

The Immediate Method

Jean-Luc Azra
Seinan Gakuin University

Meiko Ikezawa
*Kyushu Daigaku PhD
student, Fukuoka Jo Gakuin
Daigaku lecturer*

Benedict Rowlett
Soyo Junior High School
Bruno Vannieuwenhuyse
Kyoto Daigaku lecturer

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The *Immediate Method* is an original teaching method conceived with the aim of enabling actual conversations in a foreign language in the classroom. Time in class is divided into two periods; first, novel material is presented and discussed with the whole class as a group, then, the teacher has a series of 2 to 5 minute conversations with one to four students. The method is said to be "immediate" because the material taught in the class is immediately used in order to have conversations on the spot. This method was originally designed for challenging teaching conditions (large groups; low personal motivation, etc.) but it can be used, a fortiori, in easier conditions, for example in small groups, or with advanced or well-motivated students.

The *Immediate Method* is an original teaching method initiated between 1995 and 1999 by French teachers at the University of Osaka under the name "Méthode Immédiate". At that time, it relied mainly on the work of Louis Benoit (Benoit, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002) who developed the basics of the method in his classroom long before the term was coined by Azra in 1999 and the method developed into a textbook (Azra, 1999, 2002). Research about the *Immediate Method* has been subsequently developed in German (Vögel, 2001) and Japanese (Ikezawa, 2001). It is now used for teaching French, German, and Japanese in all kinds of classes throughout Japan. It is now also being developed for teaching English at the beginner level, in junior high schools and high schools. Textbooks in all four languages are now available.

The method provides functional language elements to help enable actual conversations during classtime. By 'actual' conversations we mean conversations occurring face-to-face between persons actually present in the classroom; that is between the students and the teacher.

At the start of each class, the teacher presents the elements for that day's conversation. These elements consist of possible questions, possible answers, and possible reactions to these answers. In order to transmit such material in a fast and efficient way, the teacher may use special charts, the purpose of which is to present the phrase structures simply and visually. These charts show a wide selection of possible variations in content, structure, and vocabulary.

Remaining classtime is then devoted to having these ‘actual’ conversations between the teacher and individual students or sometimes between the teacher and small groups of up to four students. While these conversations are being conducted, other students practice by themselves or in pairs. The students actually having the conversation do not therefore feel they are under the scrutiny or judgment of the group.

Institutional problems and language teaching in Japan

In Japan, English is taught from junior high school but students do not generally practice speaking a foreign language before entering university. English teaching is usually based on grammar and translation methods and is essentially non-communicative. The students, in general, end up with good comprehension of written English texts, but they may get to university without ever having had a conversation in a foreign language.

The situation as students enter university is as follows: they have often passed very difficult examinations for which they studied hard during their years in high school. They are often very skilled in their field and in English they may know some grammar and understand simple written texts but on the whole, they do not have any experience of communicating in a foreign language including even simple exchanges of personal information (McVeigh, 2001). Moreover, many seem to have little experience in communicating in their own language and are usually untrained in expressing either their own views and opinions or in speaking about themselves. Be it in English or in other

subjects, the majority of tests, assignments and examinations they sat were in the form of multiple-choice questions. Although their level of schooling may have been very high, they have often never written any essays since primary school, never been asked to answer questions at length or never written more than a few words or more than a few lines at a time.

Another problem is that classes are often overloaded. At the university level, some classes may have only twenty to thirty students, but in some universities the standard class size is more likely to be around forty. It is not uncommon to have, in classes designated as “conversation classes”, fifty, sixty or even seventy students. The situation is not much better in junior high and high schools, where the classes often include up to 50 students.

At the university level, the system is based on an extremely selective entrance examination followed by what can, in most cases, only be termed ‘relaxation’. In some secondary classes (such as foreign languages), students are not required to provide any individual work at all, only to attend class, and it is almost impossible for teachers to assign any. Usually, the exam at the end of each term triggers intensive revision work, but, since students have not, on the whole, known any study method other than memorization, they tend to do very poorly in fields which require a different kind of practice.

That is the context in which the *Immediate Method* was developed at the University of Osaka in 1995, around the work that Benoit (Benoit, 1999) had been carrying out for a few years before that. His research explains how the method meets all kinds of difficulties: large groups; low personal

motivation; great differences in knowing and speaking the language among students in the same group; bad homework habits; no opportunities to speak the language except in the classroom; few teaching hours; no lab, no audio or video material; no guarantee that students will attend each week. There is no reason, however, why the method can not be used in easier teaching conditions as with small groups or with advanced or well motivated students.

Theoretical Background to the Immediate Method

The *Immediate Method* can be said to have its roots in Long's interaction hypothesis, according to which interaction is one of the most important factors in the process of language acquisition (Long, 1985, 1996). Instead of controlled practice of language forms or structures in the classroom, conversation and other interactive communication can be instrumental in the development of linguistic rules and, in time, proficiency. Van Lier (1996) posits that language learning is a gradual and cumulative process, at the heart of which lies the central importance of social interaction. Social interaction, like an engine, moves all the elements of the process. The enabling of social interaction in the classroom through conversation would therefore act as an ideal medium through which to engage students in this learning process.

If we consider conversation as integral to participation in a social situation it becomes clear that students will need to feel some purpose in initiating a conversation or reacting to the questions of others. Brown and Yule (1983) suggest that if students have a purpose in speaking, they immediately find themselves in a situation where what they say or how

they say it has significance. If they perform well they will have immediate feedback that the language they have been learning and practicing has enabled 'actual' communication. It is with this in mind that conversations in the *Immediate Method* have been designed.

Description of the method

Content

Lessons revolve around everyday topics (eg. "How do you come to school?", "Who's your favorite actor?", etc.). Structures and vocabulary that can be used immediately to speak about oneself, and one's daily life are introduced and practiced until they can be used orally with ease. The conversations are short and follow a recognized interactional pattern of initiation, response, and follow up (as identified by Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Thus some sample conversations from the textbooks are:

- Initiation:** Are you Chinese?
Response: No, I'm Japanese.
Follow up: I see.
Initiation: How many classes do you have a week?
Response: 15.
Follow up: Wow! That's a lot.
Initiation: How was your vacation?
Response: It was good. I went to Okinawa.

Follow up: That's great. Did you go there with your parents?

Response: No, I went with my university club.

Follow up: That's great !

Initiation: How about you? How was your vacation?

Response: It was fine. I stayed in Tokyo.

Follow up: I see.

At the beginning of each class the teacher presents the elements for that day's conversation. These elements consist of possible questions, possible answers, and possible reactions to these answers.

In order to transmit such material in a fast and efficient way, the teacher may use existing textbooks, or create his or her new material and copy it (as Azra and Vögel did for many years). He or she may write sentences chunks on the blackboard (as Benoit does), or use special charts. Figure 1 shows such a chart, from a textbook (Brown, Brewer, Randell, Ikezawa, Vannieu & Azra, 2004) for junior high schools (For examples of other kinds of *Immediate Method*-type charts in other languages, see Ikezawa & Azra, 2001, Vögel & Azra, 2002, or Azra & Vannieuwenhuyse, 2003).

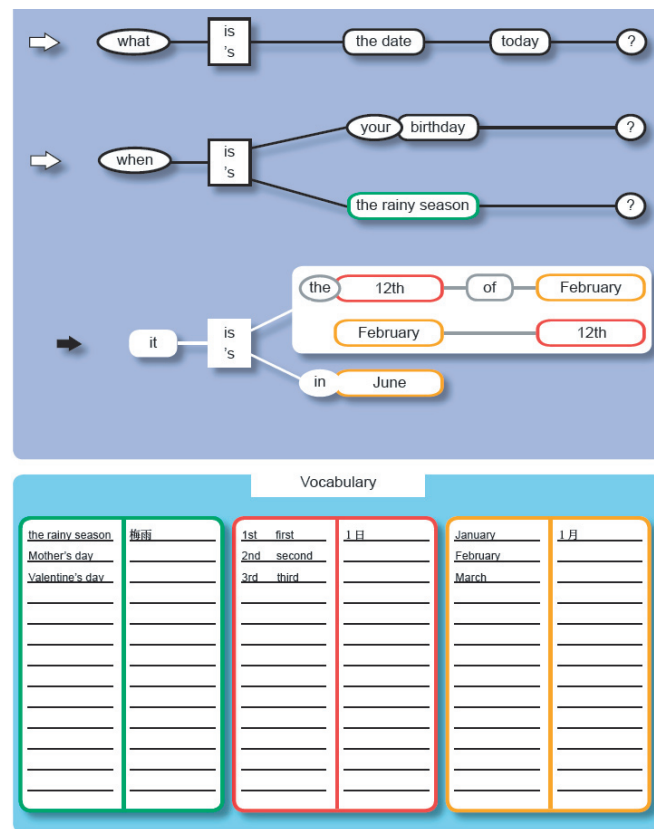


Figure 1. Immediate Method-type chart, from Brown et al., 2004

These charts provide the basic elements of the conversation which the students can use, practice and then build upon by adding to the wordlists below. Using Figure 1 as an example, possible initiations and responses might therefore be:

- i) – What's (*or* What is) the date today?
– It's the 10th of February (*or any date*)
- ii) – When's (*or* When is) your birthday?
– It's the 6th of June (*or any date*) *or* It's in June (*or any month*).
- iii) – When's (*or* When is) the rainy season (*or* the beginning of the term, *etc.*)?
– It's in April (*or any month*).
- iv) – When's (*or* When is) Valentines day (*or* Mother's Day, *etc.*)?
– It's the 14th of February (*or any date*) *or* It's in February (*or any month*)

In enabling conversations that have an immediate relevance to students' lives we can isolate the purpose in having the conversation in the first place; that is to share information about ourselves and learn about others. Most importantly, by creating content and situations where students can relate effectively with each other in sharing experiences, feelings and insights we can hope to satisfy students' sense of self-esteem gained through interaction with others (Moskowitz, 1999). This is not too far removed from Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of a *community of practice* where community implies participation

in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and communities.

Organization of classtime

Each class is divided into two periods. First, new material is presented and discussed with the whole class as a group and the students are then invited to practise in pairs. After a few minutes practice the teacher has a series of 1 to 3 minute conversations with students on a one-to-one or, depending on the class size, one-to-two, three or four basis. These are conducted, where possible, away from the main body of the group, for example in the corner of the classroom. The students actually having a conversation thus do not feel their performance is under the scrutiny of their peers.

While the conversation testing is taking place, the other students practice in pairs, continue studying for the next lesson or do some work quietly by themselves. It is important that the students change partners as often as possible both in order to enhance this sense of community referred to previously and also to gain as much practice as possible (Azra & Vannieuwenhuysse, 1999).

The students receive a score based on how effectively they are able to hold the conversation. The conversation test gives meaning to the whole class (see Benoit, 1999). A significant part of the class-time is devoted to it, so that each student is tested often, even when the group is large.

Specifics of the method

Virtually every foreign teacher in Japan has experienced the shock of silence in class. This is basically because students don't, generally, answer when expected. We have found a simple model that explains why this happens. We believe that the cultural rule prevalent in Japan is that, when asked a question, a student's 'duty' is to *look for the answer*. This is done in a number of ways; by introspection, by opening a textbook and searching feverishly for the answer or by asking a classmate. To address this issue we should be looking at strategies that can be taught in order to overcome this breakdown in communication and help students answer immediately (Vannieuwenhuyse, 2002a, b).

The main strategy used in the framework of the *Immediate Method* is what we call 'Meta-communication' (Azra, 2004), understood as the communicative 'tools' that we use in order to clarify our communication with others. 'What's (this) in English,' or even simply, 'I don't know,' are 'Meta-communication' expressions. They can assist in allowing oral practice to proceed smoothly, and allow students to continue their conversation during test-time, even when they encounter one of the following situations:

- (1) They have not understood something the teacher said, or
- (2) They have forgotten a word they want to use to say something.

These expressions can allow students to redirect their confusion back to the teacher, or indeed another student, in order to save the conversation. Richards and Lockhart, with reference to Krashen and Terrell (1996, p.196), maintain that in the initial stages of language learning such fixed

expressions or formulas can serve as useful communicative strategies for learners to manage many of the communicative demands of the classroom when they lack more complex linguistic means to do so.

Many textbooks begin with 'classroom English', but experience has shown that if basic expressions such as "I don't know" or "What's (this) in English?" are not practiced regularly, students have a hard time using them. In the *Immediate Method* awareness and constant practice of these expressions is an integral feature and they are taught and encouraged from the very beginning (Azra, 2004, Azra & Vannieuwenhuyse, 2004).

Progress sheet

Students can easily succeed in the conversation test; if they have practiced the day's simple conversation, they will get a good score. There are no surprises, no tricky questions. After the test, they receive a mark on their *Progress Sheet* providing both instant feedback and precise information about where they are in terms of getting their end credit for the class.

The *Progress sheet* is a pedagogic tool in itself. It allows students to keep a continuous record of their progress and scores: all students keep their own *Progress Sheet* (inserting it into the pocket in their *Immediate Method* textbook), and bring it to class every week. The teacher does not write the marks obtained in class anywhere else; it is the student's responsibility not to lose it. Students therefore always have access to all information about their scores and progress and are ultimately responsible for the document. Psychologically, this has a subtle but powerful effect on their understanding that they are responsible for their learning and results.

One would expect students to often lose the *Progress Sheet*, but surprisingly it happens rarely (see Azra & Vannieuwenhuyse, 1999, for the difficulties that may occur in a class and how to solve them). They are advised during the first class that the teacher will not keep any other record of the marks collected in class, and they can see this as the teacher writes down a mark on the sheet after the conversation test or an exercise done in class, and then hands it back to them. During the first class, they write down their personal information, and can add an ID picture. The *Progress Sheet* becomes an important document, akin to a passport.

The policy can be as tough as the teacher likes: no *Progress Sheet* on that day, no mark. At the end of the semester, the teacher collects all the *Progress Sheets*, and has only to add up the marks and write down the total mark on the class results sheet.

Conversation tests

Test types

Tests conducted during a standard class should be fast. As a rule, the teacher should count on one minute per student (or two minutes per pair, three minutes per three etc).

Here are the fastest test types:

- **“Interview” test.** The teacher asks all the questions.
- **“Alternate interview” test.** The teacher asks 3 questions, and then the student asks one or more questions.
- **“Questions to the teacher” test.** The teacher doesn’t ask any questions, except perhaps ‘how about you?’

- **“Prepared dialog” test.** The students perform the conversation they have prepared.
- **“Prepared dialog + questions” test.** The students perform what they have prepared, then ask questions to the teacher. This type of test has proven to be the most beneficial for both the teacher and the students because the students can at least rely on something they learned by heart, and the teacher can easily evaluate their understanding of the structure and pronunciation. The teacher can then ask one or more questions to test their capacity in understanding and responding to unprepared questions.
- **“Two person conversation” test.** The teacher and the student ask each other questions (but the teacher leaves the initiative to the student).
- **“Three person conversation” test.** Students ask questions to the teacher and to each other; the teacher participates in the conversation.
- **“Four person test”.** Students prepare for the test in pairs but find themselves facing a new partner for the test. The teacher may ask questions from time to time.

All these tests can be graded with a stamp (for example two stamps for average performance, three or four stamps for a better performance, or five stamps for an excellent conversation), or they can be graded with a mark out of 10 depending on the teacher’s preference. Stamps or marks are noted on the *Progress sheet* (for a more detailed account of the test types, see Azra and Vannieuwenhuyse, 2004).

Testing conditions

In itself, the conversation test is an essential piece of oral practice. Students face a teacher and have to perform. They are naturally nervous at first but experience has shown that they feel a real sense of achievement after succeeding in the task that was assigned to them: conducting a conversation, however simple, in a foreign language.

In the *Immediate Method*, the fact that the test is conducted apart from the group (when this is not possible owing to a particularly crowded classroom the teacher moves next to the students he or she wants to test) is very important. The main pressure on students, which renders many mute, comes from their peers. Students who might not have uttered a word in class before sometimes reveal themselves to be capable students. Disruptive students who might have normally disturbed the class with a negative attitude are not so ready to do so when they are facing the teacher privately.

While the teacher is testing, which, as we have noted, takes up a significant amount of classtime, the other students can prepare for their own test. As well as realizing that the more they practice before the test the better their performance will be, they will also be engaging more deeply in social interaction with their peers owing to the nature of the conversations practiced in the *Immediate Method*. An alternative to this is that they do written exercises. These exercises can be corrected and marked when necessary and their progress sheets marked or stamped (a missing stamp could, however, mean points deducted from the test score). We believe that having written activities to prepare for oral communication is not a contradiction. The activity of writing is important for many individuals to memorize new

information. In terms of class management, there is also a need to keep students busy during test time.

Conclusion

Teaching foreign languages in Japan confronts teachers with specific difficulties: most of the time, students are used to a very passive way of learning; they almost always rely on memorization; they generally have not yet learned to express themselves or to communicate in a foreign language (including English); they are most of the time not used to any other kind of tests other than multiple-choice questions; and they are not used to speaking about themselves at length, even in their own language. What is more, teaching conditions often include very large classes, including classes which are supposed to be “conversation classes”. Consequently language teaching in Japan can be very challenging. The *Immediate Method* is an original teaching method that was developed in Japan in order to meet the specific difficulties inherent in Japanese cultural and institutional contexts. Its success is based on a specific class management system through which the goal is to have all students, without exception, have real time, two-way conversations in each class. As well as engendering a real sense of accomplishment in our students in that they are able to communicate successfully in a foreign language from the outset, we believe that the method can help alleviate the frustration felt by many teachers when faced with a class of mute students.

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