

The use of AR to solve problems in a TBL DVD class

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Task-Based Learning (TBL) courses focus on the learners and enable them to study at their own pace of development. However, Japanese students are used to teacher-led synthetic syllabuses, so this can create problems for the TBL class. A good way to solve these problems is by the use of Action Research (AR). AR is a combination of studying theory and the teacher's own practice to implement changes in the classroom. It is an empowering process that can enable teacher-researchers to continually improve their classes and publish the results. This paper uses the example of a DVD TBL class in which the problem of low participation amongst learners was analysed, understood, then solved through the use of AR.

Task-Based Learning (TBL) コースは、学習者が自分のペースで学習の上達を図ることができるように、学習者自身に重点を置いたコースである。日本の生徒については、教師が事前に準備したシラバスを用いるため、いくつかの問題点が挙げられる。つまり、教師によって導かれた結果を生徒が見つけ出すと、いった学習法に慣れているため、生徒が問題を分析し、自分で自分の答えを出すといった学習法 (TBL) について、問題が生じてしまう。その問題解決法として、Action Research (AR) の利用が一番の解決策である。AR とは、理論を研究し、自分の授業を分析することであり、実際の授業では、教授法を変え、授業内容に変化を与えていくことである。また、AR 自体、それを行う者に、大変な権限を与えるため、授業の改善や研究結果の発表に継続的に力を注ぐようになる。

この私の発表論文には、DVD の TBL クラスの例を用いて、学習者の授業の不参加についての問題が分析され、AR が使用されることにより問題解決がなされている。

This paper will define Action Research and Task-Based Learning and their advantages. Then use the author's DVD class as an example to show how problems can occur when using TBL in Japan, demonstrating how the use of AR can solve these problems.

Defining Action Research (AR)–the cycle

Wallace (1993) argues that research can be based on received knowledge from the TESOL community or experiential knowledge from one's own teaching context. However, Action Research should draw evidence from both these sources, so it could be called a bridge between theory and practice. Altrichter et al (1993, p. 204) add that much of the work in the classroom can become routinised. They point out that this is not necessarily bad, because routines provide stability for the students to “anticipate what's coming” and enables the teacher “to do more than one thing at a time.” However, they state that “reflection on action” is necessary “to formulate knowledge explicitly and verbally, to distance ourselves from action for some time and reflect *on it*” (p. 206) Therefore, they believe that Action Research is a useful way

to develop teachers into *teacher-researchers*: reflecting on one’s classroom methodology—making changes—evaluating the result and then publishing this or making further improvements. It is therefore very empowering.

The four main stages of Action Research, according to Nunan (1989, p. 13) are:

1. Plan
2. Act
3. Observe
4. Reflect

Plan

Finding a focus

Initially, a focus needs to be discovered. This could be a problem faced in the class, or an interesting idea based on the teacher’s reading (Altrichter et al., 1993). Finding the focus is a difficult and crucial step. The use of a research diary can be helpful to note down thoughts as they occur. Mind-mapping and focusing circles are also useful ways of finding a focus (Mann, 1997). Mann says that mind-mapping (sometimes called brainstorming or spider diagrams) can open up alternatives; whereas focusing circles are useful for narrowing the focus.

Mind-mapping and diaries are used fairly commonly, but focusing circles are less well known. Therefore, the following example was used interactively at the JALT 2004 Nara conference. Participants were asked how they would spend a large sum of money. Mind-mapping was used

initially to reveal the alternatives, and then focusing circles narrowed it down. This example is unrelated to educational research, but JALT participants were quite enthusiastic about how they could spend their hypothetical money!

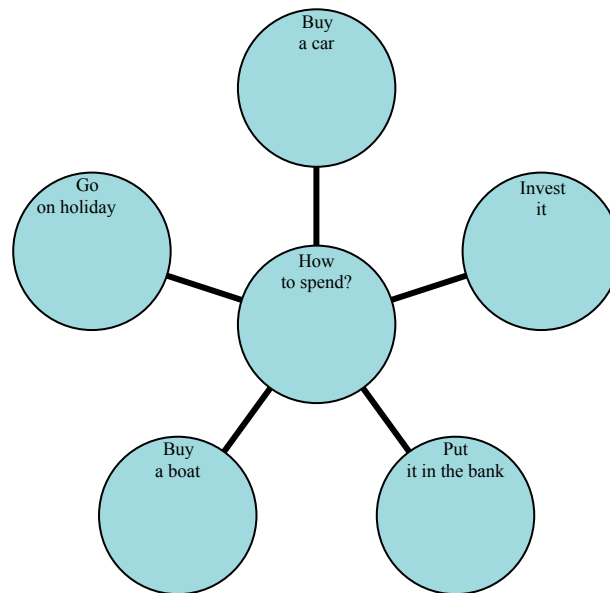


Figure 1. Mind-mapping example

From the example above, “buying a car” was selected. The following focusing circle followed to narrow down the type of car:

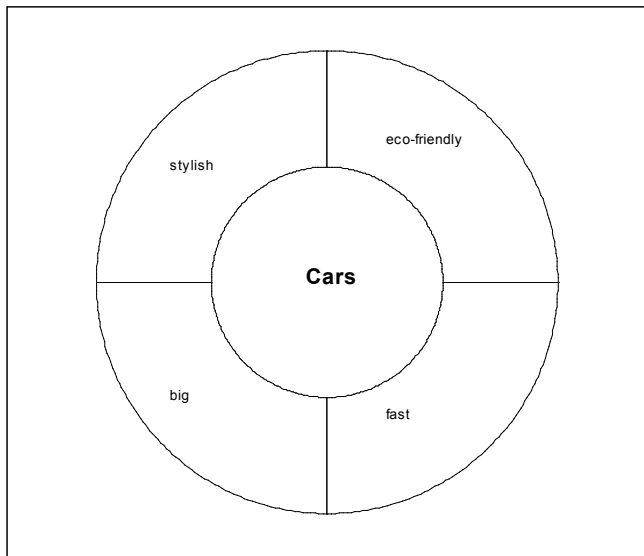


Figure 2. Focus circle 1

Eco-friendly was then selected, so this choice formed the centre of the next focusing circle:

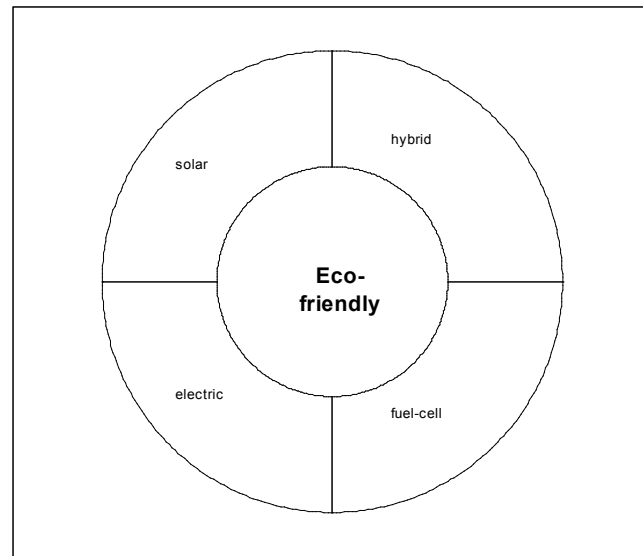


Figure 3. Focus circle 2

A hybrid car was then selected and the following alternatives were considered:

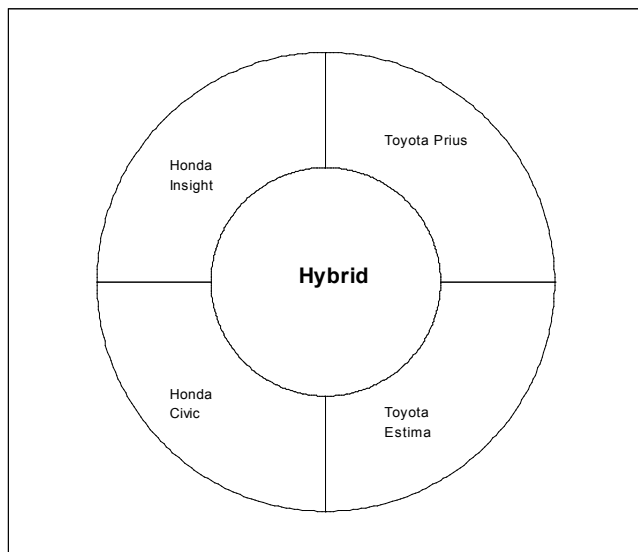


Figure 4. Focus circle 3

This example was therefore a simple way of highlighting that focusing circles can be an effective way of narrowing a focus.

Clarifying the focus—collecting data

It is important to make sure that the focus is clear and supported by evidence. Reading can provide support or alternatives from researchers in similar situations. However, no situation is exactly the same, so it is important to collect data from the classes. Interviews and questionnaires are

effective ways of collecting the opinions of students. Recording classes by video or audio cassette are a useful way of noticing problems that are missed in the thick of teaching. Noting everything in the research diary is also still necessary to keep track of ideas as they arise.

Act and Observe

From the evidence collected, a plan can be put into action. It is necessary however, to observe how successful the changes have been. This can be done by maintaining the research diary—noting ideas when they are fresh after the class. Also, the classes can be video-recorded, a critical friend could be invited to observe and comment, and interviews and questionnaires can be submitted to the students.

Reflect

It is important to reflect on the rate of successfulness of the class changes. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, if there are interesting results, then there is the possibility to publish the ideas so that other teacher-researchers can try to implement them. Secondly, improvements are likely to be discovered; therefore, a new focus can arise from the reflection that can then start a new Action Research cycle.

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Defining TBL

First of all, there are many definitions for task, therefore the approach used for this paper needs to be defined. This paper is not using the narrowest definition of task that

insists that the activities must be the same as those that are accomplished in the real world. This is not completely possible anyway, because classroom tasks may always be slightly artificial. The definition of task used in this paper is the one that differentiates the analytical learner-centred syllabuses of TBL from the traditional teacher-led synthetic syllabuses. Long and Crookes (1992, 1993) describe that synthetic syllabuses are structured linguistically for the students to discover the correct grammatical answers that the teacher expects. However, in the case of analytical syllabuses, there is no artificial pre-selection of the type of language to be used; instead, authentic unaltered material is supplied. Willis adds that a task is: "... a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome." (1996, p. 53) She adds that there are 4 key conditions:

1. Exposure to a rich but comprehensible input of real language, i.e., the kind of language that learners will be needing or wishing to understand and use themselves...
2. Opportunities for **real use of language**—chances for learners to experiment and test hypotheses, to mean what they say and express what they mean in a variety of circumstances...
3. **Motivation** to listen and read, i.e. to process the exposure for meaning; and also to use the language, to speak and write...
4. **Focus on language**—in order to prevent fossilisation, and to challenge learners to strive for individual improvement, they need chances

to reflect on language and try to systematise what they know... (Willis, 1996, pp. 59-60, abridged)

In summary, the task-based syllabus begins with a needs analysis (so that the tasks are relevant to the students); it has authentic unaltered material; the tasks are meaning orientated (rather than linguistic), and there is a focus on form at some point.

Advantages of TBL

SLA researchers such as Robinson (1998), Long and Crookes (1992), and Skehan (1996) indicate that the complexity, variability and lack of concrete knowledge about learner development means that it is impossible to create structural syllabuses that match the individual needs of the student.

Task-based syllabuses avoid these problems by appealing to the intuition of learners, because they focus on finding the meaning in natural samples of language that are not altered linguistically:

The learners' role in these syllabuses is to analyse or attend to aspects of language use and structure as the communicative activities require them to, in line with: a) their developing *interlanguage systems*; b) preferred *learning style* and *aptitude profile*; and c) to the extent that they are *motivated* to develop to an accuracy level which may not be required by the communicative demands of the task. (Robinson, 1998)

However, SLA research also shows that some form of guidance and feedback can help speed up the development

and ultimate level of achievement of the learners, but it must not be according to a sequence imposed by the teacher (Long & Crookes, 1993). It is therefore good to give advice on learning strategies *before* doing the task, and then have a focus on form *after* the students have finished it. This linguistic focus after they finish the task can highlight common problems that have occurred. Skehan (1998) says:

... the judicious balance that good learners were thought to strike between language as a system and language as communication parallels the arguments put forward ... for a balance between analysis and synthesis, and a focus on form, as well as a concern to put that form to use. (p. 264)

AR in action—the example of the DVD class

Situation

The DVD TBL class in question is the highest level class (based on translation tests) in the third grade at Kinki University Technical College. A detailed description of the class can be found in Humphries & Takeuchi (2004, pp. 27-8). The College is in Kumano, this is the *inaka*: a rural part of Japan. It takes three hours by the fastest train to get to Nagoya. To get to the Nara conference site it is a winding four hour drive through the mountains! The students' main focus is engineering, so English study is not a priority for them (this is reflected by a very small portion of the curriculum that is devoted to the subject). This, coupled with the remoteness of the region, can cause low motivation to study English. DVD movies are therefore a good way to try and generate some integrative motivation, by combining a shared interest in Hollywood movies.

Students watch the movie twice. Both times in English, but the first showing has Japanese subtitles to aid comprehension. The second showing has English subtitles to boost their vocabulary. Before watching the movie, the students are given five discussion questions (see Appendix 1). After watching the movie, students then volunteer to answer the questions. They get a point towards their tests for volunteering. After the class discussions, students form groups and write essays to answer whether they enjoyed the movie. Their answers are structured based on three of the five the discussion areas, using vocabulary that they have learnt, and evidence from the movie to support their arguments.

This class is therefore TBL because there is natural input of real language, meaning focused communication, and the focus on form comes later. The natural input comes from the teacher and their peers (in the class discussions) and the movie. The meaning focused output is produced by the students orally in the class discussion and then on paper in their essays. The focus on form comes later when their essays and class discussion comments are corrected by the teacher.

Focus—the problem

Students seemed to enjoy the film; this was obvious from their essays. The essays were also quite well written—students answered the question and structured their essays quite coherently based on the discussion areas. The problem was the discussion phase. Based on the five discussion areas mentioned above, there were 66 voluntary responses. However, from these responses, the answers were

concentrated to only 14 students out of a class of 33. It was then necessary to clarify the problem—why were students not volunteering?

Plan: Clarifying the problem

Clarifying the problem took two strands of investigation: class analysis and researching the literature.

The reading showed that communication in real time can be quite stressful for EFL students; if they are forced to speak English too soon, they can suffer from a “task overload” (Dunkel, 1991, p. 436). In the Japanese context, Nippoda (2002, p. 3) points out that the standard in Japan is for teachers to speak and the learners passively listen and copy from the board. There is no culture of voluntary participation. Brown (2004, p. 16) points to the severe peer pressure on students to stay quiet: “if they make a mistake, they risk ridicule; if they answer correctly, they risk social rejection.” Van Lier (1996) finds problems in Peru and Duff (1996) has difficulty in Hungary; both tried to introduce new methods that faced resistance. It was therefore necessary to understand the students’ expectations and then reduce the chances of miscommunication created from this new method.

To find out why there wasn’t wider participation, the classes were videoed and a questionnaire was produced for the students.

The video can be watched to give an insight into the types of questions to ask the students. Watching the video was a sobering experience that has been recorded in the author’s research diary.

I could see my classes through the eyes of my students. I’m not as funny or interesting as I thought previously and I basically talk too much. Part of the problem with this of course is that I’m trying to elicit responses from my students and they just sit there quietly, which in turn causes me to talk more. The one activity that the students did do well (apart from being quietly well behaved) was that they copied diligently from the board. They were so busy copying or at least looking down at their notebooks that they weren’t listening or responding to me. I wonder if they would notice if we let a monkey loose with a paintbrush at the front of the room, or would they just copy what he plastered on the walls!” (15th November, 2004)

The questionnaire was based on the video evidence as well as other problems perceived by the author. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese for the students, but the full English version of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2. It was divided into three sections: firstly closed questions about other classes; secondly, closed questions (and one optional open question) concerning the DVD class; and thirdly, a final open question for suggestions for improvement.

Table 1. Students' perception of teaching styles in other classes at my college

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
1. How often do other teachers ask you to verbally answer questions whilst the rest of the class listens?	2	19	12
2. How often do you copy notes from the board in other classes?	26	7	0
3. How often do you do work in small groups and then present your ideas to the class?	0	2	31
4. How often do you do individual exercises in other classes?	10	17	6
5. How often do you do group work in other classes?	2	10	21

The first section was to test the hypothesis that this class is different from normal Japanese classes. As expected, the majority of students said that they often copied from the board in other classes (78 percent) which could explain that they felt comfortable doing it in the DVD class. Surprisingly though, they said that they felt they had enough time to copy from the board and listen to me (70 percent), although this could be a lack of awareness on their part because they are so used to copying. The discussion style is different

to normal classes, the majority said that they rarely had to present group ideas to the rest of the class (93 percent), and in fact they rarely did group work (64 percent). Fifty-eight percent said that they were sometimes asked to answer questions from the teachers, however when suggesting improvements one student said: "rather than waiting for students to raise their hands, point at students." This is quite revealing, maybe that question should have been phrased differently, perhaps other teachers point at students, or just continue if no answer is given, but question 1 is too vague on this.

Table 2. Students' perception of my class

	Yes	No	Undecided
6. Is my English difficult to understand?	12	13	8
7. Is it hard to think of the correct answer to my questions?	8	19	6
8. Is it hard to think of the correct English to answer my questions?	28	2	3
9. Do you feel embarrassed to talk in front of other students in the class?	15	15	3
10. Do you feel sleepy in class?	17	15	1
11. Do you have enough time to copy from the board and listen to me?	23	7	3
12. Can you remember the movie OK?	30	2	1
13. Can you understand the movie OK?	24	3	6

Ninety-one percent said they can remember the movie OK and 73 percent said they understood it OK. Only 36 percent said they found the teacher's English difficult to understand and 58 percent actually said they didn't find it difficult to think of the correct answer to the questions. There was an even split between students who felt embarrassed and didn't feel embarrassed. Therefore, thinking of the correct English to answer the questions (84 percent) seems to be the main obstacle to participation and 18 students also singled this out as the biggest problem in the class. Feeling embarrassed was chosen by five students as the biggest problem. So from the closed questions, thinking of the correct English to answer the teacher was by far the biggest obstacle to participation. From the open questions, there were ten requests for more Japanese to be used in the class.

Act: my response

From the literature research and the questionnaire results, two responses were selected. Firstly, note-taking would be done by the teacher rather than the students. They could then receive a handout in the following class that summarised their answers. This would prevent the students from just copying from the board instead of listening and participating. Secondly, Japanese would be allowed for new ideas, (but not during the review of ideas from the previous class that takes place at the beginning of the lesson). This would overcome the anxiety that students feel from producing the language too soon. Their ideas can be translated and then written in English on the whiteboard and in the handouts.

Observe: results and evaluation

The observation of the changes was done in three ways: measuring the student participation; videoing the class and a questionnaire.

Fifteen students made 39 responses after the changes were implemented, so this shows that a higher proportion answered in relation to the questions asked (38%) this is much higher than the original 21% under the previous style. However, a higher response rate would be desirable. The students also seemed more enthusiastic to answer and there seemed to be less of a delay before their hands were raised.

The second questionnaire was also translated into Japanese for the students, the full English version and results can be seen in Appendix 3. The responses to the fixed statements are below in Table 3. Students indicated they generally preferred the changes and felt that they would participate more. However, in the open section, some students complained that they could not read the handwriting and one student requested that the handouts should be typed. Three students requested a Japanese translation for the questions.

Table 3. Student Feedback from the changes

	Yes	No	Not sure
1. Do you prefer Simon to do the note-taking so that you can listen and participate?	24	1	7
2. Can you understand better now that you are not taking notes?	17	2	13
3. Can you read my notes OK?	18	6	8
4. Is it better to be able to use Japanese to answer my English questions?	18	4	10
5. Will you participate more when Simon does the note-taking?	18	6	8
6. Will you participate more when you can use Japanese?	17	4	11
7. On the whole do you approve of using DVDs for English discussion?	22	3	7

The video evidence is summarised in the research diary entry below:

From the video, I still felt that I was talking too much whilst the students were passively listening. The most interesting moment happened though when I asked three students to justify an answer that they had voted for. It came as no surprise to me when they couldn't answer at that moment (I had no idea why they had voted in such a way) so I allowed them to think and then prepare an answer for the following class. The interesting moment then occurred in the following class. Although two of the three students had never participated in my

class before, all three of them used good English and had excellent opinions. (16th December, 2004)

The event described above stimulated the author to try a new methodology.

Reflect: conclusions and suggestions for change (starting a new AR cycle)

From the video evidence of the three students mentioned above: a good change would be to provide the question a class in advance and nominate individuals to answer. This saves the difficulty of thinking of an answer spontaneously and it links to the earlier reading about Japanese culture. The students cannot be criticised by their peers for showing off, because the voluntary aspect has been removed.

Due to the complaints in the open section about the handwriting in the handouts, an improvement would be to type them on the computer instead. In this way, there is also a digital record.

Conclusion: Benefit of using AR in a TBL class in Japan

Task-Based Learning is a good learner-focused methodology that encourages learners to use the language. The students can develop at their own pace rather than being left behind or slowed down by the lockstep style of synthetic teacher-led approaches. However, Action Research becomes necessary with this approach, due to the possibilities of miscommunication with the students. In Japan, the chance of

miscommunication is even greater because the culture and the usual teaching style in most subjects tend towards the passive absorption of facts from the teacher.

The author's DVD class is used as an example of AR in action in a TBL class. A problem was spotted—lack of student participation. The problem was then understood by reading the SLA literature and articles about the lack of participation in Japan. Moreover, the class was investigated by the use of video and questionnaires. It was hypothesised that it was due to an over-reliance on note-taking by the students and that they needed to express themselves initially in Japanese. This was part of the *plan* stage. The *act* stage followed: the changes were implemented. The *observe* stage takes place in parallel to this: the classes were videoed, notes were taken in a research diary and a second questionnaire was produced for the students. *Reflect* is the final stage, the changes were evaluated and discovered to be partially successful. This was because student participation increased and they preferred the changes, but some had trouble reading the handwriting in the handouts. Moreover, allowing planning time, but forcing all students to answer the questions in English is a new approach to be considered. These changes will be implemented and then in turn evaluated and the class will therefore continue to develop and improve. This therefore links directly to the conference theme “Language Learning for life” because teachers using AR will continually improve their TBL classes by keeping the focus on the students but also using personal introspection into our own methodology.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Essay question and discussion questions.

Essay:

Based on our class discussions and your own opinions of the movie, what is your impression of the movie: *The Matrix*?

Form groups of four students.

300-400 words.

Deadline is 18th February.

Criteria	Points
Personal opinion backed by evidence	5
Interesting and original	5
Good structure	5
Good English	5
Total	20

Whole class discussion questions:

1. Which character do you find the most interesting?
2. What choices does Neo have to make?
3. What special effects do the directors use?
4. What is your favourite scene and why?
5. Can you relate life in the Matrix to your life in school/ Japan (or China)/religion?

Appendix 2

First questionnaire (questions and results)

Questionnaire. Name:

This questionnaire is not a test of your English ability. It will not be used to grade you.

It is purely a study by me (Simon) to try and make the classes more interesting and beneficial for you the students.

Please write your honest opinions, it is OK to be critical. If you want to leave the name space blank, that is OK

The questionnaire is divided into 3 parts.

1. Questions about other classes
2. Questions about my classes
3. Your suggestions how I can improve my classes

Part 1(Please circle the best answer)

1. How often do other teachers ask you to verbally answer questions whilst the rest of the class listens?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely
2	19	12

2. How often do you copy notes from the board in other classes?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely
26	7	0

3. How often do you do work in small groups and then present your ideas to the class?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely
0	2	31

4. How often do you do individual exercises in other classes?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely
10	17	6

5. How often do you do group work in other classes?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely
2	10	21

Part 2(Please circle the best answer)

6. Is my English difficult to understand?

Yes	No	Don't know
12	13	8

7. Is it hard to think of the correct answer to my questions?

Yes	No	Don't know
8	19	6

8. Is it hard to think of the correct English to answer my questions?

Yes	No	Don't know
28	2	3

9. Do you feel embarrassed to talk in front of other students in the class?

Yes	No	Don't know
15	15	3

10. Do you feel sleepy in class?

Yes	No	Don't know
17	15	1

11. Do you have enough time to copy from the board and listen to me?

Yes	No	Don't know
23	7	3

12. Can you remember the movie OK?

Yes	No	Don't know
30	2	1

13. Can you understand the movie OK?

Yes	No	Don't know
24	3	6

14. Can you think of any other problems?

See below

15. From the choices above (6-14) which would you say creates the most difficulty for you in my class?

(Please write the letter code of one of them down below)

See below

Part 3

Please use the space below to suggest any improvements that you think I can make to the class.

See below

14. Can you think of any other problems?

- I sometimes don't understand what Simon is talking about
- I don't understand some questions. That makes me sleepy and bored
- When Simon is talking, I often find lots of words that I don't know,
- I hope I can find the meanings of words that are important at least
- It's sometimes difficult to see the picture on the screen
- I sometimes can't remember the film we watched, so I can't answer questions about it
- Because I enjoy the films, I don't try to watch them for learning English
- I'd like Simon to speak more slowly
- Because Simon speaks only English, I don't understand him at all,
- I feel I didn't learn anything at the end of the class
- Simon's class is quite fun and I feel my level of English is going up
- I don't understand Simon's English
- There are some problems
- Fewer chances for practising English conversation
- Sometimes I can't read well what Simon writes on the blackboard
- I'd like Mr. T to translate what Simon says, otherwise I don't understand what he is talking about
- The class should be in Japanese as well as English

- Why don't you show us the Matrix Reloaded after showing The Matrix
 - Some seats don't have a good view of the films
 - Sometimes the English on the whiteboard is too small to read
 - I'd like you to use a textbook or conversational English
15. Is it hard to think of the correct English to answer my questions?
- Do you feel embarrassed to talk in front of other students in the class?
 - Is my English difficult to understand?
 - Can you think of any other problems?
 - Is it hard to think of the correct answer to my questions?
 - Do you feel sleepy in class?
 - Do you have enough time to copy from the board and listen to me?
16. Suggestions for improvements
- I want a Japanese translation (four students)
 - After you say something in English, please translate it into Japanese
 - I like your class as it is now
 - Let students say anything they like in English before the class starts
 - Lets watch films in Japanese with English subtitles
 - Change Mr. T for Mr. U. Mr. T's pronunciation is bad
 - Mr. T doesn't do anything to support Simon, he doesn't teach us properly either
 - What Simon talks about is very interesting, but sometimes I don't understand, so please explain the meanings of words that we don't know
 - How about listening to Beatles music and filling in the blanks
 - Some students can't see the picture very well because of the light from outside, how about changing our seats
 - Speak slower (two students)
 - Sometimes difficult to see the picture because of the sunlight - how about using a black curtain
 - When you explain - please use Japanese
 - Write in big letters on the whiteboard (two students)
 - Each time you teach something similar
 - It would be better to translate difficult English words into Japanese
 - I enjoy your class, I think you are good at teaching, please write clearly on the whiteboard
 - Rather than waiting for students to raise their hands - point at students
 - Give us a words test every week
 - I'd like to learn conversational English and have a chance to work with Simon in a small group

Appendix 3

Second questionnaire: evaluation of my handouts and use of Japanese (questions and results)

Revised class style questionnaire

Name _____

Grade _____

Please take the time to read and answer this questionnaire, it will help me to make the class more interesting for you.

Question	Yes	No	Not sure
1. Do you prefer Simon to do the note-taking so that you can listen and participate?	24	1	7
2. Can you understand better now that you are not taking notes?	17	2	13
3. Can you read my notes OK?	18	6	8
4. Is it better to be able to use Japanese to answer my English questions?	18	4	10
5. Will you participate more using when Simon does the note-taking?	18	6	8
6. Will you participate more when you can use Japanese?	17	4	11
7. On the whole do you approve of using DVDs for English discussion?	22	3	7

8. Do you have any further comments about my note-taking for you?

- I'd like your handout to be clearer for me to translate.
- I want you to keep on making the handout.
- I'd like you to write the meaning in Japanese too. (2 students)
- Please make your handout easier to read (3 students)
- Please make your handout with the computer.
- It's easier to study with the handout.
- Please write English well.

9. Do you have any further comments about the use of Japanese in this class?

- Students who don't understand English can't answer if they can't use Japanese.
- Only students who understand can answer - it's not fair.
- I don't know, but I hope I can answer in English.
- Students who don't understand can't answer, so only the clever students can get points.
- Sometimes I can't understand Simon's question, so I want a Japanese translation.
- After Simon speaks, it will be easier to understand if Mr. T translates it. (2 students.)
- I agree to use Japanese in class.
- Our English might not improve.
- After we answer in Japanese, I'd like to know how to say it in English.