

## **Creating Competence: Planning an English Language Course at a Japanese University**

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### **Introduction**

Foreign teachers of English often find that Japanese university students in their first year classes seem very reserved and are sometimes incapable of responding to even simple questions in English. However, it is important to remember that by the time the students enter university they have already had nearly 600 hours of English instruction. They have been introduced to the English grammatical framework and have an awareness of a number of vocabulary items. They should not therefore be treated as beginners. The English teacher at university should attempt to build on the knowledge the students already have and concentrate on areas that will help the students use English in the 'real world'. The areas that need to be focused on include vocabulary building, improving listening skills, pronunciation practice, confidence building, and practice in actually using the language. This paper will first look at areas that teachers should concentrate on and suggest various factors that they might take into account when planning an English course for Japanese university students. The article will then outline a possible course plan.

### **Previous Learning Experience**

The experience of high school language learning classes has a strong influence on the expectations of Japanese students. Many Japanese university students can be expected to arrive in their first year English classes with certain ideas about what language learning involves and might view learning in terms of grammar and vocabulary input provided by the teacher. Moreover, students coming from a background of teacher centered lessons might have difficulty equating learner centered practice activities such as pair work, role plays and group work with learning. There are also wider cultural influences affecting the classroom behaviour and communication which may stand in the way of any lively teacher-student or student-student interaction. It is therefore possible that the students will feel rather nervous and unsettled at first.

### **The Suitability of a Communicative Approach**

Experience has indicated that while, the students seem to welcome many of the activities associated with a more communicative approach, there is a need to introduce the changes gradually and for the teacher to be prepared to compromise. The teacher should therefore try to be sensitive to the problems the students are having at the beginning of the course and not expect too much, particularly with regards to 'performing' in English in front of the whole class and carrying out free activities without adequate preparation. Controlled activities that prepare students for communicative tasks

help boost students' confidence and their ability to produce utterances automatically. While students are getting accustomed to the new style of teaching, it is probably better to avoid free activities that are open ended and instead provide a specific aim so that students will have a clear direction to move in. However, once the students feel more confident, it is important that they are given practice in using the language in more realistic situations.

Research carried out in Kumamoto Prefectural University in 1997 showed that student centered activities were usually popular. Activities such as pair work, group work role plays and discussions maximize the chance the students have to actually use English in class. Moreover, students feel less inhibited talking in small groups and pairs than they do when they have to perform in front of the whole class and the teacher. As well as appreciating the opportunity to practise using English, some of the students reported that they enjoyed the chance to make friends or to talk with friends in English. The importance that students attach to establishing relationships during their time at the university is also revealed in surveys carried out with first year students in the first class of the year: the most frequently mentioned future aim is to make friends at the college. The teacher might therefore give students the opportunity to meet with a number of classmates by moving them around so that they work with different partners and different group members. Melee activities are also useful for this purpose and also introduce a change of pace by allowing the students to get out of their seats and move around. As well as lowering the tension in the class therefore, a more student centered approach with increased student interaction also seems to have a useful social function and thereby adds interest to the lessons.

### **Motivation**

By providing low tension lessons that the students find useful as well as interesting and enjoyable, the teacher can hopefully maintain a high level of motivation among the students. Berwick and Ross (quoted in Ellis 1995, 515) noticed in a study of a group of Japanese university commerce students, who were studying English as an obligatory part of their course, that despite a decrease in instrumental motivation after passing the entrance exam and entering the university, and an absence of any motivation at the beginning of the university course, their motivation increased markedly during the course as a result of motivational factors that were labelled 'support' and 'interest'. Moreover, a supportive classroom atmosphere and a desire and need to communicate in the target language are considered to be important conditions for language learning activities. In order to maintain student interest it can be useful for the teacher to carry out a survey into the topics that the students like talking about and the type of activities they find useful and enjoyable. This can be done at the beginning of the course and also at various other stages during the course.

### **Course Book Selection**

If the teacher is using a course book, careful selection is necessary. When considering the level of the book it should be remembered that Japanese university students have been exposed to six years of English study at high school and already have a broad knowledge of the language. In the case of university first year students, texts aimed at false beginners with a wide variety of activities that

provide plenty of opportunity for the students to activate their passive knowledge of English are often appropriate. For general English students there should be a balanced approach to the four skills. Where possible the language should be introduced and practised in situations that the students find interesting and useful, e.g. travel English; English for the office; contexts that are familiar and relevant to the students' lives; situations relating to foreign countries and cultures .

### **Improving Listening Skills**

Many students say that they have difficulty understanding what foreign teachers are saying in English and this is obviously something the teacher should be aware of. It is important that the teacher try to use a level of language that is accessible to the students so that, while the students do not feel they are being talked down to, they can enjoy the challenge of trying to understand. Ellis (1995, 582) lists modifications that teachers can make to assist student understanding such as limiting the amount of information, paraphrasing, check questions, repetition and a here-and-now focus. To help students understand instructions to an activity a teacher-student or student-student demonstration can often make things a lot clearer.

At the same time, efforts to improve the students' listening ability should be made a priority. As well as the teacher providing comprehensible language input through clear instructions, explanations or other types of information, the teacher should try to make use of a variety of listening material. This should include tapes and videos that the students can listen to with comprehension and which are also of interest to the students so they have a desire to listen. As well as being used inside the classroom, listening material should also be made available outside the classroom in resource centres etc. The teacher should make use of pre-listening tasks to help the students' understanding and also to motivate the students and create an interest and thereby giving them a reason to listen. Such tasks might also help the students develop good listening strategies. These tasks might include prediction activities, discussions about the topic involved in the listening, vocabulary work and questions to answer while they are listening. Post listening tasks could also be set with the students being asked to make use in some way of the information they have acquired. It might also be assumed that as the students' general language ability and knowledge of English pronunciation improves and their vocabulary grows, their listening ability will improve as well.

### **Vocabulary Input**

Vocabulary input is another area that teachers must pay attention to. Research carried out on freshmen students has shown that most of the first year students have an English vocabulary of between 1,200 and 1,500 head words. This is far short of the 2,500 words needed for survival level and the 5,000 words needed to cope with regular texts. It is therefore necessary for the teacher to look at ways to help students build up their vocabulary. The teacher can make informed decisions about what words the students most need and attempt to introduce them in class. However, because of the large number of words in English it is also important to encourage the students to assume a lot of the responsibility for learning vocabulary themselves outside class. There are a number of ways that teachers can encourage students to build up their vocabulary. The teacher should insist that the

students have either a mono-lingual (for lower level students) or a bilingual dictionary and provide advice on how to use them. The students should also be asked to keep a vocabulary notebook in which a number of new words are jotted down each week. The teacher should provide advice at the beginning of the course as to how these vocabulary records might be kept and the books should be checked regularly. Extensive reading should also be encouraged as it is one way by which new words can be acquired naturally. Introducing students to the patterns of vocabulary such as affixes, collocations and compound is also helpful. Specific vocabulary work, done separately, or together with skills work should also be carried out in class. This work might include activities such as finding words that have similar meanings in a text; word association exercises; labelling pictures; work on sense relations; eliciting and introducing words associated with various topics; and focusing on the differences and similarities between the many English loan-words in Japanese. New words should be written up on the board and sentences provided to show typical sentence patterns and collocations. Efforts should also be made to reintroduce 'new' words at various stages of the course as an aid to memory and also so the students have further opportunities to see and make use of the words in a meaningful context.

### **Error Correction**

Experience has shown that students desire more correction of their output during the freer stages of the lesson so that repeated and common errors are pointed out. The student expressed concern that if the correction was not carried out learners would not be aware of mistakes they are making and at times they may sound impolite. In addition to these factors, research into programs that emphasize meaning and encourage conversational interaction show that although there are gains made in fluency, learners can provide each other with input that is often incorrect. Therefore there is often a need for structured input and correction (Lightbown and Spada 1995, 104). Ellis (1995, 599) points to studies by Pica and Doughty and Porter into group work and interaction that show that, as one might imagine, student interlanguage talk is less grammatical than teacher talk, and he warns that exposure to incorrect peer talk may lead to fossilization. He also points to the findings of Porter's study that show that non-native speakers did not provide sociolinguistically appropriate input and students may not be able to learn the social rules of speaking from each other (1995, 599-600). Lightbown and Spada (1995, ) conclude that a communicative programme should contain elements of structured input and correction:

“Classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of a communicative program are more effective in promoting second language learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on accuracy on the one hand or an exclusive emphasis on fluency on the other. Thus, we would argue that second language teachers can (and should) provide guided, form-based instruction and correction in specific circumstances.”

(Lightbown and Spada 1995, 105).

Form based input and corrective feedback is therefore particularly important. It is important therefore for teachers to monitor students' activities so that they can feed in suggestions and point out glaring errors (without being too intrusive); common errors can be noted down and examined with the whole class after the activity has finished. The teacher might also start off the class with a free activity and after making a note of problem areas, provide guided input and controlled practice activities in an effort to correct the problem. These activities can be followed up by a further free stage so that the teacher and students can assess the improvement. The process does not have to be done in one lesson alone; it can be carried out over a number of lessons. This type of 'deep end' approach might be especially motivating to students as they can hopefully see a clear improvement between the original attempt at the task and the later effort. Furthermore, it might help avoid the problem of students considering activities to be too easy as the teacher is focusing on areas that students are clearly having problems with.

### Creating Course Goals

Students often say that they hope to find a job using English. Research by the TOEIC-LPI committee focuses on what level of English Oral proficiency is necessary to perform certain work related tasks. Based on the results of this research, we have produced the following explanation of what we believe are achievable English Oral Proficiency requirements for our students. Furthermore, if our students are able to achieve this level of proficiency, it is likely they will succeed in their self expressed goal of finding work using English.

After four years in our program, students should be able to perform the following language tasks:

able to give simple biographical information. They should be able to explain who the members of their families are, say what they do, what their hobbies are, etc.

able to ask questions. Question forms in English are difficult and source of many errors.

able to narrate in the past tense. They should be able explain, for example. a recent trip where they went, what they did, how they traveled etc. They should use appropriate transitions and sequence words and used irregular past tense correctly. There should be no long pauses.

able to narrate in the present tense. As above they should be able to smoothly narrate their daily routine or explain a Japanese holiday or custom in the present tense.

able to narrate in the future. Similarly able to express future plans, goals, or intentions and explain the steps necessary to achieve that intent.

able to give instructions or directions. They should be able to explain how to cook a simple

meal or use a piece of common office equipment, such as a photocopier.

able to describe a room. They should be able to explain the lay out of a room showing spacial relationships and using prepositions of location correctly.

able to explain a current event. They should be able to explain something beyond their personal lives. They should be able to explain an event occurring in the news using appropriate vocabulary.

able to use language to handle a survival situation in a foreign country where a problem arises. For example, a simple survival situation is explaining a medical problem to a doctor. Students should be able to do this and then if a problem arises, for example, with their insurance they should be able to solve the problem or offer a solution using English. (ETS, 1996)

The above is a breakdown of the tasks a student should be able to perform. Students should be able to handle routine work-related. They should be able to handle with confidence most normal, high frequency social conversational situations including extensive, but casual conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information. The individual's utterances should be minimally cohesive. Linguistic structure will usually not be very elaborate and not thoroughly controlled; errors will continue to be frequent. Vocabulary use should be appropriate for high-frequency utterances, but unusual or imprecise elsewhere.

Students should be able typically ask and answer predictable questions in the workplace and give straightforward instructions to subordinates. Additionally, the student should be able to participate in personal accommodation-type interactions with elaboration and facility; that is give and understand complicated, detailed, and extensive directions and make non-routine changes in travel and accommodation requirements. Simple structures and basic grammatical relations should be typically controlled; however, there will continue to be areas of weakness.

### **Further Considerations For Course Planning**

1. All of the English classes in the first year and perhaps the second should focus on clear language goals. The material must be reused, reviewed, and recycled again and again, to aid facility with its use.
2. The focus of the English language classes should be changed from comprehension to production. At least a portion of each language class should be given over to oral practice.
3. Where possible classes should not contain more than 25 students. Organizing activities and providing feedback is extremely difficult with classes of 50 and it is impossible to speak individually

with all students.

4. It would probably lead to a more efficient use of resources if the various English language courses are coordinated.

5. There should be an attempt to outline some clear and realistic goals which all the students should be expected to achieve at the end of each semester.

6. If oral English is part of a course, there should be an oral exam at the end of the course.

7. Students should be encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning inside and outside the classroom. To this end some learner training should be provided and a self access centre should be created. This centre might contain graded readers, language learning tapes and videos and worksheets, all arranged according to level.

8. There should be more attempts to increase the active role of the students in their language classes so that they have maximum opportunity to actually use English, e.g. more pair work, role plays, discussions, presentations etc.

9. The number of courses that students have to take should be looked at carefully. Are the students being over stretched by having too many classes? Are we expecting them to do too much? If they had fewer classes it would be easier to provide smaller classes. Fewer classes would also allow the students more time for self access work.

### Possible Course Outline

Course Title	Year	Contents
Reading 1	1	SRA 2A plus adapted readers below the 1500 word level. Students will also be expected to master the basic 2,000 English words.
Reading 2	2	SRA 3A plus adapted readers at the 2,000 word and above level. Students will also be expected to master the words on the university word list
General English 1	1	Four skills practice Students will be expected to master the English grammar, functions and topics listed below

*Grammar*

present simple, can (ability), prepositions of location, imperatives, questions and negative verb forms, adjectives of description, past tense, irregular past tense verbs, future (going to)

*Functions/topic*

questions, time/date, daily routine, location, directions, personal information, family, likes and dislikes, describing people, order meals in a restaurant

General English 2 1

Four skills practice

Students will be expected to master the grammar functions and topics listed below

*Grammar*

present continuous, present perfect (experience), prepositions of location, comparatives/superlative, quantity, obligation, conditionals (if/unless), duration

*Functions/topics*

Habits, customs, travel, food and drink, houses, furniture, clothes, illness, careers, geographical features, climate, countries, nationalities, art

General English 3 2

Four skills practice

Students will be expected to master the English grammar, functions and topics listed below

*Grammar*

Modals: must/have to/ need/, can/ could/ be able/, may/ might  
Should/ ought, short responses, the passive, reported speech:  
statements, reported speech: questions, question tags, passive

*Functions/topic*

Offers, permission, requests, prohibition, quotations,  
superstitions, school and career, games

General English 4 2

Four skills practice

Students will be expected to master the English grammar,  
functions and topics listed below

*Grammar*

Demonstratives: this/that, these/those, quantity: some/any/no,  
much/many/ a lot of/ few/ a little/ a few/ a little, frequency,  
relative clauses: subject/object, very/too/enough, conjunctions:  
when/ while, before/ after/, purpose/reason

*Functions/topic*

surveys, shopping, complaints, duties and privileges, advertising, making  
plans, ranking, emotions, lifestyle, relationships

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|------|---|---|
| LL   | 1 | Listening practice of the grammar, topics, functions discussed in General English 1 and 2 |
| LL   | 2 | Listening practice of the grammar, topics, functions discussed in General English 3 and 4 |
| ORAL | 1 | Discuss daily topics such as family, friends, school, hobbies, likes and dislikes, etc    |
| ORAL | 2 | Narrate life events using the three simple tenses — past, present, future                 |
| ORAL | 3 | Give opinions, advice, instructions and directions about concrete topics                  |
| ORAL | 4 | Discuss abstract topics beyond personal experience  |

- Writing 3 Focus will be on producing paragraphs in English paragraph form with topic sentence, body and conclusion. Students will practice, creative, and essay writing as well as personal and business letters.

By the end of the course students should be able to write a one page English essay consisting of at least five well-constructed paragraphs.

- Writing 2 4 This course will build on the essays of Writing 3. This course will focus on writing English research papers with work on research, bibliography, sources, etc. By the end of the course, students should be able to produce a short (five-page) English research paper.

As mentioned at the beginning, students' self expressed goal following graduation is to obtain work using English. The above linguistics competency tasks have been identified as minimum proficiency requirements for work overseas. By helping students develop these areas of proficiency, we will help them to achieve the goals that they have set for themselves.

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