

How To Make an English Class More Effective

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Abstract

The study concerns student motivation, textbooks used, gender differences, student differences, teacher activities, task-based learning and culture. The attempt is to improve the way we teach English. Of course, motivation is the most important. The study finds that instrumental and integrative motivation are both important. It is not enough to simply teach for the TOEIC test. With textbooks, the study finds textbooks simply focusing on the TOEIC test are not enough, we need textbooks which also deal with other things. Gender difference was found to be significant in the way that boys and girls studied English. Individual differences were found to be significant, and a style which fits all does not exist. This makes teaching English very difficult. The teacher should remain flexible and use a number of techniques. So, above all, a teacher should be moderate. Teachers should not be stuck on one method, but should use several. Feedback is more effective if the teacher shows the student what is wrong soon after the student uses English. This is more effective than giving the students models to follow.

Assessments and tests are effective to some extent. Although all methods have good and bad points, a task-based approach was found to be effective. Moreover, Japanese English teachers could use such a method. Culture was a major factor and useful to some extent. However, too firm a belief in culture may blind us to student differences. While the teacher should be aware of Japanese norms, they should also be aware where these differ from international norms and point this out to the students. Part of learning English is learning the world where Japanese norms are different. It is important if the teacher is foreign to avoid a “them” and “us” situation.

Motivation

Some time ago, I wrote in a paper that “...the majority of students we questioned seem to be mainly influenced by instrumental motivation.”⁽¹⁾ More recently, one study said “Non communicative methods (which focuses on grammar learning or university entrance examination preparation without a communicative use of English), was perceived to be demotivating by many participants, we have inferred that such emphasis on grammar and examinations may function as a demotivating factor for Japanese learners of English.”⁽²⁾ It has long been known that a positive motivation is important English. There are, of course, two kinds of motivation. “In a series of studies collected in Gardner and Lambert (1972) a distinction was proposed between integrative orientation, characterized by those who learn a second language in order to identify themselves with the second language speaking group and ultimately join it, and instrumental motivation described as a more practical reason for learning.”⁽³⁾

One might think that Japanese learners were mainly interested in instrumental motivation. When, in fact, it is a strange mix of instrumental and integrative motivation.

One study stated “Clearly students are primarily motivated to learn English because of its usefulness in finding a job. Interestingly, these students don’t want jobs that require the use of English, rather they simply want to know enough English to find a job in the first place.”⁽⁴⁾

Gardner and Lambert have written about motivation. “Write about motivation as being of the instrumental or integrative nature, integrative motivation as being seen as the desire to communicate and become similar to members of that L2 (second language) community. On the other hand, instrumental motivation is seen as the desire to learn the L2 (second language) for pragmatic gains such as getting a better job. They found that of the two kinds motivation students who were integrative motivated made the most use of practice opportunities, volunteered more answers in classroom and were generally better students.”⁽⁵⁾

Doryei has criticized this view as being different from the usual FL situation. “FL (foreign language) learners are usually not exposed much to TL (target language) cultures or speakers and often their aim is to make friends or do business with other nonnative speakers.”⁽⁶⁾

So, according to Doryei, integrative motivation is set by “a general disposition to language learning and the TL values of the learning community.”⁽⁷⁾

So, based on research, although integrative motivation is felt to be better, most Japanese students seem to be motivated by instrumental motivation. Such a conclusion would indicate that we should be working towards TOEIC and STEP English tests. But this is only half the story. Although Japanese students seem to be motivated more by instrumental motivation, their

motivation would seem to be very weak. For this reason, we should concentrate on instrumental motivation. Like tests, we should work at raising integrative motivation. This is very difficult. But we should be using teaching materials that are practical and attractive. For example, Dornyei has said that “foreign language learners have a different kind of integrative motivation which is more culture general than culture specific.”⁽⁸⁾

The idea that a mix of instrumental and integrative motivation may be the key is a conclusion of one study “...strategies to motivate learners integratively and instrumentally is probably the key to enhancing language performance.”⁽⁹⁾

It is also important that teachers show students some advantages to learning English. “It is effective for instructors to provide practical reasons for learning English. For example, instructors should show how the English the students are learning, eg, structure, vocabulary, etc., are useful for their life.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Irie suggests goal orientation is important. “...it may be advisable to consider the Pintrich and Schurk (1996) suggestion that goal orientation theories represent ‘the most relevant and applicable goal theory for understanding and improving learning and instruction.’”⁽¹¹⁾

In Japan we seem to have a unique situation. “The researchers concluded Japanese universities are defined by a general positive interest in traveling and communicating with people from English speaking countries. Unlike their Chinese and Korean counterparts however, there was no strong desire to learn English. In order to integrate into TL communities, as in the original sense of integrative motivation.”⁽¹²⁾

Miyahara et al “...suggest that the desire to develop proficiency itself can be a goal for learning English in EFL(English as a foreign language) contexts.”⁽¹³⁾

“Performance goal orientation, a counterpoint of mastery goal orientation may also explain a part of Japanese students motivation performance orientation is usually associated with a desire for high grades (status) and better performance than others.”⁽¹⁴⁾

I am aware that I am citing a lot in this study, but it is a good. One conclusion is “...teachers should focus on a mastery orientation and foster belief that ability is changeable and controllable.”⁽¹⁵⁾

The conclusion on motivation is that “...students, who have practical reasons and intellectual satisfaction tend to have lower levels of foreign language anxiety.”⁽¹⁶⁾

As studies on anxiety have revealed, it is a major factor in motivation of Japanese learners of English.

Textbooks

English textbooks are very significant. “...it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign who will determine its (the world’s) future.”⁽¹⁷⁾

If we assume that Japanese students of English are not particularly well motivated to learn English, then the textbook used is very important. If as we suggest instrumental and integrative motivations are both important, we have to use a textbook which incorporates both in the first year. One book I used was Cool Britannia.⁽¹⁸⁾, which meet some of these conditions. The book focuses on British society, but from the point of view of that students were interested in. For example, there were features on fashion, sport, food and sexuality. The problem with book was that the questions were focused on the TOEIC test. To my mind, the book should not completely focus on the TOEIC test, since this is not the only reason students study English, although we should study other things, there should also should be questions based on the TOEIC test or relevant to the TOEIC test. So textbook design is very important and ideally teachers should be working in this area. I will publish a textbook this year.⁽¹⁹⁾

Unfortunately, this book does not feature TOEIC, so may not be ideal for our first year students. The other area that is very useful is the Internet. In this sense, weblogs help to make students more independent of the textbooks and teachers. This gives all students access to the web, and we can assume this is true. In this sense we can promote “learner autonomy” and “ability to take charge of one’s own learning.”⁽²⁰⁾

In this sense the instructor has to work hard too. “Participants were inclined to instructor feedback crucial to learning the correct forms of language as well as to understand how their entries made sense in terms of pragmatics.”⁽²¹⁾

“The instructor’s feedback consisted of pointing out grammatical mistakes, giving students correct forms and other possible usages, and leaving questions relevant to their entries in order to maintain an online conversation with students.”⁽²²⁾

One study mentions the need to use other nationalities in the textbooks. As the textbooks have “...the’ potential to reinforce students perceptions of English as belonging to native English speakers (Matsuda 2002) especially those from the United States. From a critical standpoint, this is unacceptable, as exposure to only American (or British) English will be inadequate in preparing students to other speakers from other OC (Outer Circle, former colonies) and EC (Expanding Circle, eg. Brazil, Japan), as well as speakers from other IC (Inner Circle, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States).”⁽²³⁾

Gender Differences

Some years ago I noticed a gender difference between Japanese learners of English. In general, while Japanese females are

more responsive to integrative motivation, they seem to be less effected by instrumental motivation. Social roles restrict boys and girls to some extent. It is part of our general educational responsibilities to deal with this. Japan is committed to gender equality. "...the Japanese government established the Basic Law for Gender-Equal Society in 1999. According to the preamble, "... it is vital to position the realization of a gender-equal society as a top priority task in determining the framework of 21st Japan and implement policies related to promotion of formation of a gender equal society in all fields." (24)

We are so used to the world, but "Even in a individual, use of such gender words are not fixed..." a culturally-shaped group of attributes and behaviors give given to the female or the male." (25)

It is important to be aware that gender "...is potentially limiting for males and females who are stereotyped." (26)

This is particularly true in Japan where such stereotyping seems very strong. We often see 'invisible sexism.' "The inevitable result of "...looking for natural difference and failing to see cultural difference" is frequently sexism." (27)

This disadvantages girls in particular. "Studies of classroom interaction in mixed sex classes in a range of subjects taught through the first language have repeatedly come up with the findings that female students receive less teacher attention than males, and that male students talk more than females." (28)

A study of textbooks in one study found few women in high positions in jobs. (29)

Of course we may want to treat students more equally but sometimes we may be defeated by student's expectations. Once a Japanese teacher wanted to call all students by the male term 'kun' but one student said "Don' t call me 'kun' I am female, use 'san'."

Finally, in a study of gender we read this, "Hiro' s case supports the literature..." those studying abroad "...can experience greater gains in oral proficiency (fluency and accuracy) than many of their female counterparts." (30) For social reasons.

Goals

What are the goals of the class? This is a very important question. To some extent this can be stated in the syllabus. But, to some extent, they have to be negotiated with the students. Venema, citing Cowie, speaks of the great freedom teachers in Japan have. "Teachers have a great deal of freedom as to what and how they teach. They are assigned course titles such as 'English Conversation I' and 'Writing I' and so on, but beyond these simple labels it is up to each teacher to devise and deliver the curriculum." (31)

There are, of course, socially agreed goals. "In Japanese schools , there is much more guidance than dealing with a child' s problems. The overall goal of guidance is to promote a child' s self realization that is deeply imbedded in a network of family and school." (32)

In Venema' s article negotiating involves negotiating between English teachers, but, in fear of being thought too idealistic, I think it also involves negotiating between English teachers and students too. So there is a need for the syllabus to be flexible enough to allow this. Also we need goal objectives so we can be sure what we are aiming at. To teach English is a very vague teaching objective. We need a more specific aim. Venema recommends that we "...remember the big picture..." (33) and that curriculum development is an ongoing process.

Students are all Different

We are told that cultural differences as if everyone in that culture is the same. This can be useful. Japanese learners are not so informal as Americans. Japanese tend to bow at the teacher. More and more North Americans are taken as the norm and we have to adjust to this norm. The truth is, and this is why teaching is very difficult, that all students are different. "...the findings that do exist in ID (individual differences) research have been neglected in mainstream SLA (Second Language association) for too long, and they should be brought back into greater prominence." (34)

These differences are what lies behind the Cooperative Learning Movement. The idea of cooperative learning was also influenced by democratization after the Second World War. "Education in Japan has been criticized since the 1980s regarding fostering students as individuals because many educational systems disregard individual differences due to relatively large class sizes. A course of study produced in 1989 by the Ministry of Education underscored the teaching needs of individuals." (35)

It would be easy to write a book on this subject, but for present purposes a few sentences will have to be enough. "...some people are endowed with better cognitive linguistic abilities for language than others. This generalization is simply that people vary in their language aptitude and that such variation has considerable significance for language learning success." (36)

Finally, "...individual language learners vary in their productive and receptive skills." (37)

Teacher's Activity

Obviously, students are the main factor, but it is usually up to the teachers what activities are covered in class. De Boar warns us to avoid the 'Socratic trap.' By this he means the teacher already "...has a pre-determined answer and tries to

manipulate and guide students towards the answer the teacher is thinking of.”⁽³⁸⁾

This, he claims, prevents “meaningful conversation.” Citing Banbrook and Skenan he claims “Questions can be used to allow the learner to keep participating in the discourse and even modify it so that the language becomes more comprehensible and personally relevant.”⁽³⁹⁾

The same can be said of teacher’s activities. We should not use activities where we know the answer. It is also important that the teacher subject his activities to strict analysis. In a broad sense this can be seen as part of the Reflective Teaching Movement.⁽⁴⁰⁾

This also includes research projects into methods used. A great deal of this seems little more than common sense.

More important is the question of student feedback. While not being fully supportive of a strong position on feedback, Sakai states “Although both types of feedback (models and recasts) helped the learners notice the gaps between their inter-language and target language, recasts, which were provided immediately after their utterances, were more effective in leading to noticing than were models, which were provided a few minutes later after their utterances.”⁽⁴¹⁾

This study gave me confidence because the conclusions are so tentative. “In conclusion, Japanese EFL learner’s verbal reports, although the learners noticed linguistic problems during communicative tasks and, if so, noticed them. This study found that through the activity (a) although the learners noticed linguistic problems through the activity of speaking they had difficulty in attending and incorporating the subsequent input for the later production (b) recasts were more effective in prompting noticing of errors than models were…”⁽⁴²⁾

Finally, we would like to say a little about assessment. “The goal of assessment has to be, above all, to support the improvement of learning and teaching.”⁽⁴³⁾

In a sense, assessment is similar to reflexive teaching, common sense. The difference with assessment is that you actually judge what you do through tests. What is meant by assessment? White provides a definition. Assessment according to his is “… the knowledge about how to assess what a student know and can do, interpret the results of these assessments and apply the results to improve student learning and program effectiveness…”⁽⁴⁴⁾

This would seem to mean that the teacher knows what compromises language learning and how to assess it. There is a danger that the teacher will be too confident and mistake his or her measurement for real language learning. Language learning is complicated. But White thinks he understands it.

While I think some degree of assessment is necessary we should always be humble and be aware of the limits of our knowledge.

Task-Based Learning

“Learners should be able to use the language with speed and confidence even if this means sacrificing grammatical accuracy. A task-based approach, where learners actively engage in meaning focused activities. For much (but not all) of their time in class, is explicitly designed to achieve this.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

Task-based learning comes from the Communicative Approach. Numan described a task as “A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

In Japan English is mainly studied for examinations purposes. This is why Japanese students have a lot of grammatical knowledge but are often unable to communicate. A task-based approach focuses on meaning. In Japan a traditional approach is often found. But “The teaching skills acquired in a traditional approach can be used in a task-based approach.”⁽⁴⁷⁾

As well as introducing a method like a task-based approach, it seems that Japanese students need to learn a new way to think. “Japanese students different cognitive profile suggest that they should be taught ways to learn.”⁽⁴⁸⁾

The introduction of a task-based approach would need a revolutionary change in the way that English is being taught. But why not? The present system does not seem to be working. “The switch to a more task-based approach would see skills lessons predominate. The study of language would be subordinate to the application of communicate skills rather than the other way around.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

There is some evidence that a task-based approach can work in Japanese university classroom. One student said “I could not disagree very well in stage 2. I learnt to disagree much more.”⁽⁵⁰⁾

Another study also reports success “The results suggest that the CR (consciousness raising) and TBL approaches were effective in the way they were implemented the quantitative evaluation indicates that the materials achieved their ultimate goal of reducing the frequency with which students use conjunctions at sentences initial positions.”⁽⁵¹⁾

One study heartily recommends a task-based approach. “Any well designed task-based programme should provide learners with a rich exposure to language and multiple opportunities to use the language for themselves. The experience should results in a wide vocabulary and a feel for what is right and thus equip learners to do even better in tests of a more traditional nature.”⁽⁵²⁾

Culture

This is a very important subject. There are some textbooks that try to teach Japanese culture. Culture can be seen as context in language teaching. Citing Halliday and Hanan, (Kramersch) says "The notions that text and context are inseparable: text is language operative in a context or situation and contexts are ultimately construed by a range of texts produced within a community...One common sense conception is ... that our ideas, our knowledge, our thoughts, our culture are all there- almost independent of language and just waiting to be expressed by it. This attitude is so deeply rooted that it finds its expression, for example, in out theoretical writing about languages." (53)

The problem of individual and culture is very difficult. What is culturally-specific? "Different cultural patterns translate into rules for living, artifacts, values, beliefs, naming, social relations, and all the elements of human social life, have evolved to meet universal human problems. The problems are universal, the solutions are culturally-specific. In addition, while these patterns are shared to some degree by members of the same cultural group, individual perception and translations between the public and private worlds of senders and receivers provide a unique frame for reference for every intercultural communicative act." (54)

This is a large subject, and we can only give a few tentative suggestions here. But one of the important things we realize is that learning a foreign language is not simply learning the language. "In all cases, foreign language learning is subservient to the goals of institutions that impose their values, and their definition of the educational challenge on all subjects in the curriculum." (55)

Notes

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