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Moving in a New Direction with English

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Abstract

Recently, Japanese English education has been moving towards more practical and communicative English for greater fluency. Teachers are encouraged more than ever to keep lessons interesting, to provide the basics of daily conversation, and to motivate students to speak English, not only to memorize the structure of the language. Instructional aims focus on building language skills and comfort in the English language, developing a stronger knowledge base of various topics for conversation, and encouraging the students to see English as an essential tool in their future careers. There are now more opportunities to use English as pharmacists, whether it is in conversation with foreigners in hospitals and pharmacies, or through overseas study, research or international meetings. The Basic English courses are therefore aimed at creating a stronger foundation for future study and fluency.

日本の英語教育は最近対話能力向上を目的とした教育にシフトしつつあります。教師は授業で英語を書く・読むだけでなく、話す能力をも高める工夫をしています。英語力に自信を持たせ、さまざまな場面で使える英語の知識を増やし、英語をコミュニケーションの道具として使いこなせるように指導をしています。現在、薬剤師の仕事は病院や薬局で外国人と接し、国際会議への出席の機会が増え、増々英語力が必要とされています。それゆえ、私の基礎英語の授業の目標は将来にわたっての必要な力をつけることにあります。

Moving in a New Direction with English

A dilemma English teachers face with their English classes in Japan is that the course of study is often based on “language learning” not on “language acquisition”, leaving students with mass amounts of grammatical knowledge, but an inability to communicate in writing and in speech. Despite the six years of English study in junior high and high school, many university students are unable to understand or express themselves in English and are left instead with negative reactions to English, including fear, dislike, and frustration. Herrell and Jordan (2008) state that as a natural process of learning, “language acquisition is gradual, based on receiving and understanding messages, building a listening (receptive) vocabulary, and slowly attempting verbal production of the language in a highly supportive, *non-stressful* situation” (p. 2). With that in mind, I have been challenged to develop weekly English lessons that promote more language problem-solving skills, that build greater vocabulary, and that provide more comfort in the language through reading and self-expression.

The textbook we are presently using in class covers a variety of modern Japanese-society related topics. These familiar topics range from the singing group SMAP and Japanese athletes to washoku and Metabolic Syndrome. The readings not only teach new vocabulary and review grammar, but also require the students to think about their own ideas or opinions on the topics. This is important learning for these future pharmacists because using functional or practical English means understanding the topic of conversation and being able to contribute appropriately to a conversation when speaking with patients and customers. When we think of fluency in a language, we believe there should be enough vocabulary and grammar to communicate ideas in the target language, but there also needs to be a broad knowledge base that allows the use of that vocabulary and grammar. That knowledge base should include “widely-known and often-used information” (Seeroi, 2012). For example, topics that are often headlined in the news offer a connection to the public, including environmental issues, health problems, and sports.

In my English classes, I use various strategies for learning, beginning with establishing a set class routine, so that students know what to expect in the class. For example, we start each class with a “Speaking Corner” where the students are given a problem or a topic to discuss together with the people sitting around them.

This activity is followed with a review and a mini-test of previous learning. Then the topic of learning is further clarified and practiced or a new topic is introduced. Finally the students are given homework to review and prepare for the next class. Knowing this class routine and understanding what they will study next reduces anxiety about the English class and “helps them relax and not worry as much” (Herrell & Jordan, 2008, p. 16). Some students recently informed me that they are feeling more comfortable in English class this term, which is a positive first step to further motivation and learning.

The “Speaking Corner” is a brief discussion time at the beginning of my classes where the students study a specific problem and decide on a solution or answer together with other students. It directs the students’ attention to a topic and prepares them for a point that may be discussed later in the class. Sometimes the topic is related to pharmacy, other times it is particular to the topic of study or a grammar-related exercise. Learning is motivated by curiosity and needs to be made personal in order to be effective. One way to make connections between learning and experiences is through peer teaching, also called reciprocal teaching. According to brain researcher Patricia Wolfe, “the act of making and strengthening connections” is essential to learning, and an activity where the students are encouraged to “think, pair and share”, “allows (them) to use other parts of the brain as (they) speak, listen, look, and process information” (Laureate Education, 2008). Cooperative learning with a partner or group provides opportunities for verbal interaction and offers support to the weaker students, allowing the stronger students in English a chance to share their ideas and give support in Japanese. To avoid putting the students into a stressful situation, there is no rule for speaking only in English during class, but they are all encouraged to participate in the discussion and to communicate with others during this time.

For each topic, I introduce the material visually with a PowerPoint presentation and aurally with the CD readings to assist with reading comprehension and to encourage language problem-solving. It is “important to build background knowledge and experiences that help the students to understand the meaning of the text” (Herrell & Jordan, 2008, p. 73). For example, when reading about former judo competitor Tadahiro Nomura, I included discussion and pictures of the Olympics, so that the students could also connect the topic to the current news and media coverage of the London Olympics outside of class. Another example was with the topic on Metabolic Syndrome, the students learned about related health issues and some medical terms associated with the disorder through the

pictures. We also tried to measure our own Body Mass Index (BMI) and waist circumferences to compare with the presented information. The visual supports and interactive activities help the students to gain interest and curiosity in the topic, make it more familiar and real, and expand their knowledge base on the topic.

It is also necessary, of course, to focus on the actual language structure by exploring new vocabulary, reviewing formerly-learned grammar, and practicing correct pronunciation. Although only limited time is dedicated to grammar in class, it is still discussed and presented together with the reading and vocabulary skill development activities. To encourage the students to train their ears to hear the sounds of English, they listen to the chapter first being read in English and follow along in their textbooks. In a subsequent class, they listen while following a Japanese translation of the reading on the screen, allowing them to make a connection between the vocabularies used in both languages. These two ways of listening helps them to hear the pronunciation and intonation, and “provides a good example of fluent and expressive English reading” (Herrell & Jordan, 2008, p. 77). After listening, we study the text itself, focusing on comprehension and vocabulary. I often use the “5W&H questions” (who, what, where, when, why, and how) as a base to analyze the text and to develop greater reading comprehension skills, together with a variety of selected response questions, like multiple choice, true and false, matching, or short answer writing.

It is difficult to judge a student’s knowledge only through paper tests (both the weekly mini-tests and the final exams), so I try to focus in class on instructional aims that build greater confidence to communicate in English, particularly through writing and speaking. One aim is to improve the vocabulary of the students within the context of specific topics and promote greater communication potential. From my personal experience, there comes a point in second-language learning when the spoken and written vocabulary must be developed in order to improve in communication and fluency. At this point in the first year of university, the students need to expand their vocabulary to understand that there are several words for one meaning and that they can be used in different contexts. Basic conversation allows for questions and explanation for words or phrases, but reading requires understanding of vocabulary and grammar, or it becomes consistently interrupted with dictionary searches and confusion in meanings.

The second aim is to improve the reading, listening and writing/vocabulary skills in this class, with a slight focus on speaking since they have a separate class for English conversation. The mastery of all of these skills will aid in “the procedural knowledge and understanding prerequisite to being able to demonstrate such skills” for communication (Stiggins, 2005, p. 88). The aim of teaching Basic English in English is for students to develop stronger reasoning and problem-solving skills that will support them in later studies that require stronger English skills in reading and writing. I have thus set the instruction aims of the class to integrate the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing for more practical and communicative English, and also to focus on building vocabulary for greater understanding, writing for self-expression in a variety of topics, and developing new study skills.

Conclusion

An interactive style of learning requires students to participate, discuss, think, and to write, without worrying about perfect technique, grammar and spelling. In April, I experimented with speaking only in English during class, but this seemed to overwhelm some of the students, creating a further gap between the students who were accustomed to English and those who still had a fear of it. I decided to add more Japanese into the lecture and the PowerPoint presentations to help the students make more connections to the language. Now in the second term, the students seem to feel more familiar with this style of learning, and they show more effort to participate by discussing the topics, listening while reading, connecting vocabulary in Japanese and English, reading for purpose, writing to express themselves, and using English to learn more English. I hope that this different style of learning will promote more connections between the students' knowledge of the English language and their mother tongue Japanese and that English will become an effective tool of communication for them as they build up a stronger knowledge base in a variety of topics.

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