

The Effective Classroom

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The Effective Classroom

効果的な授業

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本論文では、日本の大学でコミュニケーションクラスを受講する1年生に効果的な教授技術を調査する。学生は実用的な会話スキルを持たないため、オープンエンドタスクの使用は不十分であるし、また、語彙中心の授業も、学生が高校で習得するような潜在的語彙を増加させるだけである。必要なのは、学生の特定のニーズに合うこれらの中間点である。

この「中間点」には以下4つのポイントが含まれる：1) 親しみのあるトピックを利用して、学生が言語に特化したスキルに注意を向け、そのトピックについて話したくなるような状態に促す。2) 打ち解けた雰囲気を作り出して、なじみのない場所で話すことへのためらいを払拭する。3) 英語を使わなければならない教室環境にすることで、どんな状況においても、学生が英語を使用するように促す。4) 特定の会話ツールを教えることで、学生の自信を向上させ、学生自らが気軽に会話を始めたり、終わらせたりできるよう促す。

In this paper the authors hope to outline an effective first-semester course for Japanese college students of intermediate ability. At first, we will describe our student population, and give a fuller description of our goals. We will also show how to develop a congenial classroom atmosphere and illustrate the specific tools of conversation. We will explain in detail a class we use in the first term which incorporates many of these points. Finally, our research and testing procedures will be outlined.

Our students, like almost all first-year Japanese university students, have received six years of English education. About a third of the students in our program had a native English speaker in the classroom at some point during junior or senior high school. By their freshmen year of college our students bring a great deal of grammar and vocabulary knowledge to the classroom. In general, their speaking ability has not been developed to the same level as has their grammar and vocabulary. This results in a college freshman who can not readily call upon or use their knowledge of English when attempting to speak. Of course there are a certain percentage in every class who either have a natural talent for English or have a keen interest and have further pursued English study outside of school. So in every class there are a few students who feel more

or less comfortable trying to communicate in English. The vast majority, however, are very hesitant to do so. In our initial survey, when asked how well they could communicate in English, the students rated themselves 5.1 on scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the highest.

The primary goal for our first-term communication class is to help students develop their English ability to the point where they can engage in a five minute conversation. To achieve this goal, the authors feel it is necessary to establish a class which uses a more structured approach, uses familiar topics, and is not overly reliant on a large corpus of new vocabulary. Of fundamental importance is to reinforce and build upon the English knowledge the students have, to make them feel comfortable and confident in using English in meaningful exchanges. In order to do this, it is necessary to create an atmosphere in which they feel safe to exchange information, in other words, to create a class that feels bonded and works well together.

One of the major obstacles to overcome in a communication class with Japanese students is their relative hesitation to express themselves in social situations, especially in front of strangers. It is therefore extremely important to set the mood in the first few classes by using activities that emphasize interaction with others. One of our preferred techniques is an information card creation activity that involves student interviews. Instead of having students simply fill out information cards, the students are paired with partners not known to them. Student 1 (S1) and Student 2 (S2) interview each other and, subsequently, create each other's cards. After the cards are created, they are exchanged so that each student holds the card containing his or her personal information. S1 and S2 then work together to create questions on the back of their cards designed to elicit personal information from the teacher. S1 and S2 then attempt to guess the teacher's answers to these questions by writing out their predictions on the cards. While the students create identical questions for the teacher, they are allowed to make their own guesses. After both sides of the card are completed, S1 and S2 are paired with S3 and S4. S1 then introduces S2 to the other group members using information remembered from the interview stage. S3 and S4 will then each ask one original question about S2 beyond the scope of the card's information that S1 will attempt to answer based on his or her impression of S2. This activity will continue until all four group members have introduced their partners. This allows each student to learn a rather significant amount of information about three of his or her classmates in a relatively short period of time. After completing this activity, the cards are collected by the teacher who will either verbally answer commonly asked questions on the backs of the cards, or will write the answers on each card and return the cards next week at which time the students

can affix their photos to the front.

An effective communication class is one in which all members feel comfortable sharing information, where members are willing to ask follow-up questions, and where the members feel a responsibility towards helping each other learn English. It is for these reasons that the teacher must make an earnest effort to help the class to bond. This should begin in the first class. Our students are freshmen in a new college, with new classmates and a new style of communication class. The activities of the first weeks should be communicative ones in which the students can find out as much about each other as possible. It is in the first few weeks where the class can gel, common interests can be discovered, and friendships formed. When the students feel connected to each other they will work harder to make the class more effective. Our research showed that students preferred pair and small group activities over whole class and solo activities [see figure 1]. Teachers should be aware of students comfort zone when designing class activities, in order to enhance this feeling of interconnectedness.

Student Grouping for Speaking Tasks

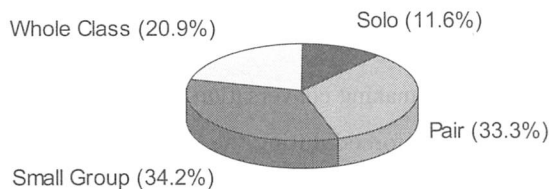


Figure 1

A concern for many teachers is controlling the amount of Japanese spoken in the classroom. As adult learners, the students have an opportunity to use their native language (L1) in beneficial ways. Unfortunately, L1 too often becomes a crutch for less highly-motivated students and can spread out of control unless managed efficiently. We advocate a hybrid approach. In our classes we have found that allowing students to use Japanese, when embedded within English questions and statements, works extremely well in most cases. If students constantly check dictionaries, it breaks the natural flow of communication and reduces focus; while if students lapse into Japanese conversation, they miss the opportunity to improve. We have found that in the cases where S1 does not know the correct way to say something in English, she can simply ask her partner, "How do you say _____ in English?" This maintains the spirit of using English as the

primary language in the class as well as providing the opportunity for S2 to access her knowledge of English when translating the word or phrase for S1. This technique is much quicker than using a dictionary and maintains the flow of the conversation. There are two cautionary notes with this approach. First, the classroom English needs to be introduced in the initial class meeting and reinforced in several subsequent classes. We use a 10-minute surprise quiz in the second class that is graded immediately after it is given. The students are told that they will be given the same quiz in the third class and that if their score on the second test is higher than on the first, they will receive that grade. However, if their score is lower the second time, they will receive the average of the two grades. This guarantees at least three weeks of active exposure to classroom English without taking up an inordinate amount of class time. The second cautionary note is concerned with a common error that students make with the two questions, “How do you say _____ in English?” (Q1) and “What does _____ mean?” (Q2). The problem lies with an error in translation. The Japanese equivalent of Q1 is “_____は英語で何と言いますか” The question word in the Japanese version “何” means “What” in English. The opposite is true for Q2 where the question word in the Japanese version “_____はどう言う意味ですか” means “How” in English. As a result, students often ask, “What do you say _____ in English?” and “How does _____ mean?” If the teacher emphasizes this point of confusion in the first class, it will provide the students with a memory device to avoid misusing these questions throughout the entire year.

Teaching the fundamental tools of making conversation is a central part of our communication class. These can be taught and reinforced during the first semester as students develop their communication skills. As simple and rote as the skill of *making introductions* seems, recognizing your partner, learning her name, and introducing yourself are clear indications to the speaker that this will be an authentic conversation. Not only do introductions reinforce social connections, they force students to recognize their classmates. In addition to using certain phrases, introductions also require a certain disposition. Eye contact and a smile might appear unimportant but, in fact, they are great aids to communication. They signal to one’s partner a willingness to listen, which inspires confidence in the speaker.

Another important conversation skill is *opening a conversation*. This signals to one’s partner what the speaker intends to discuss. For example, when the topic is “hometown”, one student might say, “So, where are you from?” These structures are necessary for effective communication. Students often hesitate to begin speaking because they are not sure how to start the conversation. These structures help the student to speak more naturally and give the student

confidence to start speaking. It is very important for the students to realize that they are initiating the conversation in a normal and polite way. These phrases serve as catalysts and help students to overcome this initial inertia. Such activation structures are of great assistance to nervous first year students. *Closing the conversation* is equally important. Of course there are a variety of ways to close a conversation and take one's leave. One pattern that students enjoy is looking at their watch and dramatically saying, "Oh, sorry, I have to go. Nice talking to you." To which the listener responds, "Oh, my pleasure. See you later."

Another important skill for students to learn is *active listening*. These are the interjections and phrases we use when listening to show the speaker we are interested and listening carefully. A few examples are: "Wow." "I see." "Really!" These phrases are significant in that they give students tools to use when they might be tempted to use Japanese. In addition, using such phrases reinforces the idea that the framework language of the class is English. We introduce *active listening* during a class about schedules. As the students listen to answers they must respond with an appropriate phrase. A reward system using any type of counters (marbles, poker chips, fake money) placed in a bowl in front of each group, can be used as a great motivator. Each time a student authentically uses *active listening*, they can take a poker chip. Each time they use Japanese they lose two chips. This system can be regularly used to overcome the students' inclination to resort to their L1 when reacting naturally. Another aspect of *active listening* is a repetition of part of the speaker's statement. For example, S1 says, "I get up at 6 a.m. on Tuesday." S2 says, "Oh 6 a.m." S1: "I take the Hankyu train every day." S2: "Oh I see, Hankyu." This is an excellent way to check what one has heard in order to avoid miscommunication as well as to show the speaker that one is truly listening.

Perhaps the most important conversation tool we can teach students in the first term is the skill of generating *follow-up questions*. Follow-up questions require listeners to pay careful attention to the speaker and base their questions on what they have just heard. This keeps the students on topic since lower to intermediate language learners tend to hop from topic to topic. By staying with the speaker's subject, students can expand and deepen the conversation. Follow-up questions can also lead to clarification when the listener is confused about some point and can add greater detail to the speaker's statement. They make conversation richer and strongly connect the interlocutors. In the first semester, in every class follow-up questions are practiced. Its importance as a skill can not be over-emphasized.

A guiding principle of our classes is that using familiar topics will help students to greatly expand their communication skills. Fear of using English and making mistakes prevents students from communicating comfortably. In terms of efficiency, if our goal is to get students communicating comfortably while overcoming their fear of using English then the most efficient way to overcome this fear, short of a home-stay in Sydney, is to get them talking about something they know very well. In addition it should ideally be about something they would like to not only talk about but also hear about. Our research underlines this point. It shows that students' interest and skill levels increased after participating in a class about family [see figure 2].

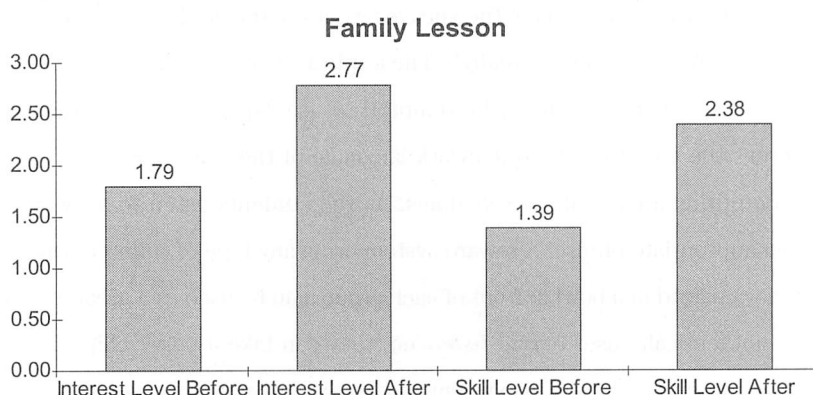


Figure 2

With the parameters of familiar and engaging topics in mind, we'd like to explain in detail one lesson that incorporates many of the previously discussed language skills. One topic that is close to students both emotionally and chronologically is "high school". To prepare students for the class, they are given a small writing assignment - five sentences about their high school (favorite subject, teacher, class trip, etc). Homework helps orient students toward the topic.

The first activity is designed to get the students' English flowing with a lively activity. The lesson begins with a "Find Someone Who" activity with columns for "name" and "follow-up questions". Students get a chance to ask several questions, learn some new vocabulary, practice follow-up questions, and use active listening skills. Most importantly, students are being exposed to language which later can be used in conversation.

In the next exercise, the students write three questions about the teacher's high school days. Not only is this a good way for students to practice forming questions but it's also highly motivating.

Students really enjoy comparing their high school experience with that of someone from another country. At the start of this activity the teacher dictates five sentences about his/her high school. Students check to see if their questions were answered. If not, they directly ask the teacher, and a whole- class discussion about the differences between Japanese high schools and American high schools ensues.

It is time now for a controlled conversation about high school. Students are given ten key words or phrases such as: teacher, festival, class trip, etc. From these, students orally form questions without writing them down. The teacher checks that students have formed grammatically correct questions and explains that are a few ways to ask the same question. Students then chat with someone about high school using the ten key words as framework upon which they can build a conversation. Students are told to keep chatting for five minutes and ask many follow-up questions, use active listening and open and close the conversation. After the conversation, students write down what their partner said about his/ her high school. Finally, students change partners and practice the conversation again.

With lower-level students more structure can be given, and of course with higher-level students more challenging discussion questions can be introduced. In general, students are very excited to talk about their high school and to find out about others' high school experience. Five minutes before the end of the class, the teacher should bring to the students' attention that they have been engaged in a five minute conversation. This is an important strategy in helping students to overcome the deeply entrenched loop that runs in their heads, "I can't speak English." Students need to be continually reminded that they can in fact communicate in English. Once they begin to accept this, they can become more confident and develop their English skills to the point where they will view English as not just an annoying subject in school but as a useful method for exchanging information.

The first semester culminates with an oral examination. The topics covered during the semester are split into three thematically consistent groups and students are provided with a review sheet in the penultimate class. On the day of the test, students are randomly paired with partners and queued. When it is their turn to speak, the pairs come to the front of the class and draw a single card from a set of three. This card represents the topic group that the students will talk about for 5-7 minutes. During the exam, the teacher does not speak other than to provide clarification. Having the students randomly select the speaking topic just prior to beginning the test forces

them to prepare to speak on all of the topics; while by having random pairings, the students cannot prepare “canned” dialogues, which guarantees real-time, authentic conversation. This helps to promote active listening as well as interjection usage. According to our post-semester survey, students felt that preparing for the test rated a 4.1 on an effectiveness scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the highest).

A first-semester course for Japanese college students of intermediate ability presents its own set of unique challenges. In light of this, we feel the most effective classroom should utilize familiar topics which help students focus primarily on language-specific skills. Also, establishing a congenial classroom atmosphere helps students overcome their hesitancy to speak in an unfamiliar setting. In addition, a classroom environment that expects English will encourage students to use English in all situations. Finally, specific conversational tools help increase students’ confidence level and increase the ease with which they can initiate and terminate conversational exchanges.