor and project developer for Intercom Press (www.intercompress.com).

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Proceedings Editor-in-Chief

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Doshisha University

Editors

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Layout and Design by

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