



5 steps to an all-English classroom

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While many instructors feel it is beneficial for their students to speak only English in the classroom, it is often difficult to keep homogeneous classrooms in the target language. Some of the reasons for this are that students are more comfortable in their L1, they may not feel they have the language they need to express themselves, they don't want to stand out from their peers if their peers are not speaking in the target language, or there isn't always sufficient motivation to speak in the target language. This paper will explain how the authors went from struggling with these issues in their classrooms to recognizing the motivation behind students' behavior. The authors will explain five steps that will create an environment in which it is comfortable and motivating for the students to stay in English during the entire class.

多くの先生達が、教室の中で英語だけを使う事が生徒達の為になると感じていたけれど、しばしば、全員が同じ言葉を使っている人たちが英語だけを教室で使うのは難しいと感じていた。理由のうちのいくつかは、生徒達は母国語を話している方が快適、又、自分たちには言いたい事を十分に言える語彙が無いのではないかと考え、英語が母国語ではない仲間達と違って見られたくないと思う。そして 英語を使う十分な動機は常には、無い。

One of the great debates in English as a Foreign or Second Language education is whether classes should be conducted solely in the target language, or if some use of the students' L1 is an effective learning tool. There are currently several schools of thought that believe conducting lessons in English as much as possible is desirable because there is a definite relationship between comprehensible input in the L2 and proficiency (Krashen, 1985). In Japan, many EFL teachers express a desire to conduct all-English classes because they realize that "monolingual teaching with authentic communication in the L2 [is] the best way to learn a language" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 169); and they realize that their students get little exposure to English outside the classroom "so it is very important that L2 use

is maximized in the classroom” (Nation, 2003, para. 6). However, the social structures of Japanese culture often create large obstacles and teachers trying to implement an all-English policy find themselves fighting an uphill battle.

Having taught at an Intensive English Language Program (IEP) in the U.S. prior to teaching in Japan, we knew it was possible to conduct ESL classes solely in English. In the IEP, classes were not linguistically homogeneous, so English was the common language. In order to complete tasks and activities, students had to use English. Even the lowest levels of students were able to successfully work and negotiate in English, not only during activities, but in the downtime between activities as well, which is often where the best use of authentic language occurs (Martin, n.d.).

We believed we could create a similar all-English situation in our monolingual university classes in Japan. However, it wasn’t long before we encountered the same obstacles that many teachers before us had faced. Jon Leachtenauer recalls one class in particular.

The students were doing a survey activity in which they were walking around the room interviewing various students. As I listened, I heard mostly Japanese. Many students were asking the questions in Japanese and they were also answering in Japanese. I was frustrated at the lost opportunity for English practice and irritated that the students did not seem to realize that the point of the activity was not acquiring the correct answer, but practicing their English. At the end of class, a student approached me and said she was also frustrated that many students were speaking Japanese and implored me to make them speak English.

When faced with this scenario, many teachers try the heart-to-heart talk method. When students are using a lot of Japanese, the teacher stops the activity and addresses the class, asking them why they are in the class. The answer: to study English. The teacher reminds the students that if they want to improve their English, they must use it and this class is their chance to do just that. Often the students will respond positively and for a time, they will speak in English. However, it isn’t long before the students slip back into Japanese for the majority of the time and the teacher is again frustrated and discouraged.

So, how do we get Japanese students to speak only in English? To answer this question, it is important to understand some of the cultural influences and pressures that make it difficult for Japanese students to speak English in class. First of all, the Japanese education system stresses providing the correct answer. This fosters an environment where students are afraid of making mistakes, which is an important element in language learning. In order to improve language skills, students must be willing to make mistakes (McVeigh, 2002, p.103). Also, Japan is a group-oriented society and students spend a considerable amount of time trying to fit in with the immediate social group (p.109). Students’ classroom behavior is geared more towards gaining acceptance by their classmates than improving their language skills. A part of this group mentality includes the idea that everyone is the same; being different is not acceptable and no one wants to be ostracized for showing off or standing out, so fairly competent students are often hesitant to speak (p.100 and 155).

It is important for the English teacher in Japan who wants to implement an all-English policy in their classes to understand and work within these underlying cultural structures. Students do not want to be perceived as different, so it is important to establish English usage as the norm; to speak Japanese is to be different. Also, it is important to create a sense of community inside the classroom where every student is a member of the same group with equal rank and social standing. Finally, it is important to create a comfortable learning environment so that a fear of making mistakes does not become a hindrance to learning. Through the course of our time in Japan, we have developed five steps to good classroom management that will provide teachers with the tools to be able to create an all-English classroom.

Step 1: Provide many speaking opportunities

The most important element in creating an all-English classroom is to create an environment where English is always spoken. One of the most important factors in getting students to speak only English in class is providing many opportunities for them to bond so that they are comfortable speaking to each other. We recommend beginning every class with some type of speaking activity. If the activity is connected to the main lesson, that is great, but it is not essential. The purpose of an introductory speaking activity, is to habituate the students to speaking English and also to help them get to know and trust each other.

It may be your experience that it is difficult for Japanese students to talk when you present them with speaking activities. It is true that if students were told to talk for five minutes about their best friend, probably not much

would happen. However, if they are provided with a list of questions to ask, they will be able to successfully complete the task. So, for most speaking activities, it is important to provide students with a set of questions. However, it is also important to let students know that they should not limit themselves to the questions provided. Encourage them to ask several follow-up questions for each provided question. At first, students will not know how to ask follow-up questions, so it is important to demonstrate and practice this the first few times.

If students are not provided with specific questions, make sure the task goals are very clear. For example, ask them to find three things their partner did last weekend. At first, there may be students who finish very quickly. They might report that their partner slept, went shopping, and did homework. Make sure to demonstrate how they can expand their conversation by asking follow-up questions such as, *Where did your partner go shopping?* or *What did they buy?* Teach them to always ask the next logical question and to “go deep” in every conversation. The most important element in getting students to speak is providing them with enough structure to get them started. Once they get used to these kinds of activities, the need for structure diminishes.

Two kinds of speaking activities are pair and group activities. One type of pair activity is an Information Gap in which two students each have a worksheet containing different information. They must ask questions and exchange information to complete the task. One type of Information Gap activity that works well is a partially completed crossword puzzle without the clues. Students must ask their partner for hints in order to fill-in the missing words. Another

type of pair activity is “Find Three Things”. Students must find out three things about their partner, for example, what they did last weekend or their plans for summer vacation. Finally, there are interviews in which students are provided with a list of questions to ask their partner based on a certain theme or grammatical structure.

Group activities include “Find Someone Who” activities in which students mingle with their classmates to find people who can answer yes to the questions on their worksheet. Another group activity is role-plays. Students are provided with a situation, for example a college party, then as a class, they brainstorm the language necessary to complete the role-play before acting out the situation. Finally, there are surveys. Students write one or two questions on a certain theme, then interview every student and report their results. With all of these activities it is important to encourage follow-up questions so that students generate as much English as possible.

Step 2: Use a daily score system

Step one demonstrates how to begin getting students to speak in English, however, it is often difficult to keep them in English. When we began teaching in Japan, we knew what kinds of activities got students talking, but they were continually slipping back into Japanese once the activity was finished. After attempting several different methods, we realized that the students needed a motivation to stay in English that was stronger than the motivation of being accepted by their peers. This led to our Daily Score System, which is a way to assign students a daily grade based on their participation and English usage.

Before the first class, construct a blank grid on half a sheet of paper. There should be one square for each class day. Once folded in half, the blank side becomes a name card, and the grid side becomes the daily scorecard. On the first day of class, have the students fold the paper in half and write their name in large letters on the blank side. In the four corners, they should write some information about themselves. Next, have students introduce themselves using the information on their name card. Finally, explain to them that you will collect this card at the end of every class. While in the class, they should keep their name cards face up on their desk.

Next, tell students that, while in class, they are expected to speak only English. This means that all activities must be done in English as well as any speaking they do between activities. For example, if they bump their knee on the desk, they shouldn't say “itai”, but “ouch”. Explain that every day they will receive a daily score of 3, 2, 1, or 0 points on their daily scorecard. A score of 3 indicates they participated well, completed their homework and spoke only in English; a 2 indicates they forgot their textbook or didn't participate well in class; a 1 indicates they spoke Japanese or were late; and a 0 indicates they were absent. Point out that speaking in Japanese is almost the same as not being in class, so there is a serious consequence.

The negative consequence of speaking Japanese is an effective deterrent, but if you would like to offer positive reinforcement as well, an effective addition to the 3 point system, is bonus points. Most teachers in Japan have had the experience of asking a question to the class and receiving no response. One way to encourage students to volunteer

answers is by awarding bonus points. Simply write students' names on the board when they answer questions. Each time they answer after the first time put a check by their name. Having their name on the board one time earns them one additional point; two or more times earns them two additional points. This simple technique will have most students participating within days.

The Daily Score technique works for four reasons. First, it establishes English as the norm. Before, if a student was speaking English, they stood out, but now if a student is speaking Japanese they stand out. Students want to fit in, so by changing the norm, you can change behavior. Second, by using a system in which there are negative consequences for speaking in Japanese, it is no longer the students' choice to speak in English. When their friend wants to speak to them in Japanese, the students have a good reason not to; they don't want a low daily score. By the same token, the possibility of winning bonus points adds some positive motivation to speak English. Also, students seem to really care about these daily scores. When students receive their name cards at the beginning of class, the first thing they do is check their score from the previous day and, if there is a mistake, they will be sure to tell you about it. Finally, with this system, the results are immediate; there is no lag time between action and consequence. Whether students have outstanding performance or they have broken the rules, they can see an immediate effect.

Some teachers may worry that use of this system will discourage students from talking at all. For the first few classes, students may be a bit quiet, but they are highly motivated to communicate with each other and once they

realize that they can't speak Japanese, they will speak English. Soon, students don't just do the activities in English, but they chat and fill the time between activities with English as well.

Another concern some teachers express is that they don't want to spend time policing students. They are afraid of creating an adversarial relationship with the students instead of a cooperative one. With this system, it is true that the teacher must be fairly strict the first couple of weeks. Students must understand that you are serious about speaking only English in class and that there are consequences if they do not. Whenever you hear Japanese, you must write a 1 on the student's card. However, it doesn't need to be intrusive; you don't even have to say why. The students know why. It is also important that students understand it is not personal. They spoke Japanese, so they get one point. If you do this consistently in the beginning, soon everyone knows you are serious and they stay in English. It takes a couple of weeks for students to really understand and become used to the system, but after that, they feel much more secure, there is a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom and enforcement is minimal.

Step 3: Assign seats and change the seating frequently

A fundamental classroom management task that every teacher must face is seating arrangements. Along with questions about desk arrangement and mobility comes the question of whether to assign seats or not.

When we began teaching in Japan, neither of us assigned seats. However, the same problems kept occurring. The boys wouldn't sit with the girls; less-motivated students sat in the back; no one sat in the front; and there were always one or two students who were being isolated.

In order to eliminate these problems, we began assigning seats and now overall student performance has improved, and it is easier to maintain an all-English environment. First, there are strong social pressures on Japanese students to fit in with the group. When the teacher assigns seats, it eliminates some of these social pressures. Students don't need to think about where they will sit and how their choices will affect their standing within the group. By assigning seats, an all-inclusive class group is formed that overrides any outside group obligations. Also, by assigning seats, it is easier to mix ability levels. Higher level students can work with lower level students, which benefits both parties. It is often easier for lower level students to understand explanations presented by their peers, and higher-level students can solidify their knowledge of a subject by teaching it to someone else. Finally, assigning seats eliminates the tendency for less-motivated students to sit in the back, where they can disengage from the class. In fact, moving these students into the center of the group can often change their behavior in a positive manner.

We also believe it is important to change seat assignments frequently. In the beginning, if students are partnered with a new person for each class period, or even several new partners within one class period, they quickly develop a strong sense of community within the class. They become comfortable speaking with everyone and this helps them to

stay in English at all times. By changing partners frequently, it is also possible to use the same activity several times. This repetition of language and tasks has been found to help students gain confidence and competency while developing their language skills (Brown, 2000). Finally, there are times when two students can't work together, but if everyone knows that the seating arrangement will soon change, it doesn't have to become an issue.

A technique that we have developed for assigning and changing seats is to use a bag that has two sets of alphabet blocks in it. One way the letters can be used is to assign students a seat for the semester. Then, when you want to assign pairs for pair work activities, have students draw a letter out of the bag. They must find the student who has the same letter and sit with them. You could also label each desk with a letter. When students enter the classroom, they draw a letter from the bag and find the corresponding desk. This technique works well because it is random. There is no pressure on the teacher to match students together and students do not have to worry about where they will sit. Also, students really enjoy drawing their seat assignment and discovering where they will be sitting and whom they will be sitting with that day.

Step 4: Provide classroom language

The goal of these techniques is to create a classroom environment where students are encouraged to stay in English as close to 100% of the time as possible. Usually students have no trouble performing activities and tasks in English. However, functional language, like how to ask for information, is often missing from their lexicons, and it is

in these areas that students are often frustrated with their English skills and feel a need to use Japanese. Therefore, by providing students with some basic function questions and phrases, much of their perceived need for Japanese will be eliminated.

An easy way to do this is to identify a short list of common questions and phrases that you would like students to use, such as: *How do you spell ____?*, or *Can I borrow a ____?* Then, construct a simple handout or poster. On the first or second day of class, introduce the classroom language and review the phrases with the students so that they become comfortable hearing and saying them. It is also important to reinforce the phrases with several activities that will encourage their use (Martin, n.d.). For example, have students read a dialogue that utilizes many of the phrases or have students dictate words to each other to practice spelling.

Once the classroom language has been introduced, it is important to reinforce its use throughout the term. Encourage students to use it by pointing to the poster or referring to the handout when they are struggling to ask a question or when they ask a question incorrectly. By simply providing the students with a few phrases and questions, they will be more engaged in the class at all times and be able to stay in English more easily.

Step 5: Be the leader

For many English as a Foreign Language teachers, especially at the university level, it is difficult to take a strong leadership role in the classroom. We often want to approach our students on an equal footing in order to foster a peer-like

connection that will encourage language exchange. However, it is our experience that Japanese high school and university students still need and want their instructors to be leaders; in fact, they appreciate having an instructor who tells them what to do and guides them through the class. Also, for many Japanese students, this could be their first experience with a native English-speaking teacher or a teacher who expects them to speak only in the target language, which could be intimidating at first. However, if students know what to expect and what they must do to succeed in the class, they will follow where you lead them, even if it is unfamiliar territory. Therefore, even though establishing yourself as the leader may seem uncomfortable and unnatural at first, if you want to have a successful, all-English classroom, it is important that your role as leader is clear. If done correctly at the beginning of the term, it will help you create a unified, productive class.

The first step is to set your rules and begin enforcing them the first or second day of class. It is important to do this early because even a short time without a clear leader can create a power vacuum, which could quickly be filled by the socially powerful students. Also, without clear direction in the beginning, students could quickly fall into classroom patterns and habits that are more familiar (Martin, n.d.).

Next, it is important to begin and end class clearly. Students must be able to determine exactly when the all-English rule has begun. The same is true for the end of class. Students need to know when it is safe for them to speak Japanese. One method is using a phrase such as ‘Good Morning’, which students repeat back, at the beginning of class and another phrase at the end. This creates a safe period

of time on either end of the class where students can clarify questions or activities in Japanese if they need to.

Another common mistake that can lead to a loss of control in the classroom is allowing students to talk while the teacher is talking. Unfortunately, many Japanese students come from academic environments where this is allowed. However, in order to gain the students' respect and trust, it is important they understand that when you or other students are speaking, they should listen. If the daily score system is being implemented, use this to discourage students from talking out of turn by lowering their daily score.

Conclusion

Having successfully implemented these five steps in all of our university level classes here in Japan, we know that they are effective in creating learning environments where English is spoken for the majority of the time. However, as teachers, no matter what techniques we choose to implement in our classrooms, we must always keep in mind who our students are and what their needs are. We must monitor not only their behavior and progress in the class but also their attitudes. This is especially true when trying to implement an all-English policy. It is vitally important to establish a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom as soon as possible by fostering a strong sense of community and trust between the students and teacher so that the students will cooperate with you. In order to maintain this trust, it is important that if you sense a student is upset, you touch base with that student. For example, if a student is upset that they received a low daily score for speaking Japanese, talk to them one-on-one to make sure they understand why they received

the score they did, and also how to improve their score. This personal touch will foster a good working relationship between you and the students and this, along with the implementation of the management techniques we have described, will allow you to run a successful all-English classroom in Japan.

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Resources

For examples of classroom language, daily grade point card, and other handouts please go to <http://web.mac.com/loranedwards>. (Last accessed May 12, 2007)