

Teaching General English Courses in Japanese Universities: Focus on Q & A

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Introduction

Most Japanese university students come to the first year English class with a great deal of hesitancy. To overcome this, we need to focus more on what these learners already know. All non-English majors have had the same experiences with English as it was taught in junior and senior high school. There are thirty to forty in a class (sometimes more) and they have had little or no experience in using the language to communicate. Having to communicate with a teacher who is a native speaker makes the task more challenging.

My original idea to have students follow the textbook usually proved futile. Matching the textbook with the class was often confounded by not knowing what kinds of students would be in the class. It became clear that the textbook I had chosen was not going to work. I would have to teach the students something more appropriate for their level in the same way and have the same focus so that students could better help each other as the course progressed. Having a goal of what I wanted the students to do regardless of the textbook was chosen.

Choosing a new course of action

I decided that the students would need to perform four tasks:

- They should be able to answer questions about their own lives.
- They should be able to ask questions of the teacher on a variety of topics.
- They should be able to formulate sentences, which explained conclusions they had come to.

- They should be able to look for differences between their own answers to questions and answers given by the teacher or other students.

By doing this, the students no longer had to struggle with the textbook and they could help each other to answer questions, look up words in the dictionary and decide which type of response was best for particular questions. Thus, while the method of course was the same for all, they could work together to produce results, making the task less threatening for the students with weaker skills and allowing the students with stronger skills to be helpful to the others.

Learning to ask questions

At the beginning, the idea that they had to ask the teacher questions was not well accepted. The students who had weaker skills were very hesitant to talk to the teacher, which is to be expected. However, I believed that by having the students focus on questions and answers rather than on making conversations from those modeled in a textbook, it would give them more opportunities to gain an understanding of the teacher and other members of the class while also giving them opportunities to talk and write about things that were more familiar to them. This would make for a more comfortable learning situation. Questions could be written by the students themselves, taken from a textbook or selected from a list of interview type questions that are often asked of Japanese at employment examinations as a test of their language ability. Many of the students took the opportunity to ask questions of the teacher and even those who were hesitant at the beginning were better able to ask and answer questions in the end simply through having the experience of answering and sometimes asking questions in groups.

This does not mean that learners in such classes can do without a textbook. They do need a guide to help them maneuver the class. It was clear that in this class a textbook was not going to help

them to use the language more quickly since they have class only one 90-minute period per week. Rather than have them focus on using the dialogues, I wanted them to talk and write about what they were seeing and hearing. This meant that they would all have to talk whether it was to the teacher or to other students (with the teacher potentially listening in on their questions and answers).

Silence

Foreign teachers of these classes will often complain that their students don't talk. "Why don't they talk?" is often heard in the teacher's room. "The question is not simply why don't they talk in class but in what situations they do talk and why?" (Anderson in Wadden 1992:102). Silence in my own classes at this level is often unfortunately the norm. I have found that the best way around this silence is to give them interesting, meaningful activities, often placing an emphasis on questions and answers, which can be used in many ways. Through choosing a particular topic or emphasizing the topic of a particular unit, the students produce survey questions, which they can use to ask the teacher and others. Once this is done, the students can then actively ask their questions in a non-threatening situation. They are now able to save face and use the target language. They can then use the results to give a written or oral explanation to the teacher. Silence has become less of an issue for this group, as a result.

While silence in these large classes often will annoy teachers, we must admit that it is quite natural. But as teachers we must also work to make the large language class at the Japanese university a place where one to one communication can also be found. Using this Q & A method will give the students more opportunities to learn language that is directly applicable to their current situation, with less emphasis on the goal of using English overseas, which is an expectation many students do not have at this moment in their lives.

Conclusion

Textbooks can often provide teachers with what they need in the classroom, but when the choice of book becomes so obviously inappropriate, teachers must choose a more effective course of action. In this case, I have found the question and answer approach quite successful. Although hopefully in the future the textbooks I choose will more specifically match the needs and level of this group of students, this experience has shown me that the Q & A approach can yield positive results. Through this approach, the students were more vocal and active and could accomplish specific goals in each lesson. Those students who master the ability to use the questions and answers at this point in school will have a stronger basis to develop their language skills in the future.

Reference

Anderson, Fred E. (1993) The Enigma of the College Classroom. In P. Wadden (Ed.), *A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities*. (p.102) Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.