English as a Foreign Language: Teaching Approaches for Specific Needs of Japanese Learners
外国語としての英語教育－日本人学習者の具体的ニーズを考慮した教授法

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Abstract
要旨

This essay explores the relationship between theory and practice in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in order to introduce some of the useful teaching approaches particularly aimed at Japanese university students. To determine the specific needs of Japanese learners, I will examine English education in Japan based on my school experiences discussing the typified teaching / learning environment to which university students have been exposed up to now. I will then conclude with some of the findings which need to be taken into account for improving English education in Japan in the future.

　本稿は、TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) における理論と実践を考察することで、主として日本人大学生に対する適確な教授法を見出すことを目的とする。そこで、日本人学習者に何が必要であるかを探るため、筆者の経験を含め、多くの大学生がこれまで慣れ親しんできたであろう日本の典型的な英語の授業スタイルや学習環境を見直す。最後に、今後の日本におけるより効果的な英語教育のために目を向けるべき課題を示唆し、本稿の結論とする。

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[Introduction]

In this essay, I will discuss the relationship between theory and practice in relation to a particular group of learners. First, I will describe a teaching / learning context of university students in Japan and analyze the nature of the learners and their needs based on my current teaching experiences. Second, I will examine theories of language and language learning that I believe are most relevant to creating a teaching / learning program for the same university students. Finally, I will summarize to highlight the issues that will need to be dealt with in EFL in Japan, and share findings that could be useful for students in Japan.

[Overall Background of English in Japan]

Before I look into the nature of university students in Japan and their needs, I would like to examine the background of English education in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan is trying to introduce communication into the curriculum, and they have started creating English language classes in public elementary schools (MEXT, 2003). I believe that the main reason is simply to give children opportunities of learning (or playing with) English when they are still small so that they will be able to communicate better in English in their future. Very little importance is placed on teaching grammar, since the goal of the program is only to make students familiar with English. However, upon entering junior high school, teachers teach toward the competitive high school entrance examinations,

and a grammar based approach takes over. (This situation is the same for high school students aiming at college entrance exams).

Although MEXT has been putting greater value on speaking and listening components, and has designed more oral communication classes with native English speakers in junior high schools and high schools (MEXT, 2003), in reality, most students worry most about the exams that they will be facing in three years. They therefore tend to focus only on preparing for this style of exam. As a result, students become knowledgeable about English grammar but do not gain proficiency in speaking. Also, the way Japanese subjects are taught has historically been very much teacher-centered. Thus, even when trying to have learners do 'student-student' talks in English classrooms, at first many students have a hard time fitting themselves into the type of classes.

On the teachers' side, because this teaching style (grammar based) has been dominant in Japanese English education for years, a number of teachers (especially experienced teachers) have not had to improve their oral communication skills. In fact, there are still many Japanese English teachers who have never been overseas or studied abroad. Although many of these teachers have a great deal of grammar knowledge, because they did not spend much time on

training for speaking skills and have not been encouraged to improve their speaking ability by their employers, their English classes are still mainly grammar and reading focused and also taught in Japanese. As a result of this teaching and learning situation, most Japanese people can not speak English very well even after 6 years of obligatory English education. However, last year, MEXT began testing students' listening comprehension in the university center examination (MEXT, 2003). This could be a good starting point for junior high schools and high schools to gradually change their teaching approach from grammar based to more speaking / listening focused classes. However, it is very unlikely that the Japanese traditional teaching style will be immediately revised.

The way Japanese companies evaluate their applicants' English skills is another factor that will slow down revisions to the education system. When hiring high school / college graduates, most companies give written tests or just review what certificates applicants have acquired. It is very rare that they require applicants to demonstrate communicative ability in English at their interviews unless they are foreign companies. Therefore, hunting a job does not really encourage students to improve their oral communication skills or the education system to revise its core teaching approaches.

[Current Teaching / Learning Environment and its Issues of University Students in EFL]

Having examined the overall background of English education in Japan, I would like to move on to the teaching / learning area that I am particularly interested in. Since I currently engage in teaching profession at a university level in Japan, teaching adult EFL has been my primary interest. As mentioned earlier, many Japanese students have been forced to study hard in the big competition to enter a prestigious school. Therefore, after entering university, most students tend to take studying less seriously and consider the 4 year college time as a 'long break'. It is very difficult for them to realize the importance of studying English and of becoming fluent in English in 4 years. This presents a challenge to teachers in my situation.

Moreover, the ultimate goal of studying before, which was to pass the entrance exams, now shifts to finding a good job upon graduation. In Japan, the best way to appeal to companies in terms of English competence is to have high scores from the TOEIC exam (Test of English for International Communication). Since this test is considered among companies to be one of the best exams to measure English communication skills, many classes have been designed specifically for TOEIC and offered in Japanese universities in a last decade. Indeed, at my university, our listening lab has now become a weekly TOEIC lab. We have also been designing classes that could effectively improve student TOEIC scores. The TOEIC exam consists of two major parts: listening and reading, with each component worth 50 percent plus an optional oral component. While the TOEIC encourages the development of listening skills, because the oral

component is optional, it has not been treated as important as the written mode among companies. As a result, most test takers do not take the oral test, and they do not really practice their oral communication skills during the 4 years of college. Some students score really high on the test because they know the grammar well and strategies for the exam. Unfortunately, it does not prove that those students are good at speaking. Therefore, teachers must monitor that students cover all aspects of English in order to become a better English speaker.

[Students' Preferred Learning Style]

One other significant factor in my teaching context is the students' preferred learning style. As discussed earlier, most students have been conditioned since elementary school to expect a teacher-centered classroom. They are not used to the class discussions, presentations, or pair / group work that are often seen in ESL classrooms. They expect teachers to talk the entire class, and they tend to think that their role is to write down whatever their teacher writes on the board. When learning English in universities with a lot of speaking activities, many students become nervous and feel uncomfortable being in those interactive activities. In addition to this, when learning English in Japan, students have very few opportunities to speak English outside their classroom. Many of them tend to have a hard time picturing using English in a real world. Because of this lack of real-world practice, many students do not know how to apply sentences into real conversations. The unrealistic contexts often shown in their English textbooks also do not help students apply what they learn to real-life situations. Therefore, preparing materials which are specifically designed for these particular students is crucial.

[Teaching Approaches for Specific Learners' Needs (Specifically for University Students in Japan)]

Now, I would like to move onto the next phase, and discuss particular theories of language and language learning that I believe can influence the teaching / learning program for university students. Considering the learning backgrounds mentioned above, I believe that a communicative approach should be applied to meet student needs. Given the communicative methods available, I think a 'task-based approach' is most suitable to the learners in my teaching context, where a 'task' is defined as involving "communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure" (Nunan, 1989, p. 10). Compared with the teacher-centered grammar-based approach used in the high schools, a task-based approach would provide students with a greater sense of how meanings should be delivered in real conversations. Although they might have a hard time pushing themselves to speak English at first, having them achieve some tasks in pairs or in groups would naturally get them involved in a lot of interactions using English. As Long and Porter (cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 83) found,

group or pair-work provides learners with a lot of chance to use English. Furthermore, when doing task-based group work, students try to produce more complete sentences for other classmates to comprehend their utterances. In addition, Long and Porter (in Nunan, 1988, p. 83) suggest that group-work motivates students better and creates a positive learning environment. In order to achieve the goal, students will need to put all of their knowledge together to get their messages across as much as possible. Also, it is more likely that working with a partner or in groups gets rid of their stress compared to working individually with a teacher (Derewianka, 1996, p.190).

Teachers must, however, keep in mind that they should carefully monitor students' language. Since the students' native language is Japanese here, it is very possible that some students would start depending on Japanese when facing difficulties.

Activities of particular interest to me are task-based activities that include 'Strategic Interaction,' developed by Robert di Pietro. Students are divided into two groups and each one is given a slightly different scenario of a particular event that they must then enact with another group (Derewianka, 1996, p.188). Because it is task based, students know exactly what they need to do. Second, students will encounter unpredictable situations, thus encouraging students to produce new sentences spontaneously. Third, because they must focus on completing their tasks, students will focus less on their fear and anxiety about speaking English (Derewianka, 1996, p.189). I expect that after this activity they would feel more confident because each of them must have used at least a few utterances that brought the messages across during the activity.

A second method that I think would be very effective for my students is 'the genre- based approach' based on Halliday's systemic functional theory of language. One of the advantages of using this approach is that it is influenced by Halliday's view that when people communicate, they do not only use one utterance, but instead they use many in order to get their meaning across in a situation. So a number of different functions are combined together simultaneously in a single conversation (Brown, 2000, p. 252). Therefore, learners can study the target language holistically. It is also likely to motivate the learners better than other teaching approaches because its major focus is to consider learners' needs and specific purposes for using English. Halliday (1978) maintains that "Language is the ability to 'mean' in the situation types, or social contexts, that are generated by the culture" (p.34). Thus, themes or topics for EFL classes should be decided examining the cultures and social contexts so that learners could easily realize why and how they are going to learn the target language. This could give them concrete images of themselves using English outside their classroom in their everyday life.

Martin, Rothery and Christie (Derewianka, 1996, p. 249) studied genres such as giving a recount of an event, or giving instructions. Since Japanese students almost never learn holistically like this in high school, a genre-based approach would show them how to use the

words and grammar they know holistically. For example, in my university, we are currently using a textbook which was especially designed for Japanese university students and has holistic tasks. Some unit topics are: 'How to talk to foreigners visiting Japan', 'How to solve class related issues' and 'How to talk to friends about weekends'. Students using this textbook are first year students and their level is between high beginner and low intermediate. Although I found this particular textbook would work well for low intermediate students, it would also be possible that the genre-based approach could be effective for a variety of levels if teachers select appropriate textbooks.

Some people might think that the genre-based approach is like a recipe because the way it teaches is too prescriptive so that it could prevent learners from being creative (Derewianka, 1996, p. 250). However, I believe this approach would particularly fit Japanese students because they are used to simply following a prescribed context. They are not aggressive language learners. A genre-based approach might start off as prescriptive but in the end, students are talking freely and independently. So this approach smoothly invites them into meaningful interactions. Therefore, the genre approach could be applied not only for universities but also for junior high schools / high schools in their oral language classes.

Finally, the last method that I would like to apply for my students is 'The Lexical Approach' created by Michael Lewis. I have seen a number of students have trouble learning vocabulary. The way I have always told them as an effective vocabulary learning strategy is to study a new word in a sentence so that they can get to know how to apply the word in context. The Lexical Approach takes the idea of context further. Lewis (1993, p. 121) points out that this approach can lead students to fluency by having them study fixed phrases or pre-fabricated expressions as whole "chunks" without examining or analyzing the grammar aspects. I believe that when learning vocabulary as chunks, those words would tend to remain in students' memory for a long time because learners repeatedly practice the words as if they are learning lyrics. Most importantly, it could be applied for many other teaching approaches. For instance, teachers could pick up several important phrases for the students to memorize during the genre-based approach. I believe the lexical approach would work more effectively in a good combination with other significant teaching methods.

[Conclusion]

In summary, I have discussed the general background of English education in Japan, and explained why the grammar-based approach is still used in junior high schools and high schools in Japan. I then examined some teaching methods that would work particularly well with the Japanese college students I currently teach, and I also mentioned the nature of Japanese college students and their needs in order to choose from the various teaching approaches available the

few best ones that would specifically fit Japanese university students. Next, I introduced three teaching approaches as effective teaching ways for my students. First, I discussed 'the task-based approach'. By aiming at tasks, students would collect all of their linguistic knowledge to have other classmates comprehend their utterances. Second, I proposed that a 'genre-based approach' would be particularly useful for Japanese students. Lastly, I introduced 'the Lexical Approach' founded by Michael Lewis. In particular, I emphasized that learners could efficiently expand their vocabulary by chunking sentences in a meaningful way. In addition, the fact that this method could fit in many other teaching approaches is helpful for teachers working to make an effective language classroom.

In the near future, the main teaching method at junior high schools and high schools is expected to be revised to be more communicative. Since it will be university entrance exams and university education that will drive this change, all English instructors in Japan must not forget that the biggest responsibility of English education at Japanese universities is not to produce graduates who are good at only grammar rules. We must lead students to communicate using those rules, and teach them to use all of the linguistic information that they have learned spontaneously to get messages across. With the teaching approaches that I have raised in this essay, I believe that teachers could create much more effective classes specifically for Japanese university students or even for all Japanese learners.

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