The Communicative Core — Teaching Interactive English

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The Challenge of the Interactive Class

In language teaching, broadly defined learning goals are a challenge. Memorizing irregular verbs, practicing self-introductions and so on are narrowly defined goals which can easily be translated into concrete activities in the classroom. Broadly defined goals, like improved cultural understanding or improved speaking ability, are both more difficult and more ambitious. Because language learning involves a broad and interrelated set of skills knowledge and awareness, ultimately these larger goals must be tackled.

In the Interactive Course, which forms the core of the Communicative Course Curriculum, the challenge is to help students improve their ability to interact in English. The goals are not limited to improved speaking ability, but rather to use all four skills to improve overall communicative ability. In addition, students should be challenged to start to examine social, cultural and communicative issues beyond their personal and classroom experience. This paper reports on my attempts to translate these broad goals into classroom activities, and to report on the successes and difficulties encountered after one year with the new communicative curriculum.

Beyond the linguistic goals for my students, I had the personal goal of attempting to go beyond some teaching habits of my own which I felt were particularly American, and which were not always effective for my students. This interactive course provided the perfect vehicle for these personal challenges of my own because the class meets twice a week and the number of students is relatively small.

The First Challenge

As a new language teacher in Japan 11 years ago I found that activities that

I had used as a teacher in Mexico didn't work. I struggled with my students' silence, with asking open-ended questions and getting no response, with what seemed to me to be a tendency for my students to become inexplicably nervous. I hit my first cultural wall, and began to look around for ways to improve my teaching.

I found many things which helped. In order to help students be less nervous I had them work in pairs more often. Because they worked so well collaboratively, I had them do group work. I also learned to not expect answers to questions asked of the class in general. I would address students individually with questions I knew they had the ability to answer.

Over the years I became a much more skilled teacher within the Japanese teaching context. The basics that I learned with those first students helped me when I entered other teaching contexts, such as a university. Working with larger numbers of students was a challenge, but I was able to adapt to that challenge within the framework of the techniques and ideas that I already had. In order to get my students to do X (speak more, use English, not be nervous), I needed to do Y (use more pair work, not single students out, encourage them to not worry about grammar).

A Different Approach

However, conversations with a highly skilled Japanese teacher of English who had been a fellow student in graduate school, made me feel that somehow there was still an important element missing in my teaching. This teacher not only accomplished the goals that I had in terms of classroom management, but also had students confide personal problems, work very hard out of an almost fanatical loyalty, and push themselves in her classes to a degree which I couldn't imagine in my own teaching. She had to shoo students out of her office because she was popular, but was not seen as an easy teacher — in fact, to the contrary was seen as extremely demanding. All of this was taking place in a university whose students should have been significantly lower in terms of academic achievement than the students that I was teaching at Rikkyo.

Slowly, it began to dawn on me that there was something very American about my approach that was getting in the way. When I listened to this colleague talk about her teaching and her students, it was clear that she was not taking the problem-solving approach to classroom activities that I was. She didn't use

"students not talking" as a problem that had to be "solved". Instead, she used as a measure for the success of her classes the relationships that she was able to develop with each student as an individual. She had standards of what she wanted from students, and was willing to engage with them totally to help them understand what those standards were, and what they might gain from participation in the classroom process.

It became clearer to me that my expectations of my students were based on very deep-rooted cultural ideas about ideal student behavior in the classroom. Students who asked for permission to go to the restroom seemed childish to me, in spite of an intellectual understanding that this was normal in Japanese university classrooms. Girls tending to sit together in a different part of the room seemed somehow a defect that had to be overcome. Intellectually of course, I knew that cultural difference was responsible for these things, but I hadn't realized how much it influenced my goals and ways of deciding how to structure activities.

Theory Into Practice

My goal therefore, with this interactive class — particularly in the fall of 1997, was to try to shift my approach to my students to one which more emphasized my relationships with students first, and the mechanics of classroom management second. I used as a starting point the assumption that my students wanted to have a good relationship with me, that they wanted to be challenged, and that they wanted to be respected, but also wanted clear limits, so they knew where they stood. During the course of the semester, I worked on this in a number of different areas.

The first was lateness. On the first day of class only five out of thirty students came on time. Immediately, I made it clear that this was unacceptable not only because it was disruptive but because I expected students to make as much effort in this class as I was willing to. If I came on time, they had to also. To emphasize how strongly felt about this, I posted a sign on the door as soon as class started asking late students to wait outside until they were called. I also marked lateness in the grade book, and made two tardies equivalent to one absence. Not only did this give me a chance to show how important this class was to me, but also I was able to interact with each late student one by one as I marked their names down when I called them in. I felt that this personalized

the lateness and in a strange way let students know that I cared about their presence in class. Lateness dropped off dramatically.

In the first couple of classes the students didn't seem especially focused. It was as though they had had a teacher in the Spring semester who had been friendly, but not very demanding. They seemed happy to sit back and be entertained, and were not disruptive, but didn't seem to engage. Since I wanted a more balanced level of involvement between me and them, I decided to immediately make a strong clear demand for involvement, in a format which they understood clearly.

Going against years of practice of not putting students on the spot too early, I assigned for the second class of the second week that each student should give a two minute presentation about themselves to the class. I choose as the theme "Who people think I am versus who I really am." I choose that theme because I thought it would get students talking about themselves in a way which encourage relationship-forming. I assigned the audience to make a list of each presenter, with the title, key words from the presentation, and a ranking of how interesting and how prepared the presenter was. This paper was to be handed in after class.

On the day of the presentations, I talked briefly with each student in front of the class after they had presented. Usually I made personal comments about the content. Sometimes, however, when it was clear that the student hadn't prepared, I didn't make an effort to enforce joviality, and simply let them go back to their seats after a perfunctory conversation. Overwhelmingly, however, students were prepared and very engaged. In the following class, I seemed to have succeeded in getting their attention.

I did not try to do a lot of entertaining activities with this class, in terms of bringing in games and so on. I worked very closely with the text, but tried to structure the activities so that students had a chance to improve their relationship with each other. I assigned students to groups and pairs randomly in order to avoid having friends paired or in groups. Again, this was a change for me, since in the past I had felt that security was very important for students to get over their "nervousness". Now, I simply assumed that they needed to be able to work with a wide variety of partners in tasks which were clearly structured and also demanding.

Every other chapter of the text, Language In Use, has a grammar section with quite difficult, or at least complicated exercises. I used those exercises as

written, but emphasized relationships in structuring the activities. For example, I had students review the grammar page without doing the activities, and ranking them for difficulty. They then formed groups based on the activity they found most difficult. Each group then worked collaboratively to understand the activity and get all of the right answers. They were told that they had to understand the exercise well enough not only to get the right answers, but also to be able to teach the activity and grammar point to another student.

After each group had finished, students paired up with someone from a different group and assumed the role of the teacher, teaching the student from the other group how to do the exercise, and then testing them to make sure that they had it. This approach to having one student assume the role of the teacher and another that of student worked very well. It gave a clear sense of purpose not only to the task at hand, but also to how they were expected to relate to each other. It had the additional benefit of making one of the students in a pair or group the person responsible for the learning.

During this kind of pair or group work, I spent my energy moving around the room asking for questions and trying to interact with as many students as possible. This also marked a change for me since I had for a long time assumed that the teacher being too close too often makes students nervous, and that I should leave them space in which to work at their own pace. I sought out contact with my students in this way, particularly by circulating to each pair or group and making a point of seeing if they understood the activity, if they had any questions and how it was going. As a result, I had more students than I was used to ask me questions, or make comments to me about the activity, the performance of their partner, or even something that I might have said in class. Circulating in this way seemed to me the single most important thing which contributed to a feeling that I had a relationship with my students, that what they were doing was important to me, and that I expected them to be applying themselves.

Another thing which I got good feedback on, was my way of opening class. Partly as a way to let students get used to hearing English without being on the spot, but also as a way to develop my relationship with the students, I spent the first several minutes of each class talking about something from my life. I talked about my decision to buy a cellular phone, and my considering the different cost options, and an accident I had skiing. I mentioned funny things

that happened to me or something I had done over the weekend. During this time, I was animated, and really wanted my students to share in my enthusiasm for what I was talking about.

Although the students didn't have to do anything more than listen, I was extremely strict about silence during that period. If anybody talked I would immediately stop talking and wait in stern silence. I found that students not only seemed to enjoy the chance to hear natural spoken English — which they seemed happy to be able to follow — but also that they would bring those things up to me in conversations during or after class. I manage to give them some raw material so that students who wanted to interact with me had things to comment on and react to. Of course not all students did this, but it certainly gave students who were interested in more interaction with me a chance to have something to talk about. It also gave me some leeway to ask students about their lives, or kid them about what they wore, or the color of their pencil case.

Difficulties and Successes

Of course, not everything went so smoothly. Sometimes I pushed the demands and expectations of cooperative relationships too far. On one occasion I assigned as homework for students to choose from a list of current social topics that students had generated. They were to prepare a one paragraph statement about the topic (things like *enjo kosai* or the entrance exam system), as well as a list of questions that they would ask other members of their group, as a way of stimulating discussion.

On that day I had students discuss in groups, but then decided to take it one step further. I tried a fishbowl activity, in which one member acts as a representative of their group, and becomes a participant of a single small group which does the discussion in front of (surrounded by, really) the rest of the students. The idea is that the group can choose their strongest representative to go to the main group, that they will be interested in how things go, and will learn indirectly by observing the discussion of the "fishbowl" group — that one being watched by everyone.

Unfortunately, the students were extremely nervous in front of the whole class, and seemed to find it difficult to interact with the representatives of the other groups, probably at least in part because they had not had a chance to practice with them, and so were uncertain about what they might be asked or

how they should respond. The demands were too great and the task fell flat. It seemed that I was forcing students to do something they were unable to do well enough to feel comfortable. Over the course of the semester, however, I got to know the strengths and weaknesses of the students, and got a feel for how much they could handle.

Toward the end of the semester, my having developed these relationships seemed to pay off in an activity which I decided to try on a whim. I had assigned students to prepare a short presentation on the Japanese education system. To prepare them, I had given a mini lecture on the education system in the United States, and I gave them a list of questions which one might ask about the education system of a country that one doesn't know much about.

In the following class I told students we would be doing an international friendship exchange meeting, with the theme being the Japanese education system. I had each student choose a country to be from. They were all to take the role of foreigners who wanted to learn about Japan. (Interestingly, many students choose non-English-speaking countries, like Italy, to come from, and then made up elaborate scenarios to explain why they, a native English speaker, were from that country) Students were in groups of four or five, each taking the role of their foreign self (they also had to specify their profession). From each group, one of the students was to leave the room, ostensibly to send in a Japanese university student, who would discuss the Japanese education system with them. The "foreigner", in effect, changed identity and came back to the group as themselves. After their "Japanese self" explained and answered questions about the education system, they left the room again, to send back in the "foreigner".

In the past I have had difficulty getting students take on the role of foreigners without students either not wanting to act like a foreigner, or parodying foreigners to a distracting degree. This time however, was different. Students played their roles and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of Japanese education in depth with the "Japanese" visitor. Students came up after class and told me how much fun it had been, and how they wished to do more activities like it, even though it had been difficult.

I would not have been able to anticipate whether that activity would have worked, but in hindsight I see that perhaps the emphasis I had laid on relationships, and on taking the content of the class seriously, contributed to the level

of seriousness and trust that was required to make an activity like this one a success. I hope that in the future I can develop that atmosphere sooner in the semester so that these interesting, yet challenging activities can succeed.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I felt that the personal teaching goals that I had for this class related to changing my approach to classroom dynamics, fit nicely with the overall aims of the Interactive Course. My greater emphasis on relationships gave students the chance to practice interaction in English with each other and with me. I think it also humanized the classroom, allowing the language practice to go beyond the mechanical nuts and bolts of language — grammar, vocabulary and sentence formation — to the dynamic process that it is.

Ultimately, these larger, more vague goals are the greatest challenge of a mixed skill class like the interactive class. Although I didn't always succeed with my approach to this class, at least the process of active engagement was a learning experience at many levels. I hope that I can create a classroom environment in which students feel the same way. The chance for teachers and students to do this is the great opportunity that the Interactive class gives us. Let's use it to its full potential.

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