

TEACHING ENGLISH IN JAPAN

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Teaching English to Japanese students has been a deeply rewarding, if sometimes frustrating, experience. I have been fortunate in being able to teach a wide range of students, from business men to children, from university students to housewives. Each class has its own personality and the successful teacher must have the ability to recognize, respond to and utilize each group's unique qualities. A repertoire of teaching techniques from which to draw from, a sense of humor and a desire to reach out to others are necessary supplements to an interest in and a knowledge of one's subject.

Before I came to Japan, I had little understanding of the task that I would be undertaking. I knew that English is taught from junior high school and that most Japanese students study English as a foreign language for at least seven years. I had studied French in school for the same amount of time and was reasonably fluent in it. So I expected that the average Japanese would be able to have a conversation in English. I was wrong. Very wrong.

There are many reasons for this. Perhaps the main reason is that English is taught for examinations. I have seen students who were unable to have a simple conversation in English solve grammar problems that most native speakers of English would never be able to solve. But these same students cannot put together a simple sentence on their own. The examination system is an integral part of the Japanese educational system, which is one of the best in the world. Unfortunately, English is not

taught as a tool for communication but as a complex system of grammatical rules. Grammar is the structure upon which language is built, as bones are the structure upon which a body is formed. But a body is not only grammar.

Many students are alienated at an early age by the exclusive focus on grammar. They develop a strong dislike for English which never leaves them. A student who is not motivated is unlikely to be a successful student.

Adult students may be motivated through purely practical considerations. He or she may find that they cannot function effectively in business without being able to communicate in English. This is not a strong enough reason to overcome their childhood aversion to the language.

Other students study because they hope to travel abroad. These students are interested only in 'Survival English' and have little or no interest in learning to communicate anything other than the barest necessities.

There are many, many reasons why students join an English conversation class, but rarely is it because they actually like English. Therefore the most important task facing the foreign teacher is motivating the students. We must somehow create a desire in the students to learn English.

The key to this is creating a pleasant classroom atmosphere so that the students want to attend the class. Humor, warmth and sensitivity are all indispensable. But they are not enough. The teacher must also recognize the difficulties the students face, the level of the class and set goals which can be realized.

I have found that even a rudimentary knowledge of Japanese helps me to pinpoint many of the problems that my students encounter when they study English. The grammar is almost the opposite. When I speak Japanese, I have to think in Japanese. I can tell when students are translating in their heads. One of the more obvious examples is when a student

asks, 'Please teach me the answer.' In this case the student is clearly using the English word 'teach' in the same way that the Japanese word 'osieru' is used. In English we would use the word 'tell.' Another case is when a negative question such as, 'You didn't do your homework, did you?' is asked. The student will typically answer, 'Yes.' What he actually means is, 'No, I didn't.'

English has many more sounds than Japanese and is not as phonetic as Japanese. English is a language where idioms are widely used and it has a very large vocabulary.

Idioms, in particular, are very difficult for students. The majority of idioms used in English are made up of very simple words whose meaning changes completely depending on the context in which they are used. In the previous sentence I used the idiom 'make up' in the sense of 'composed of.' But we also make up our face, make up a story, make up with a friend after a fight and make up for lost time.

When the teacher is aware of these problems and of the level of the class, he or she can begin to set attainable goals for the class. This is extremely important for two reasons, the avoidance of frustration and a sense of achievement.

If the goals are too high, the students become frustrated and a feeling of hopelessness sets in. They feel that no matter how hard or how long they study, they will never be able to speak English.

If the goals are too low, there is no sense of accomplishment which is the primary reward for the student. They feel that they have wasted their time and made no headway.

Once appropriate goals have been set, the interests of the students must be addressed. It's time to put flesh and blood on the grammatical bones of the language. The teacher's job now is to enable the students to talk about things that interest them. And to stimulate conversation.

This is where group dynamics become important. The personality of each student contributes to the atmosphere of the class as a whole. The aim is to allow each individual student as much speaking time as possible. This entails gently encouraging students who are reluctant or embarrassed to speak, as well as challenging the less timid students to reach higher levels. The teacher acts as a conductor, bringing harmony and balance to the group while allowing the group to define itself.

Earlier in this paper, I mentioned that the successful teacher should have a 'repertoire of teaching techniques.' By this I mean that the teacher should be familiar with many different techniques such as drills, games, role play, etc. This way the teacher is able to choose the approach that best suits the students and is not confined to a set approach. Often a combination of techniques is the most effective. Let's consider, for example, yes/no questions. There are many types of drills that can be used to elicit yes/no questions from the students. In addition I often use one or two games which force the students to compose their own questions and, at the same time, encourage them to expand their vocabulary. One such game is 'What's My Job?.' In this game one student chooses a profession and the other students ask yes/no questions until they have guessed the 'mystery' job. For example: Is your job dangerous?., Do you make a lot of money?, Do you work outside?, etc. I have found that incorporating this type of activity into the class stimulates the students and they enjoy learning what they might otherwise find extremely tedious. They have a task to accomplish and the English skills necessary to complete the task.

The interaction between the teacher and the students in an English conversation classroom can, and should be, rewarding to both the students and the teacher. I have found that the more energy and warmth I give to the students, the more I receive in return. In other words; the more fun I have in the

classroom, the more the students learn.

The unfortunate fact is that learning a language takes time and effort. There is no magic formula, there is no such thing as 'Instant English.' And, perhaps the most frustrating fact of all, there is no final point where a student is able to say, 'Now I know English.' Some students expect a magician instead of a teacher, and I'm afraid that they are disappointed. Mastery of a foreign language is, for most of us, a life-long task. However, a student with a good attitude who is willing to devote some time and effort can reach a level where he or she can communicate in a surprisingly short time.

The most rewarding part of teaching English in Japan is the glow in a student's eyes reflecting his or her feeling of accomplishment after he or she has used English outside of the classroom for the first time and successfully communicated with a foreigner. Last year one of my students saw an American in Tokyo who seemed to be having trouble understanding the subway map. The student offered to help, in English, and a conversation ensued. The foreigner was a movie director and my student received passes to the movie as well as a poster. He was very pleased by these gifts but his greatest joy was the discovery that he was capable of communicating in English.

The English classroom can, at times, be a very frustrating place both for the students and the teacher. But it can also be unbelievably rewarding. In the long run, the rewards and the joy that come from them far outweigh the frustration.