

Easy English Communication at the Secondary Level :

Easy Ways Teachers Who Are Non-Native Speakers Can Use More English in Class

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Introduction

In Japan, since sometime in the 1980s, the Ministry of Education (Monbusho)--recognizing that students who have studied English six years still can't speak it--has been revising curricula, revamping textbooks, and trying to redo the whole of English education at the secondary and even primary level. Thanks to the nine-year-old Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, next year well over 4,000 assistant language teachers (ALTs) will visit English classrooms. All this to improve students' English communicative ability.

The best textbooks, teaching materials, syllabi, and even regular visits from a native speaker will ultimately fail, however, if the ordinary classroom English teachers do not model and use English communicatively in their classrooms. As the primary exposure students have to living English, the regular English teachers are the most important people in the English education of their students.

In my two years spent as an ALT in six Japanese junior high schools, I have worked in class with almost twenty different junior high school Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). Like many other ALTs, I have realized that the best thing I can do to help my students is to help their teachers teach English more communicatively. Thus I created this little guide. Using simple practices such as these can make a great difference in students' (and teachers') linguistic competence.

Easy Ways To Use More English In Class

Always Use English When Opening and Closing The Class

It's not very important that elementary students learn exactly what *Let's begin* means in their native language. They will understand the basic idea if you use it at the beginning of every class. If you also use *begin* to tell the students to start writing an examination or other activity, the meaning will be further clarified for many students. (Later if you more formally introduce the word *begin*, the students will already know concrete examples of its usage.) The same holds true for expressions like *That's all for today*.

If, on the other hand, the class begins--as do most Japanese classes--with a traditional L1 greeting like *onegaishimasu* and ends with *arigatou gozaimashita*, this reinforces the idea that the students already have--that the primary communication in the class is done in their native language. An art museum wouldn't put a Rembrandt painting in a polka-dot frame by Seurat. Likewise, English classes shouldn't be framed in Japanese.

Teach Your Students "Classroom English"

Teach the students classroom expressions appropriate for their level; for example, *I don't know*, *I*

don't understand, Once again please, Just a minute, What's ~ in L1 (English)?, etc.

Be sure they understand how to say and use the expressions you expect them to know. You could make a poster with expressions in English, and post it where all students can see it. Alternatively, give the students a small handout with the expressions you would like them to use and have them paste it in the back of their notebooks for easy reference. (In my experience, posters have tended to be more effective.) On either the handout or poster you may want to include translations, but be sure to remove them as soon as the students seem to have a reasonable command of the expressions.

Later, if a student uses an L1 equivalent for an English expression you have already taught, remind her or him--in English--what they should be saying. The more the students communicate with you and with each other in English the more comfortable they will become with it.

Try To Use Only One Or Two Expressions For The Same Activity

By limiting the number of classroom expressions the teacher uses, the students will learn the expressions faster. For example, in an elementary class you could use *Open your books to page ~*, even if the students' books are already open. Later, you can introduce the expression *Turn to page ~*. Some students will only understand *...page ~ anyway*, so both expressions will have the same meaning to them. Other students, however, will figure out the two meanings without being explicitly taught.

For those teachers who work with an ALT (or a student teacher), consider making a list of expressions you use in class to give to these people. It's very frustrating to come into class when students don't understand a very simple expression, and after class you are told the students understand *Please repeat this sentence*, but not *Please read this sentence aloud*. When working with an ALT, this kind of list will help avoid situations where translation is necessary.

Always Have The Students Write Their Name Using The Roman Alphabet

This applies, of course, to speakers of languages which do not use a version of the Roman alphabet. As soon as the students learn to write the letters, insist that they use them to write their names. Remember this is English class. Getting used to how your own name looks and sounds in a foreign language is a part of personalizing your knowledge of the language. Besides, allowing students to use their native writing system for their names only reinforces the idea that the primary communicative language in English class is their native one.

This applies for other students' names too. When the students are doing an activity that involves writing other students' names, they should be in English. At the elementary level, students will probably have to help each other write their names.

If students can't remember how to spell their names, ask them or help them to write their names in Roman letters on the front of their English notebook so they can always refer to it. For beginning students, if you do not have the time to spend 20 or 30 minutes to allow the students to learn how to write their names in class, give them a card with their name on it. They can use the card to copy their name on their papers and books until they have memorized it.

Use Handouts For Written English Communication

Use English for very simple instructions such as *Please write ~, Answer the following questions, English only, please*, etc. Read the instructions to the students and explain the instructions by modeling what you want them to do (e.g., pretend to write answers as you read the questions aloud, or interview a student and pretend to write down what she or he says).

Students have been filling in worksheets for years, so very few instructions are necessary anyway. And, as always, the slower students can see what the other students are doing if they don't understand, and you can help them individually or ask other students to help them. If absolutely

necessary, a minimum of L1 instructions on the handout are probably better than orally explaining the directions in L1.

Even for beginners, however, don't use L1 for easy words like *name, class, date*, etc. Again, you can show the students what you want them to write in these places by writing an example on the board.

Teach Grammar In English Too

For teachers who have never taught grammar in English, nor seen it done (this applies to a large number of JTEs), it may seem like an impossible task. But it can be done--easily. I do it. I have taught some of the teachers I work with how, and they have all been able to do it. This method can be adapted for just about any grammar point and just about any level of English.

Start with what the students know. For example, if you are teaching present progressive (*be doing*), you can start by reviewing the present tense. Show the students a few sentences like

She plays soccer every week.

He cooks spaghetti every Tuesday.

Make sure the students understand these sentences. Then change *every week* or *every Tuesday* to *now*, *plays* to *is playing*, and *cooks* to *is cooking*.

She *is playing* soccer *now*.

He *is cooking* spaghetti *now*.

Give the students a few more sentences in present tense. After changing *every week* into *now*, ask a couple of students what to put in place of the verb in present tense.

Similarly, to demonstrate how to make questions in present progressive, you can add a question mark to the end of a sentence and change its pattern to the question form. (I usually write *+ ? =* and then write the question form; *+ not =* is also self-explanatory.) Give the students a few more examples and then ask them to make the changes for themselves. Once you have taught them the question and negative patterns, they will be able to do simple interview games or Q & A with the teacher to practice what they have learned--all in English.

At the elementary level, pictures will make it a little easier for the students to understand and help you avoid the temptation to translate vocabulary.

At the same time, teachers who primarily use English for instruction need to allow for students who aren't as fast at understanding these kind of ideas even when explained in L1. This doesn't necessarily mean spending the last part of every class re-explaining everything in L1, however. Due to the nature of the Japanese English entrance examinations, translation is still a necessary part of English classes here, at least in junior and senior high schools. Take advantage of this by asking students--in English--to translate sentences in the new grammar pattern into L1. At this point you may have at least a few students who can explain the grammar point itself in L1. When the students do the translations and explain the grammar in L1, not only does it help the slower students understand, but it encourages the students to try to come up with the answers by themselves and not to rely on the teacher as much.

Have Confidence In Your Own Ability

This is essential. The students need a model of a confident ESL speaker to inspire confidence in themselves. Though communicating in English for an hour at a time is difficult for many teachers, the practice you get in class will make it increasingly easy and more habitual.

Some teachers have told me that their English isn't good enough to conduct class in English. They say they are afraid to make mistakes in front of the students. They shouldn't be. First of all the level of spoken English you need to use is only a little above what you are teaching. Besides, language learning should be about communication, not perfection. Don't worry that the students will hear and copy your mistakes. Most third-year Japanese junior high school students still struggle with grammar they learned in their first year. They probably aren't going to remember a mistake you make occasionally. Relax and enjoy yourself.

Correct But Don't Criticize Your Students

If you want your students to experiment, guess, and practice, you should encourage these behaviors. Let the students know you are pleased that they are trying--even if what they say is incorrect. When they make a mistake, praise them for answering and then ask them to try again, tell them the correct answer, or ask another student for the answer.

The one way to guarantee that the students will never say a word in English is to make them afraid to make a mistake. It's easy to get frustrated by a student who can't respond correctly to a simple question they've studied. But if your students see you quickly and often become displeased with them, they will be more nervous about speaking English and increasingly more likely to make a mistake. Or they will stop talking altogether.

Finally, Challenge Your Students and Yourself!

See if you can get through a whole class using only English. If you can't, try getting through half the class, or even just fifteen minutes in English. How about one English only class each week... and then two, three...the rest of the term?

Implementing These Ideas:

The suggestions above may be simple and easy, but remember that they aren't a quick fix. If you want them to work, you need to commit yourself to English communication in your classroom, not to the strategies themselves.

I have given an earlier draft of this paper to all of the teachers I work with, so I have been able to see how some teachers have implemented these ideas.

Let's consider how several teachers introduced the classroom English suggestion. A teacher of first-year junior high school students I work with made handouts of classroom expressions, and the students pasted them in their notebooks. She taught her students how to use the expressions and has consistently encouraged her students to use them. And the students do use the expressions a lot of the time.

On the other hand, one teacher I work with liked the idea about making posters so she made posters with a few classroom English expressions and taught the students how to pronounce them. She didn't teach the students appropriate use of the expressions and, though the posters remained up on the wall--at least when I was at that school, she never asked the students to actually use the expressions. So, naturally, the students didn't. A third teacher gave the students handouts with some classroom expressions and the students pasted the handouts in their notebooks--never to look at them again.

In the later instances, the students' failure to use classroom English was a result of the teachers' failure to follow through and reinforce the use of classroom English. Students aren't likely to use English just because you ask them to. If you don't insist that students speak English in class, don't be surprised when they don't.

Getting the students to use a few English expressions in class or write their names in the Roman

alphabet provides one kind of challenge. When the teacher switches to speaking mostly or all in English, a different kind of challenge presents itself.

I've watched teachers become immediately frustrated because the students resisted being taught in English. When the students loudly complained that they couldn't understand, these teachers promptly switched back to speaking Japanese and gave up on the method. The teachers weren't prepared for resistance. That was a mistake.

For teachers and students who are, like many I've worked with and taught, accustomed to English classes conducted primarily in L1, introducing the above methods can be a radical change. In many cases ESL students have had everything explained to them in their native language for several years. Of course some students will resist this kind of teaching at first. They are accustomed to understanding everything the teacher says. When suddenly they are struggling to understand anything, they may not like it. The teachers I saw become so easily frustrated could have, instead of lapsing into Japanese, said in a soothing tone, "It's okay. It's okay" and then proceeded to use a few more examples. They could have asked--in English--for a student to explain the point in Japanese. Another student could have provided a simple L1 explanation, while showing the frustrated students that it is possible to understand and that they shouldn't give up.

Whether you make these kinds of changes gradually or almost all at once, it has been my experience that the students will learn to accept and finally enjoy the new style. You will too.

Conclusion

A thousand meetings, the best textbooks, creative teaching materials, even native speakers visiting the classroom aren't going to "give" ESL students English communicative ability. Only by using English communicatively with their teacher and classmates will students develop the ability to speak English. If, for example, you decide to teach some grammar points in English and not in L1, it might be more difficult for your students (and you), but they will probably remember the ideas better. This is because they actually have to listen and think about what you are saying. Thus, not only will their (and your) communicative ability improve, but so will their test scores.

Conversely, your students won't attempt to communicate in English if you are unwilling to do so yourself. You aren't just teaching spelling, vocabulary, and grammar in class, you are indirectly teaching your students the value of communicating in English. If you don't show your students by using English that you think it's important, they won't think it is. If students are taught primarily in their native language, they may learn how to read English, they may learn how to write English, they may learn how to translate English, but they aren't very likely to learn how to speak English.

Appendix I: Classroom English for Teachers

For non-native speaker English teachers who are worried about using non-grammatical or non-idiomatic expressions while teaching, here's a list of classroom expressions based on American English. You probably already use some or many of them. And, of course, there are countless more you could use that aren't listed here.

These expressions are not for the students to study *per se*. But, in context and with appropriate gestures from the teacher, the students should roughly understand the meaning and be able to respond. If you must translate any of these expressions because gestures didn't clarify the meaning, only translate them the first few times you use them. Words in parentheses () are optional. When words are separated by a slash / , choose only one.

Greetings:

- Hello.

- Good morning (class/everyone).
- Good afternoon (class/everyone).
- That's all for today.
- Goodbye.
- See you tomorrow/next week/Friday.

Directions:

- Stand up.
- Sit down./Be seated.
- Open your (text)books/notebooks (to page ~/chapter ~/section ~).
- Turn to page ~.
- Look at page/part/number ~.
- Close your books/notebooks.
- Take out your pen/pencil/notebook/textbook/homework/~.
- Put your pen/papers/books/everything/~ away/in your desks/in your bags.
- Pass your notebooks/tests/papers/homework to the front/to me.
- Here is/are your tests/your homework/your notebooks/~.
- Take one (handout/test/copy/~).
- Come to the blackboard/front.
- Translate this into English/L1.
- Write the answer on the chalkboard/in your notebooks.
- Listen carefully.
- Read page ~ (aloud).
- Repeat after me./Repeat ~./Again.
- Practice (~).
- Check your/your partner's answers.

(Please can be used with the above expressions.)

Transitions:

- First (of all)...?
- Next...
- For example...
- Now let's ~.
- After that...

Questions:

- Who knows (the answer)?
- Who knows (~)?
- Who understands?
- Who can tell me (~) ?
- Who will volunteer (to ~)?/Who will do it?
- Who has a question (about ~)?
- What's ~ in English?/What does it/~ mean in English?
- What's ~ in L1?/What does it/~ mean in L1.
- What's the answer?
- Do you understand?
- Do you know (~)?
- Do you have any questions?
- Can you tell me (~)?
- Will you volunteer (to ~)?/Will you do it?
- Who's absent today?

Disciplinary Expressions:

- Be quiet./Stop talking./No talking.
- Calm down.
- Stop that./Stop it.
- Don't do that.
- Put that/~ away.
- Listen (to me)..
- Look (at me).

(*Please* can be used with the above expressions--but if the teacher is very angry or frustrated she or he probably wouldn't use it.)

- What are you doing?
- Are you listening?
- Are you paying attention?

Appendix II: Classroom English For Students

Lists of expressions like these seem to be circulating everywhere for good reason. Students need to learn these kinds of expressions if they are to communicate in English in class. Naturally teachers should help them with pronunciation, meaning, and usage. Especially at the elementary level it may be useful to provide the meanings in L1 or ask the students to write them in. Teachers may want to suggest that the students paste the list inside the front cover of their notebooks so they can refer to it easily during class. As with Appendix I, there are many other good expressions which aren't listed here.

- Excuse me?
- (Are you speaking to) me?
- I didn't hear you.
- Again, please.
- More slowly, please.
- Just a minute, please.
- Ms. ~/Mr. ~.
- I'm thinking.
- I don't understand. (Huh?)
- I don't know.
- How do you say this word?
- What does ~ mean?
- What's ~ in English?
- What's ~ in L1?
- I think ~.
- One more please.
- That's easy/difficult/strange.
- Please help me.