

A CREATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

A foreign language teacher's approach, his teaching technique and personality is crucial for establishing the rapport between him and his students, which motivates their interest in foreign language learning. To achieve success in teaching a foreign language we have to take into consideration our students' levels, their motivation to learn the language and their ability to comprehend the material. The purpose of this essay is to consider some common difficulties encountered in teaching foreign languages in technical higher educational institutions in Japan, overview the creative approach of other educators and to propose educational activity that can enhance our students interest in foreign languages by stimulating their corporative spirit and need to express themselves, and help them to start learning a foreign language with greater enthusiasm.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CREATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING IN GENERAL

Teaching is sowing seeds of knowledge into the soil of the student's mind. Just as a farmer has to take into account a number of different factors that are necessary for obtaining a good harvest from the sown seeds, a teacher needs to consider many different ways that will help students acquire the given knowledge successfully. The famous saying by Charles Spurgeon brilliantly illustrates the idea of a creative approach to teaching, "Don't just throw seed at the people. Grind it into flour, bake it into bread and slice it for them. And it wouldn't hurt to put a little honey on it." Creative teachers like to teach and like to learn and can accept new ways of teaching to improve the skills they already have. A creative approach to teaching is impossible without knowing what the students want from the teacher because it helps the teacher organize the teaching process in accordance with their needs. R. W. Luce (1990) writes about what he has learnt from his students:

- *One of the most prominent comments from students regarding what they want from the college experience involves individualized instruction. They all want to have their individual needs met. They want to feel like they are more than part of a crowd, that their*

individual talents and abilities are respected and deemed worthy.

- *They want teachers who are real people, who recognize them as human beings -- teachers who care about them -- not just their test performance.*
- *They want to be challenged, not decimated.*
- *They want caretakers who check on them regularly, who support their individual learning, who inform them individually of their progress, and who assign a variety of tasks that give them the opportunity to learn in modes that fit their individual styles and that are designed to meet their level of learning.*
- *They like teachers who talk at their level, who can joke and take a joke, and who let them talk and learn with other students.*
- *They like clear, complete explanations and concrete examples, thorough (but brief) explanations of difficult concepts, and opportunities to have their questions answered.*

Students' answers make teachers rethink their ways and methods of teaching a foreign language and enable them to find creative ways to achieving the

best possible results in their classes. Narayanan (2006) expresses the idea of a teacher as a facilitator who “helps to remove the biggest language learning obstacles from his/her learners, and creates conditions conducive to language learning success.”

THE PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES IN JAPAN

Nowadays, due to globalization, the majority of higher educational establishments throughout Japan realize the need to provide good language skills to their students. As for Japanese technical universities and colleges, it is clear that regardless of the importance of teaching English and other foreign languages being emphasized in the curriculums and educational programs, they will never become the first priority. But at the same time language courses cannot be fully neglected, because it is expected that most of the students after their graduation should be able to learn technical literature and communicate in English, to know international terms enough to be competent in their field of study, and have a general cultural level appropriate to a person with higher education.

Even though the foreign language courses are not neglected, they definitely have some peculiarities that may affect the educational process and become obstacles to successful teaching.

1. The number of the students in the language class
2. The students' general cultural level
3. The students' motivation to learn the subject

THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASS

In many technical universities in Japan the number of students in the language classes is comparatively large. Teachers usually associate large classes with lack of control, lack of student attentiveness, lack of teacher-student interactions leading to lack in efficiency and effectiveness. Teachers who have to teach large classes often feel tired and exhausted after their lectures and thus, they are losing their zeal, energy and enthusiasm to teach. Hayes (1997) summarized the problems with teaching in large classes as follows:

Discomfort: Many teachers are worried by the

physical constraints imposed by large numbers in confined classrooms. They feel unable to promote student interaction, since there is no room to move about. Some teachers also feel that teaching in large classes is physically very wearing.

Control: Teachers are often worried by the discipline aspects of large classes. They feel they are unable to control what is happening, and that the classes become too noisy.

Individual attention: Many teachers are concerned that they are neglecting the needs of their students as individuals.

Evaluation: Teachers feel a responsibility for checking all of their students' work, and are worried if they cannot do so.

Learning effectiveness: All teachers want their students to learn English. They are understandably worried if they don't know who is learning what.

It is important for teachers to make own decision based on their particular teaching situation and their skills. Toubia (1999) held that, “The teachers' skill in classroom management is the primary ingredient for success with group work in large classes.” Larry M. Lynch (2008) writes the following about the overcrowded foreign languages classes: “When I'm faced with over-sized groups I immediately implement strategies using choral, small group and pair work to help in lessening the load on both me and my large group of learners. I also separate out a few of the more “advanced” learners to help me with group work elements. It doesn't solve all the problems, but it's a good start.”

This is a good example of a creative approach to teaching in a challenging learning environment. As a rule teachers organize cooperative learning in small groups, usually of four students or less, rarely more than six. In such groups Japanese students are more relaxed because many of them have a fear of making the slightest mistake and consequently are reluctant to answer oral questions freely or to engage in discussions enthusiastically before the class.

Another example of a creative approach to organizing an effective teaching of foreign languages in large classes is using computers. It helps teachers

make language learning more accessible and relevant and more interesting for students. Using computers, you can control the work of your students on an individual level and in groups, adjust their tasks and make them practice the language without the feeling that they are doing it in front of the big audience. José Picardo (2010), who is a teacher of Spanish in Nottingham High School, has prepared these 10 suggestions for using technology in the classroom to interest the students and to enhance teaching and learning:

- *Never use technology for the sake of using technology. Ensure instead that the use of technology is warranted within your schemes of work and that it will help you achieve your lesson objectives.*
- *Use streaming video in your classroom. The advent of broadband has facilitated the inclusion of video straight from the internet within lessons. Authentic video material from sites like YouTube or national TV broadcasters' websites, such as TVE or Canal+ are a fantastic way to expose reluctant teenagers to the popular culture other reluctant teenagers enjoy in their native countries.*
- *Use more music. Teenagers are fanatical about music. The likelihood is that they use iTunes and so should you! Find out what type of music they are into and try to get similar music in the target language, which you can then use in your lessons.*
- *Use teleconferencing tools, such as Skype, to put your students in touch with students in partner schools abroad. They'll realize there are other people in the same situation in other countries and might even end up establishing relationships they can follow up using MSM Chat, Hotmail, etc.*
- *Create your own interactive exercises. You know your pupils' strengths and weaknesses better than anyone, so why be stuck with exercises done by other people for other people? Make your own using tools such as Hot Potatoes or game makers from ContentGenerator.net or LanguagesOnline Australia and then get your school teccie to put*

them on the school's website or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

- *Use your interactive whiteboard more effectively. Go on a course and learn the basics. A little knowledge goes a long way helping you create more effective interactive classroom activities for you and your pupils.*
- *Create your own podcasts. They are technically easy to do and once they are done they can be downloaded again and again, year after year. Think about them as lessons to take away. Alternatively get your pupils to make them! You can get started using Audacity.*
- *Start a subject blog, a class blog or a wiki to showcase your pupils' work and achievements, providing a focus for their efforts and adding an extra dimension to your teaching. Perhaps you are feeling adventurous and want to make use of some of the online social networks your pupils frequent, such as Facebook, as an educational tool.*
- *Use internet tools more often to help you prepare lessons or to help your pupils with their class or homework. Using tools such as Voki, Wordle or Animoto, just to name three I have been exploring this year, will help motivate you and your pupils.*
- *Make the most of your pupils' gadgets. They all have iPods or other mp3 players and mobile phones, most of which come with a camera nowadays, so why not set them a video task using their mobiles or create or find resources they can put on their iPods?*

THE LEVEL OF THE STUDENTS GENERAL INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

It varies depending on the place and higher education establishment, but it can be said that on the whole Japanese technological university students' interest to other cultures is lower in comparison with that of university students studying humanities. So foreign language teachers are challenged to find creative ways to facilitate their students' learning

while taking into account their backgrounds and experience. Since many of the students in technological universities have a limited knowledge of world history, geography, literature, philosophy, culture and arts, a foreign language teacher may want to try to fill in the gap and broaden students' outlook by providing them with plenty of relevant information concerning the country, whose language they are learning, as well as that of the neighboring countries and all of the region in general. Thus, in German classes, teachers may mention some interesting facts not only about Germany, but about France, England, Russia, Italy, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries along with the whole Western civilization. On the other hand, English teachers have to remember that for most of their Japanese students, English is a language of all foreigners (the notion that all foreigners are fluent in English is still common in Japan) and often is considered to be the language of "white people." We also have to realize that many Japanese cannot or are unwilling to accept Chinese, Vietnamese or Latinos as native English speakers, even if they were born and have lived all of their lives in English-speaking countries (not to mention fluently speaking immigrants!) just because it does not fit into their image of a "native English speaker." Japanese are far from understanding or accepting the concept of multiculturalism, which is one of the most important fundamental principles for most of the English-speaking countries today. I was very surprised to learn from the staff of the Japanese travel agency about the cultural problems they had with their one-month homestay language studying course in New Zealand. For example, they had complaints from some of the students' parents that their kids had stayed with Maori families where they could not hear "real" English!

Kitao & Kitao (1995) emphasize that Japanese students are not very acquainted with the cultures of the countries whose language they are studying. *"Another problem that students have with English is that they do not know much about English-speaking cultures. Since language and culture are closely linked, a knowledge of the target culture is necessary for successful communication, but culture is taught neither extensively nor well in English classes in Japan."* Without knowing the realities of the countries the language learners deal with, they cannot

adequately perceive the teaching material, which complicates the learning process. Creative teachers are also concerned about developing their students' intellectual abilities and raising their overall intellectual level, which is attained due to the teacher's purposeful work on developing the students' thinking. Thinking activities dealing with the mastery of foreign languages do increase the students' linguistic abilities, attention and memory, which in their turn raise the foreign language student's command of the language.

STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

While teaching English in a technical university in Japan, every year I face the same problem: in each class there is a group of students who sit quietly, never ask or answer questions, show no interest in group discussions, and seemingly do not want to be engaged in learning at all. It is a common fact that the students' motivation to learning their specialist subjects in universities is higher than to learning other subjects. That is why the motivation of students in technological universities in Japan to learn a foreign language (especially English) is not as high as their motivation to learn their major subjects. Jeffrey (2006) states that: *"Given the low levels of student motivation in Japan, and the reasons for it, teachers shoulder much responsibility, as they are required to play a very important role in motivation. Teachers need to convey enthusiasm to minimize the potential psychological distance and the propensity for students to create mental barriers between themselves and the target language as well as its culture. Teachers have to walk a fine line on [sic] keeping a class disciplined whilst keeping the students motivated and interested in the subject enough for consciousness-raising to take hold. This is no easy task and often takes years to refine."*

Motivation will always be a crucial point in learning a foreign language. Language teachers with a creative approach may find ways to increase the students' motivation to learn their subject if they understand the great importance of it in the teaching process.

The term "motivation" in a second language learning context is seen according to Gardner (1985) as "referring to the extent to which the individual

works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity.” According to Sass (1989), the following eight characteristics are the major contributors to student motivation:

1. Instructor's enthusiasm
2. Relevance of the material
3. Organization of the course
4. Appropriate difficulty level of the material
5. Active involvement of students
6. Variety
7. Rapport between teacher and students
8. Use of appropriate, concrete and understandable results

As for the material (textbooks and texts) students usually work with, I can agree with J. Norris-Holt (2001), who states the following: *“Many Japanese texts often contain material which fails to capture the interest of students due to the heavy emphasis on vocabulary and grammar. Many foreign texts, however, which have been designed for EFL, and specifically the Japanese market, often contain topics which can create a great deal of classroom interaction and help to motivate students to develop their language skills. It is important for the instructor to take advantage of such discussion topics and help students to realize that, even though they may see no need to become proficient in a second language, the study of another language and culture can only enhance their perception and understanding of other cultures.”* Creative teachers will use such active methods as role playing, debates, brainstorming, discussions, demonstrations, case studies, audiovisual presentations, guest speakers, etc.

The level of the Japanese technical university students' command of the English language is on the average not too high. Benson (1991) noted that educators in Japan are often surprised by university students' lack of ability using spoken English, compared with that of their grammatical understanding of the language. Kitao & Kitao (1995) write the following about teaching English in Japan,

“At the university level, most English classes are reading classes... Many Japanese say that they can read English, but they cannot speak it.”

Probably the most difficult task for a foreign language teacher in a technical university or college is to enhance the productive skills (speaking and writing) of their students. I often ask myself, “Why are my students so unwilling to interact?” The reasons will vary. Some students may feel unprepared and unable to comprehend the material; others are too tired after their part-time jobs or other activities; some are experiencing personal problems or may be under pressure from intensive learning of other subjects, and so on. Still others believe they will eventually be passed, so why try hard.

But there are some reasons that all of the students who avoid interacting have in common:

1. They are usually too shy to speak in front of other students or express their opinion (sometimes even in Japanese, to say nothing of the foreign language!) and they would try to abstain from interaction whenever possible (苦手です).
2. They are afraid of making mistakes and prefer rather not to interact at all than to do it in a wrong way (遠慮します).
3. They do not mind or even proud of being punished if they receive punishment not for their mistakes, but only for their indifference (どうでもいい). In that case they will most likely think they are right and the teacher is wrong.

WORK IN GROUPS

As I have mentioned previously, one of the most successful methods in dealing with passive students is breaking up the large group (more than 20 students) into several small groups (4, 5 or 6 students). It is commonly known that participation in group work increases students' engagement in lectures and facilitates learning. I have often used this method during my lectures. But with regard to reticent students, even if we divide them into small groups, it will be easy for them to escape communicating with others. They will give all the initiative to the group leader and remain indifferent to the contents of the group discussion, some of them seem to be dozing

while the rest of the group is working on the given task.

Another crucial factor is the group leader's personality. If the leader is too dominating, he tends to do all the work himself by taking all the initiative in the group activities. The other members will take part only as his passive supporters or as an endorsement team.

To engage reticent and demotivated students into the education process I would suggest using online chat or email correspondence. For the online interaction I would like my students to use Skype. Skype is a popular messaging and voice communication tool, widely used in the business world, especially in the export-import businesses. Skype is absolutely free, easy to download, secure and, as a rule, users are able to call and chat through it simultaneously. It also provides a high quality video service and can be used for videoconferences. But if one is more familiar with the MSN messenger, Yahoo messenger or any other online messaging application, they can be introduced to students and used instead of Skype.

ACTIVITY

There are many activities in which we can engage our students in during their language learning process, but the most successful activity will be the one they are really interested in. And since our main goal is to make the students interact in the foreign language they are learning, probably the most successful activity should be the one they are used to interact in. Japanese students often interact or communicate using text messages on their mobile phones. Even during their classes you may see someone pushing the buttons on their mobile phones. So in our lectures we can make them use Skype instead of mobile phones, but the activity will not differ much from the one they are used to. And we can use English (or any other foreign language) for communication. The teacher's responsibility is only to control the process. As an example of such a creative task the following activities can be suggested:

Students are divided into small groups (4 persons in each).

Each group is a "trading company" selling, say, new and used electronic dictionaries at low prices. The teacher is a potential customer. He wants to buy some decent electronic dictionaries and inquires of

different "companies" to choose the best one. The company where the teacher places his order will become the winner of the competition.

Each group (company) consists of four members: the Boss, the Manager, the Receptionist, and the Advertising Agent. Of course they have to fulfill different tasks and their activities will slightly differ. The Boss is responsible for the control of the whole process. He is the leader who gives the tasks, advises his staff, and promotes his company. He is the only one who is able to negotiate with the Customer (teacher) in critical situations. The Manager is the one who explains the advantages of working with their company and he elaborates the ways of persuading the customer to place an order. Probably, he will always be in chat and the responsibility to correspond with the customer is mainly his. The Receptionist has to take care of phone calls from the customer and also help with translations while other members of the group are busy doing their job. Finally, the Advertising Agent is in charge of making attractive pictures of their product, creating announcements and ads, and sending some reminders. It is the most creative role in the company, and the teacher should be aware that not all the students can cope with such a task.

CONCLUSION

The main target in such activities is to maximally involve all the students in interactions in the foreign language they master and make them confident in their ability to communicate in the language. They should gain the confidence that they can at least "survive" if their future job will imply using such skills.

One more thing these Japanese students have to learn through the activities is that a foreign language is in fact a language, not a set of rules to be learned with the aim to enter a good university, or to get a credit. Language is a means of communication, and you may use it any time you want to communicate with someone. You do not need to think about how perfect your grammar is as long as the partner you are communicating with can understand what you say or write. There are a lot of misunderstandings even when people are communicating in their native languages, so why worry so much about the mistakes. Consequently, it is very good if we can engage our students into social networking in the language they

are studying. As J. Picardo says about his students, "Social networking is, after all, what they do on their mobile phones and other hand-held devices under their desks when we teachers are not looking. This is what they do as soon as they get home from school. Many will argue that most students are just wasting their time and gossiping online but, whatever anyone's [sic] opinion on the benefits or dangers of social networking is, it cannot be denied that they are all sharing, collaborating and networking and they are doing so in a way which they enjoy and find engaging, otherwise they simply would not do it."

A creative approach to organization of the English course will enhance the students' motivation and result in a successful acquisition of the instructional material that should be neither too easy nor too difficult for them. A variety of English teaching activities and methods will help prevent boredom caused by a routine predictability and refresh the students' motivation.

Acknowledgement:

For his suggestions and corrections, I would like to express my gratitude to Gregg McNabb, an associate professor at Shizuoka Institute of Science and Technology.

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