Teaching Discussion and Debate: How to Create a Communicative Classroom

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Abstract

Creating a communicative classroom can be a challenge for the university language teacher in the Japanese setting. Previously learnt systems and styles need to be confronted, and various techniques need to be implemented. Creating an atmosphere where learners feel confident to express themselves, as well as to think critically about what they are presented with, should help to produce a student body more capable of meaningful discussion and debate. This paper will examine some of the obstacles faced by both educators and learners within the classroom, and examine some approaches to creating a more dynamic and communicative learning space.

An honest look at teaching discussion and debate within the Japanese university system must first consider some of the shortcomings of English language education at Junior and Senior High School level. It is not uncommon for the university English language teacher to be faced with a group of students who seem barely able to utter a full coherent sentence, never mind conduct a conversation in English. This, it should be stressed, is not always the fault of the students, but often reflects the system that they have come through.

This system seems to be primarily geared towards passing tests, and ultimately the university entrance exam. Much of these tests seem to involve grammar exercises and translations, therefore it is of little surprise that the Grammar-Translation Method of English teaching seems to be still favoured. Reesor (2003) observes that, "language study has tended towards formulaic processes which stress decoding and deciphering skills." While no one is denying the importance of grammar, when it comes to communicative skills, many school pupils do not seem to be engaged in much spoken English.

Thus, the student who emerges from this system may be able to pass a grammar test or have a stock of vocabulary. However, using this grammar and vocabulary, putting it all together, still seems to be extremely challenging, if not even beyond many students.

The other phenomenon that the university language teacher will soon become aware of is the general, almost systematic lack of questioning from the student body. This may be because up until this point, the students have been largely passive observers in their classrooms; with the teachers holding court and explaining various rules of syntax (often in Japanese), which then must be remembered off by heart. As Shuji (1999) cited in Reesor (2003), notes: the Japanese lack of spoken English ability is a result of "exclusive

emphasis on reception rather than transmission."

Anecdotally, several teachers working in Japan, including the author, have related how, when they took the CELTA qualification, after having spent time teaching in Japan, they were all told that they demonstrated too much TTT (Teacher Talking Time). A response may have been, "Have you ever tried teaching English in Japan!"

Speaking, in this teacher-led classroom, often comes in the form of recitations, whereby a passage in English is learned and then produced in front of others. While this may be of benefit to diction, it does not demonstrate any ability to actually 'produce' spoken words and sentences. In other words, the pupils, for the most part, do not seem to be expected to question, but rather to listen, accept and absorb. If students are not encouraged to question, then by extension, they are not being encouraged to think critically. Critical thinking, even at its most basic level, is essential to lively and engaging conversation.

Rigid accuracy is also something that seems to be adhered to in the English classroom. Again, anecdotally, this writer has observed teachers marking papers where a Japanese passage has to be translated into English. The teacher had his translation, and only gave full marks to the students who had the exact same wording. Even papers where the meaning and structure are the same, but the vocabulary used is different, were marked down. This means that the students develop a fear of making errors. Again,

while accuracy has its place, when you translate this mindset to conversation, the results are that the student often says nothing rather than risk making a mistake. The concept that we learn from our errors seems to have been forgotten.

If, as it seems to be evident with the imminent introduction of mandatory English classes for fifth and sixth graders in Elementary schools, there is a desire to have a population more comfortable conversing in English, the English language teachers of the future will therefore need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach effective speaking. This paper hopes to outline what techniques and skills need to be passed on to potential English teachers.

Main

When considering content for a discussion and debate class, a logical place to start is with the objectives and goals of such a class. The following list is not in any order of precedence, and each point will be examined in more detail during the course of the discussion.

1) To have students develop the confidence to express themselves in front of others.

2) To encourage critical thinking; to have students question what they read and hear, and be able to look at a scenario from more than one viewpoint.

3) To encourage students not to be afraid to make mistakes.

4) To ensure that glaring form and

pronunciation errors are corrected, so that they do not become fossilized.

5) To encourage the repetition and reuse of phrases and vocabulary, so that students can begin to 'think in English'.

6) To encourage as much peer-to-peer learning, correction and cooperation as possible.

To speak in another language undoubtedly requires a degree of confidence. There are all the unfamiliar combinations of sounds, as well as the grammatical peculiarities of the target language, not to mention the constant fear that whatever one tries to say will be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or worse of all, mocked. As with trying to master any new skill, practice and repetition are of paramount importance. In the case of using language to communicate verbally, this means uttering sounds as often as possible. To say that the average Japanese university or college student has failed to grasp this concept would be somewhat of an understatement. While this is most likely the fault of the system they have come through rather than down to their own shortcomings, it is of no real help to the English teacher faced with the reticent class. When pressed as to why they find actually trying to speak so difficult, many students will say, *'We Japanese are shy'*, or something similar. While this may be the case, it will not help with the improvement of English spoken ability.

As to what causes this shyness, to some extent it is probably cultural; the Japanese are not famed for their garrulousness. However, there is often something else at work here; the fear of making mistakes and losing face in front of their peers. Dorji (1997) noted in her analysis of Japanese students studying in the UK that:

"The apparent lack of an attempt to co-operate came out as being one of the strongest negative aspects perceived by the teachers in Japanese behaviour. This so called natural reticence, it has already been argued, comes from a school training in which teacher and peer pressure discourages a child from voicing his/her opinions in class; the *hito ni warawaremasu* fear (fear that people will laugh at you)."

This is understandable, especially among teenage learners. The teacher therefore, must facilitate an atmosphere where the students can comfortably speak out, without constantly hesitating to worry about others judging them. This brings us back to TTT (Teacher Talking Time); there needs to be less of it. Responsibility for communication needs to be transferred to the class. Rather than just being the fount of all knowledge and holding forth from the front of the classroom, the teacher needs to let the class fill in the blanks and provide the answers. This is more of a Western concept, as Dorji (ibid) argues:

"Whereas Japanese education is based on the belief that ability is the result of effort, and thus, can be *taught*, Westerners consider ability to be innate but also with the potential to be trained and developed. The task of the instructor therefore shifts from being provider of facts to 'facilitator' in learning. What the British instructor

aims to develop in the students is a way of thinking that will allow them to analyse a problem and produce an individual response or opinion."

While this may seem obvious, it is often all too easy for the teacher, when faced with an unresponsive class, to keep on talking, and in the end eliciting nothing – the active teacher to the passive class.

The employment of pair and group work is probably one of the easiest solutions to this problem. Having students discuss problems, possible answers and potential feedback amongst themselves, serves several purposes. Firstly, it gives the student a chance to produce utterances in a much less hostile, more intimate scenario: in other words, not in front of the whole class and the teacher. Secondly, it allows the students to realize that their partners are usually no better or no worse at English than they are (and even if they are, Japanese students tend to be very reluctant to show-off or grandstand), so is confidence building. Finally, it gives students a chance to have a dry run at what they want to say, before they have to produce something in front of the wider class. This is where monitoring by the teacher is important and valuable, as errors can be corrected in a less embarrassing setting, and subsequently can give the student that extra bit of confidence when they come to speak in front of the whole class.

Pair and group work aside, the teacher can also encourage more unsolicited feedback in whole class exercises or discussions. Rather than choosing an individual student to answer, the whole class can be invited to reply. While this technique usually works very well among more loquacious cultures, it can be an uphill battle in the Japanese classroom. Various techniques can be employed by the teacher to overcome this reticence. Getting angry, shaming the class, waiting them out to see who blinks first and resorting to using Japanese are all methods that the frustrated language teacher has no doubt tried, More subtle approaches, are however available. Certainly, asking more straightforward, easily answered questions to begin with is advisable, rather then trying to elicit opinions. Making direct eye contact, especially with more able members of the class, is also a non-direct way of actually eliciting some response. However it happens, once a few brave souls begin to communicate, and the class realizes that this actually makes the teacher happy, others will follow.

Class size, of course, will have a bearing on all of this – the larger the class, the harder eliciting unsolicited answers will be. With the larger class, pair and group work often need to be utilized more often. In his seminal work, Harmer (2007) notes that, "in large classes, pair-work and group-work play an important part since they maximize student participation." Whatever technique is applied, confidence building is the ultimate goal, and this needs to be encouraged and nurtured, as without it, successful communicative English will be unattainable.

Critical thinking, defined by Dunn (2015) as "procedures that allow for a deeper understanding of information as well as

the more complete use of information presented or gained through critical thinking skills." often seems to be something lacking in Japanese formal education. There are cultural reasons for this, particularly the general reluctance to create conflict within Japanese society, as well as the desire to maintain a workforce who generally obey orders and don`t question their superiors. This can be seen particularly in the company setting, with its strict code of hierarchy. It is also prevalent in education, where the old mantra of, *'the peg that sticks up gets hammered down'*, still seems to be adhered to.

The development of successful English communication however, depends to some extent on the ability to think critically. To give opinions, for example, is to demonstrate critical thinking. It is also worthwhile noting that to truly master a language one needs to immerse oneself in it, and that also means immersing oneself in the culture, which is inextricably linked to the language. People in English speaking countries often enjoy debate, disagreement, argumentation and the giving of opinion, and the language reflects this.

Asking students in the Japanese classroom, 'What do you think about this, or that?' in other words, asking them to express an opinion, is unfortunately often the quickest way to silence a class. If any response is forthcoming, it is often of the circular, rather redundant nature, for example:

Teacher: 'Do you think Tokyo is an interesting city?'

Student: 'Yes.'
Teacher: 'Why?'
Student: 'Because I like it.'
Teacher: 'Why do you like it?
Student: 'Because it`s interesting.'

Once again, the student is not necessarily at fault here, as he or she has most likely had very little instruction in how to think critically. Dunn (2015) notes that a Japanese university student attending a discussion on the topic of critical thinking in Japanese universities observed that:

"He did not feel prepared for his first year at university because the expectations to think deeper on any given subject, not only his English courses, were much greater than his previous educational experience. He also stated that he had been interested in thinking about topics more deeply in the past, but did not have an opportunity to exercise this way of thinking in almost all of his courses in high school."

As with the confidence issue, this puts the language teacher in the position of having to devise methods to elicit opinion or an argued point of view.

Choosing classroom discussion topics where it is impossible not to have a point of view or opinion is a good place to start when trying to tackle this problem. Many discussion activities will stick to safe, neutral territory: what was done during the weekend or holidays, talking about family, hobbies, part-time jobs and such like. While even these fairly basic topics can be turned to elicit opinion; for example asking a student about their pay in a part-time job and ascertaining

whether they think this is a fair wage or not; it is sometimes good to steer discussion topics towards issues. Issues, whether it be the rise of AI, women`s rights, nuclear power, or whatever, force the student to take a side, and therefore express an opinion.

A way to save the student the stress of having to provide an opinion on the spot is to have the class give presentations on these topics. This gives them the chance to think about the issue and formulate their views in their own time. Back in the classroom, they will feel surer of the topic, and hopefully be able to express an opinion on it.

The teacher should also encourage students to question him or her as often as possible. Again, this will be going against character for the Japanese cohort, but it is still worth pursuing. This involves handing over responsibility to the class, rather than just spoon-feeding them the information. A simple example recently used by the author was the following: a student read the date 2002 as 'twenty-two', instead of 'two thousand and two'. They were told that saying 'two thousand and two' was better, and then asked why. The answer is of course that 'twenty-two' could be confused for the number '22'. The teacher could easily have just told the class this, or not even given any reasoning, just corrected the student and moved on. Asking 'why' however, forced the student to ask himself why, and therefore to think critically.

That we learn from our mistakes is a given, yet so often in the language class it appears that students are so nervous about making mistakes that they say nothing at all, which is of course completely counter-productive. With its focus on the Grammar Translation method, the English language teaching system in Japan puts a lot of importance on accuracy. Unfortunately, this is sometimes to the detriment of communicative English. That wall of silence, which the teacher sometimes faces after having asked a question, is usually not because the students are ignorant, but rather that they fear making an error, especially in front of their peers.

As with the other issues discussed in this paper, encouraging pair work is a good way to counter this problem. The pair work must, however, be monitored by the teacher. In this way, errors can be corrected in a safer, less intimidating setting. The student must then be encouraged to use the corrected form, and also encouraged to try to self-correct. The teacher must also be careful not to look askance if the student does not know something that the teacher feels they should. This will only lead to learners clamming up even more.

Fossilization occurs when a learner uses the wrong form, or mispronounces a word, is not corrected, and then continues to make the error so many times that it becomes the default setting. *'Sarada',* for 'salad', is a good example of this. The word is a Katakana version of the original, and also the de facto Japanese language word for 'salad'. Successful communication does not require native-like proficiency, yet it does require the speaker to be understood. Omitting articles, for example, will rarely result in

miscommunication; major mispronunciation, however, may often lead to confusion. Those of us living in Japan know what *'sarada'* means, but the wider English-speaking world will almost certainly have no idea what the speaker is talking about. Therefore, monitoring and correction by the teacher are vital, and eventually, with any luck, will lead to the student self-correcting.

When one 'thinks in the language', one is well on the road to mastering it; this is after all what we do with our native tongue. Thinking in the language also enables the speaker to converse in a more unbroken, fluid manner, and therefore be more likely to be involved in conversations, which in turn leads to greater improvement. When the learner has to constantly translate in their head, from the L1 to the L2, the whole process of communication is in danger of grinding to an almost standstill. This is further compounded for the Japanese learner, as not only are they agonizing over vocabulary, but they also have to contend with a different grammatical system. Dorji (ibid) mentions this when talking about the Japanese students studying in the UK:

"Comparison was made between the teaching of grammar in Japan and Use of English in the UK. Students said that in the latter case, grammar was taught in a more discreet and lively way with examples being more relevant to what students actually need to say and use. Students were particularly pleased to note that they now *naturally* understood grammar without necessarily having to memorize rules and that they had come to realise that it was *best not to translate* but to *think in English.*"

Being able to think in the language requires the speaker to be using the language in particular situations as much as possible, so that words and phrases become second nature, in much the same way that muscle memory works for physical actions. Obviously, the best way to achieve this is to be fully immersed in the target language, ideally by living somewhere where the language is spoken. Failing that, the teacher must try to ensure that every opportunity is provided in the classroom for learners to use and then reuse words and phrases so that less internal translation is required.

As has been alluded to several times in this paper, encouraging pair work and peer-to-peer learning, cooperation and correction, does a great deal to foster a sense of confidence in the student body. For the classroom predominately with students who have come through the Japanese high school system, and therefore often find it uncomfortable or intimidating speaking in front of the whole class, pair and small group work provide the perfect opportunity to practice communicative English. Of course, the goal is to have the students feeling confident enough to talk in front of the whole class, yet as a bridging technique, pair and small group work are invaluable. It also serves the purpose of getting everyone in the classroom to communicate at the same time. Even if students develop the confidence to express themselves in front of the class, any interaction will always be limited to the speaker and the teacher or another

student. In larger classes particularly, this can lead to quieter more shy students going through complete courses without uttering more than a few words in English.

In summary, the English language teachers at a Japanese university will most likely find themselves trying to reverse much of what has gone before. While this will prove challenging, it will not be impossible. It is the author`s experience that in a good many cases the students do actually want to communicate in English, but lack the necessary strategies to do so. This can be as a result of the teaching system they have previously experienced in high school, a lack of confidence, shyness, or a disinterest or even dislike of English. Whatever the reason, there are techniques to help remedy the situation, and the more trainee teachers know about these techniques, the better the chance of producing communicative students in the future.

A final word of caution must be added, however. The single thing that most English language professors teaching in Japan are aware of is the detrimental affect of the university entrance exam on students` communicative ability. Whatever curriculum changes are made, and however much the teacher introduces communicative styles of teaching in the school classroom, all goals usually boil down to passing this exam. As Reesor (2002) warns:

"Teachers are forced to choose between meeting curricular objectives and delivering the kind of English skills that will help their students succeed when they take their entrance examinations. With the immediate pressure of students and their parents always present, it is not surprising that curricular goals end up being sacrificed."

If true improvement in the discussion and debate skills of Japanese students is hoped for, then either the English section of the university entrance exam needs to be drastically overhauled, or simply scrapped altogether.

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