A Case For Using CLT With Japanese University English Conversation Students

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Native speakers of English teaching English conversation at Japanese universities often complain that their students, after six years of language study in secondary education, cannot carry on even a simple conversation in English with a native English speaker. Teachers who are new to the situation turn in desperation to their Japanese and native English speaking colleagues and ask for some kind of explanation of how this could be the case. The usual response to such a query is an account of the Japanese examination oriented education system with final blame being placed on the grammar translation method employed in most schools. Not only has this response become cliche, but it is no longer entirely true. The number of Japanese English teachers enrolled in Japan based M.A. TESL programs (Temple University, Columbia University, SIT) and TESL certification programs (Georgetown University, Cambridge University) indicates that there is a keen interest in adding a communicative element to the English classroom. At some point in the average Japanese student's school life, the student is now likely to have been in a class where the teacher used an approach other than the grammar translation method.

Even if we accept that the reliance on the grammar translation method is to blame, however, it does not help the new or prospective teacher deal with the problem at hand: How do you get the average class of forty first year university students who have spent the better part of six years with their heads down, pencils and dictionaries in hand, translating word for word from English to Japanese, to pick up their heads, look you in the eyes, and speak to you in English? There are quite a few English teachers in Japan who have concluded that it cannot be done. If the goal is to produce fluent speakers of English in one school year, then most would agree.

If, however, a more realistic goal is pursued, that of getting students to begin talking and feeling more comfortable with conversing in English, then the task does not seem nearly as impossible. Getting first year university students to begin speaking English would be far less formidable if teachers were to learn more about their students' culture and how much English they learned in high school. In other words, if teachers know how and what their students have studied in the past and why students have chosen to study with a native speaker of English, they stand a better chance of accomplishing their goal.

What follows is a general account of some of this information which will be of some help to teachers new to, or preparing to leave for, a position at a Japanese university. Once this background information on Japanese students and their needs has been discussed, an example of how these needs might be met with a communicative activity will be given.

What and How the Students Have Studied

In Japan, English education usually begins in the first year of junior high school. By the time students finish junior high school they have completed over 300 hours of English instruction, and are expected to have committed nearly 1,000 words to memory (Helgesen, 1993). Once the student enters high school, the story gets far more complex. The Japanese Ministry of Education's curriculum outline in use during the 1996-97 school year requires that first year high school students receive 140 hours of English language instruction (Goold, Madeley, and Carter, 1993). During the second and third years students can choose from up to a total of 560 hours of elective English coursework, basing their decision on what they intend to do upon graduation. Only students who intend to study nontechnical fields at a university are likely to take full advantage of the 700 hours of classroom instruction available in the high school curriculum because English makes up a large part of their university entrance examinations. Students intending to try to get into a high ranking university, regardless of the field, will probably have sought additional outside opportunities to study in excess of the 700 hours available at school. This means that the average university freshman enrolled in an English conversation class will have had anywhere from 440 to 700+ hours of English instruction over a six year period.

New curriculum guidelines have been implemented in order to accommodate a more pressing need for conversational English skills than was formerly perceived. The new curriculum outline has increased the amount of time that can be spent studying English conversation from 140 to 210 hours. The effect of this new emphasis on oral communication will not be seen until April of 1997 when the first products of the new curriculum enter universities. However, since the goal for most high schools is to provide their students with the education needed to pass the entrance examination to the university of their choice, this is what high school teachers tend to focus on. While it has been rumored for quite some time that future entrance examinations will include an interview in English to test conversational skills, for the most part this has yet to happen. Current entrance examinations require students to be able to translate long passages from English to Japanese. In "Beyond Grammar Translation: Teaching Students to Really Read," Bamford (1993) explains that Japanese students have been given only one strategy for dealing with written English. In junior and senior high school, on university entrance examinations, and in many of their university English classes, Japanese students have been trained to transpose English word-for-word into Japanese. Although Bamford is writing

about how to teach reading, the following quote is relevant to the Japanese system of English language education in general:

> . . . the tradition of using the "grammar-translation" method is so strong that it is practically synonymous with English education in Japan. It is not only the main method of instruction in junior and senior high school but also in university: as a result, most of your Japanese colleagues will be using it as the pedagogical method of choice in their English classes (p 64). The 1994 Ministry of Education Curriculum Outline indicates that Japanese students will have more of an opportunity to take classes to help them deal with spoken English, but again, until university entrance exams include a spoken English section, these elective classes will take a distant back-seat to those which stress grammar-translation.

Even if high school students choose to take the new elective series, we cannot assume that by the time they enter university they will have had plenty of opportunity to use English for communication. While the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Outline signals a move in the right direction, very few Japanese English teachers in junior and senior high school have ever experienced a communicative approach to language study. For the most part, they themselves studied English using the grammar-translation method. Although many of these teachers are currently turning to language teacher training courses that have become available in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe for help, many of them simply do not know how to teach communicative English.

In sum, the average university freshman enrolled in a native English speaker's English conversation class will have had anywhere from 440 to 700+ hours of English language instruction, will have been taught to translate using the grammar-translation method, and may have had English conversation classes with a Japanese English teacher. Very few of them will have had the chance to practice speaking English with a government sponsored Assistant English Teacher (AET), outside the high school via classes or self study, or in a home-stay situation.

Some Important Cultural Factors

In "The Japanese Student and the Foreign Teacher," Nozaki (1993) lists some cultural differences between Japanese and western students, two of which are important to this study. The first difference, one which a new foreign teacher will quickly notice, is that Japanese university students do not appear to be very motivated to study. Students will rarely do any homework and this, as Nozaki explains, is because once they have entered a

university, students are virtually assured of graduation. This situation is what is called the "escalator system" (p. 28) which Nozaki says Japanese society sees as compensation to the students for the long hours and hard work they were forced to go through during their elementary and secondary schooling. In Japan, the university is a place for young people to relax, experience as many things as possible, and to learn to socialize with their peers. Consequently, the new university English conversation teacher should not be surprised when it becomes clear that his/her students place a higher priority on their club activities than their English studies.

The second difference Nozaki mentions is that Japanese students differ from their western counterparts in their attitude towards learning and ideas about appropriate classroom behavior. Unlike western students, who have been taught to speak up in class and express their opinions, Japanese students have been trained to learn by sitting quietly and observing. Expressing one's opinion is not something that is done in a typical Japanese classroom. This makes the teaching of conversation rather difficult, especially if the teacher makes an effort to conduct a student centered class. Regardless of how many hours of English language instruction Japanese students have had, they are not likely to voluntarily put those hours to use and engage in conversation with the instructor. In other words, even in a "conversation" class, the students expect the teacher to do most of the talking.

In addition to the differences that Nozaki lists is the important fact that Japanese tend to be more group oriented than westerners. This is especially evident among university students, because the university is one place where young individuals begin to establish themselves as lifelong members of a group. In *The Japanese Today,* Edwin Reischauer explained that "Groups of every sort abound throughout Japanese society and usually play a larger role and offer more of a sense of individual self identification than do corresponding groups in the United States" (Reischauer, 1988, p. 134). This group orientation has a profound effect on the way that Japanese students approach classwork. A new teacher will quickly discover that it is futile to hand out in-class assignments and expect the students to complete them by themselves. However, as will become evident later, this propensity to do things in groups can be used advantageously in an English conversation class.

How and What to Teach:

From what we know of the typical Japanese university freshman enrolled in an English conversation class, it is safe to say that even the worst students will be false beginners. This is true because even though they have gained certain language skills through their high school studies, they still function at a beginning level. The fact that

they will have passed the entrance examination is an indication that they will have at least a basic understanding of English grammar, and a vocabulary larger than the 1,000 words they had to memorize during junior high school. Consequently, this paper recommends the use of teaching methods and techniques that are output-based. Such methods and techniques are appropriate because one of the reasons these students cannot speak despite six years of language study is that the grammar translation method with which they have been taught never requires it of them. If we borrow some terminology from Krashen, we might say that Japanese junior and senior high school students are allowed a six-year "silent period." Six years is long enough, and makes the adoption of an approach such as Krashen's, which would give the students more silent time, unnecessary. Instead, teachers should use techniques that will give students the chance to practice speaking English within the context of a communicative language teaching approach. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an appropriate choice because it requires the students to actively use the target language from the start (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 8). In addition, the fact that university English conversation classes only meet once a week for an average of 90 minutes makes it imperative that the students get as much time to produce the target language as teachers can give them. Since the focus of this paper is on teaching conversation, techniques for practicing reading, writing, or listening will not be discussed. However, it should be remembered that CLT does allow for one to incorporate these skills into an English conversation syllabus as well.

The example I have included below is one half of a pair work information gap activity. In information gap tasks students have information that their partners need. In order to complete the task, they must use their English, not just practice it. In this activity each student has a handout with two menu charts, one filled in and one empty. The task for the student who has the empty chart below is to find out from his/her partner what three fellow group tour members ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Once the students have exchanged the information needed to fill each other's charts, they can use the information together with clues provided at the bottom of the handout to help discover each tour members' nationality

Fill in the charts

Ask your partner for the information you need

Name	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Vitri (female			
Mahmood			
Toni (male)			

Clues:

1. Vitri's country is made up of more than 13,000 islands and islets.

2. Mahmood's country became independent from India in 1947.

3. The people in Toni's country enjoy watching bullfights.

Activities like the one discussed above not only fulfill the CLT requirement that meaning be transferred and/or negotiated (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 8), but they also capitalize on Japanese students' predisposition to work in groups. Other CLT activities, such as the freer group speaking tasks, labeled "Ensemble" activities in the Lingual House *New English Firsthand* series (Helgesen, et al, 1991), give students the opportunity to move from working with one partner to working within a larger group. These activities, like the pair work task discussed above, require the students to transfer and/or negotiate meaning while interacting with other students in English. Frequently, such activities are in the form of games which require focused practice on an element of English grammar such as the use of prepositions of place (For example, a simple game of "I Spy"). Regardless of the type of conversation activity, the teacher is to circulate around the classroom, providing help when needed. By doing this, the teacher fulfills another requirement of CLT by facilitating the communicative process between the students themselves, and between the students and the text (Breen and Candlin, 1988).

The kinds of activities listed here are particularly suited to the Japanese university English conversation class because of the typical 40:1 student-teacher ratio. In a teacher-centered classroom where the teacher dominates the class calling on individuals to answer questions one by one, the amount of time spent in English speaking practice is minimalized. In the activities discussed here, however, students are given plenty of time to practice using English. In addition, the pair and group activities allow for further exploitation of the Japanese student's group orientation. Granted, Japanese students might at first be confused by the student-centered classroom, but Nozaki indicates that so many of her students at Kyoto Sangyo University came to enjoy this classroom style that student-centered classes have become among the most popular on campus (Nozaki, 1993).

Although there are a multitude of textbooks available in Japan that conform to the CLT approach, a single text alone should not be relied on for classroom activities. Strict adherence to the exercises as they appear in a text would quickly bore most of the students in any class. CLT requires that classroom materials and activities reflect real-life situations and demands (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 8). Textbooks cannot always be expected to fulfill this requirement. It is up to the teacher to take the material that is in the text and adapt it so that it seems relevant to his/her students' life. In other words, the teacher may want to change and supplement some of the material found in the text to reflect the community in which his/her students live.

Providing classroom conversation drills that are built around the people and places of our students' community tend to make the English conversation class more interesting. This technique, however, does not address the fact that Japanese university students have almost no chance to use English outside of the classroom. For students who are keenly aware of this it is difficult to convince them that the effort required to learn a language well is worthwhile. One way to address this problem would be to give frequent homework assignments that require students to use English with foreign residents of their community. In almost any community in Japan one can find foreign exchange students, language teachers, missionaries, and laborers. These foreigners are not always from countries where English is the first language, but Japanese students also need to be taught that English can be used as a means of communicating with people from other countries as well. In one assignment that this writer found particularly successful at a rural Japanese national university, students were required to interview four foreign residents of their community in English. The students were surprised to find that not only could they use English to talk with an Australian English teacher, but with a Brazilian worker, a Malaysian medical student, and a Russian language teacher as well.

Conclusion

Getting first year Japanese university students to begin speaking English is no easy task. Given the six years of grammar-translation studies, the teacher-centered classroom environment, and lack of opportunity to use English for communication that these students have had prior to entering the native English speaker's classroom, one might think the task impossible. This paper, however, has attempted to show how instructors, with a little bit of knowledge about Japanese students' background, can use communicative teaching techniques to at least get the students to begin speaking in English.

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