

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Developing an international tutor program for conversation classes

John F. Maune

Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College

Reference data:

Maune, J. F. (2008). Developing an international tutor program for conversation classes.

In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

An international in-class conversation tutor (i.e., teaching assistants) program that was funded by a Ministry of Education grant started about three years ago in our junior college English department. The main goal of this program was to provide a stimulating learning environment, and to expose students to English as a world language. The tutors were all advanced ESL speakers from a variety of countries (Kazakhstan, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Poland, and Uganda) and were either spouses of or graduate students at a local university (i.e., Hokkaido University). Teachers, students, and tutors evaluated the program in anonymous questionnaires. The results were overwhelmingly positive.

文部省補助金によって出資された英文科の会話家庭教師(すなわちクラス内でのアシスタント、トゥーター)プログラムは、私たちの短期英文学部では、およそ三年前に始まりました。このプログラムの主な目的は、より刺激的な授業環境を生徒に提供すること、及び世界共通語としての英語に日常的に触れる機会をもつことでした。トゥーター達(アシスタント達)は色々な国(カザフスタン、ネパール、ナイジェリア、フィリピン、ポーランド、ウガンダ)からの高度なESLを話す方々であり、また地元の大学(北海道大学)では、大学院生または、その配偶者の方たちでした。このプログラムについて、匿名のアンケートを、生徒や先生、またトゥーターの皆さんにとった所、結果は圧倒的に、これを評価し肯定的なものばかりでした。

In 2001, the Hokusei University Junior College English Department received a Ministry of Education grant for special English education. The grant was awarded based on various long running programs in the English department (e.g., content based courses in English, see Maune, 1997), but in addition, it was used to fund various new programs. The international tutor (or in-class teaching assistants) program was one such new endeavor.

Reasons for starting the program

The main reasons for starting the program were to create a more realistic international classroom environment to stimulate and motivate students, expose the students to English as a global language, and to provide the students with more individualized feedback. Many of our students study English in order to communicate with foreigners in Japan and abroad (yearly survey results), so creating an international classroom environment with a more global perspective (Holliday, 1994, and Dyer & Bushell, 2004) should stimulate and motivate the students to improve their language skills (Fink, 2003). The students would invest (Churchill, 2002) more time to better communicate with the tutors.

In addition, we wanted to expose our students to English as a global language. The tutors would provide real examples of English as an International Language (EIL) (Jenkins, 1998) outside of the majority image of English as being of Britain, Australia, and North America (BANA) (Holliday, 1994). Finally, using tutors in class would allow students to receive more feedback than a single teacher could provide.

Starting the program

The tutor positions were open to any qualified English speakers (i.e., Japanese and BANA nationals), but the vast majority of applicants were either Hokkaido University foreign graduate students, or their spouses.

Only six tutor positions were available, and applicants far exceeded that number. Applicants were screened based on their written correspondence, brief phone interviews, and

then the best qualified were chosen following an interview. The first six tutors were composed of three women and three men from Cambodia, Nepal, New Zealand, Poland, The Philippines, and Uganda.

Tutors were briefly trained, but all of them had been teaching English in various situations. Training consisted of teachers relating their classroom experiences to the tutors such as problems encountered in the classroom and possible solutions. One major point was that the tutors try to share their time equally among the students. As seen in Question 6 in the questionnaire below, their time allocation was successful.

A brief explanation of the classes

Hokusei University Junior College English department conversation classes are 45 minutes. Classes consist of about 20 students. First year students have four, and second year students have two conversation classes each week. A first year student will have three or sometimes four teachers a week, while a second year student will have two teachers a week. This system has been used for about 20 years. A brief example is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Weekly Schedule

Conversation class	M	T	W	Th	F
	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher
First Year	A		B	C*	B
Second Year	X			Y*	

Note: * plus three tutors

Each year the schedule changes so that first year students will have conversation classes four times a week, and second year students twice a week. Tutors are assigned to classes based on how they can participate in consecutive classes. Whenever possible during the first two years of the program, tutors were assigned to classes taught by full-time teachers. This was in order to more easily monitor the new program and work out any problems without having to hold extra meetings (i.e., unpaid) with the part-time teachers.

English Lunch with the tutors

English Lunch was started more than 10 years ago. Student participation is voluntary, so students can choose to join a different teacher each day of the week during lunchtime in a room near the cafeteria. The goal of English Lunch is to provide the students with an informal setting where they can use their English skills outside the classroom. Students are encouraged to talk amongst themselves or with the teacher in English.

Shortly after the tutor program was started, tutors were included in English Lunch. Each day both a teacher and a tutor are present at English lunch. The English Lunch room has a few tables, so there is a tutor's table, and a teacher's table. Students freely choose where they want to sit.

Evaluation

The program was evaluated three ways: (1) informal discussions with teachers, tutors, and students as the program progressed, (2) a qualitative year-end round table discussion between teachers and tutors, and (3) a quantitative year-end questionnaire for students and tutors.

At the beginning of the program, teachers, tutors, and students were asked their opinions about the program. Teachers were very enthusiastic about how the classroom changed with the tutors. Students were also very positive, but the tutors wished that the students would be more serious about their English language learning. Very soon after the program was started, many teachers who did not receive tutors expressed their dissatisfaction. This indicates that the teachers who had tutors in their classes were speaking favorably about the tutors with other teachers who had no tutors.

With the exception of one tutor the first year, the tutors have all been very accomplished and highly motivated English as a second language (ESL) speakers. They are an excellent resource for getting feedback about how to improve the conversation classes.

Therefore, at the end of the second and third years of the program, an informal year-end roundtable discussion/party was held. It was a way for the tutors to share their ideas about the conversation classes. The tutors did provide many useful ideas, which were made into a list and circulated among the teachers. Some of the ideas were implemented in the classroom the following year. The discussion/party allowed English Department teachers not working with the tutors to get a chance to meet them. It was also a way to say thank you to the tutors for job well done, with pay and free food.

Each year the students were given questionnaires about the tutor program. It consists of six questions. The questionnaire is completed during final exam week, which is a few weeks after classes have finished. The results have always been

about the same from year to year, and between first year and second year students.

The questionnaire results indicate the tutor program was a success in the students' eyes. The most surprising result was that so many students thought the program was successful and wanted the program to continue (Question 1), but they were less sure that their English ability was benefiting (Question 6), or even that classes with tutors were more enjoyable or not (Question 5). It is easy to imagine students having lower confidence about their own English progress, and perhaps talking with the tutors was somewhat stressful for some students. That about 30% of the students had no opinion, and 10% disagreed with Question 5 might reflect positively on how teachers are running their classes. Whatever the reasons, the results were overwhelmingly positive.

Conclusion

The international conversation tutor program was started more than three years ago and has been an apparent success. The students have experienced English as a global language first hand just by going to class. Interacting with the tutors gave meaning to countries that many students were ignorant of, and motivated the students to better communicate in order to better understand about the tutors' cultures.

English is now spoken by more non-native than native speakers of the language (Jenkins, 1998). However, our students seem to focus on the NA of BANA (i.e., North America), and to see English outside NA as less authentic. The tutors pronunciation and word usage is definitely not standard American TV news speak, but rather representative of an evolving world language. Such variations challenged the students, and stimulated them to more actively participate in the lessons.

Table 2. Questionnaire results

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Blank answer
	%	%	%	%	%	%
1. Do you think the tutor program was successful?	32	50	15	1	3	0
2. Do you think the tutor program should continue?	36	46	13	2	3	0
3. Do you think the tutors were used effectively in class?	32	46	15	4	3	1
4. Did each student have equal chance to speak with the tutors?	29	52	11	5	1	2
5. Did you enjoy classes more with the tutors than without?	33	31	27	6	3	1
6. Did the tutors help your English speaking skills?	20	44	26	6	4	1

Note: results of 113 first-year students

The tutors were not identified as teachers, so the students assigned them a status less than a teacher. Students could then more easily interrupt a tutor when something was not understood, and use Useful English (e.g., *I don't understand, please say it again more slowly*). Often, students are not willing to admit to the teacher that they did not understand something, but they could with the tutors. The title of teacher sometimes raises a wall that students can cower behind—students seemed to perceive the tutors as less sacrosanct beings than teachers.

The tutors were all excellent role models who the students could view as fellow ESL students of English—again not true for teachers. This theme was used in one class, with students asking various questions to the tutors about how to best improve various English skills. Each tutor had different ideas, but being real live ESL success stories, the students listened earnestly.

Cultural exchange took place naturally from the first time the students met the tutors. This theme was present throughout the year, and was utilized in-class. There was one chapter in the first year text relating to Japanese culture. The students enjoyed teaching the tutors about Japanese culture. This was easily turned around to have students questioning the tutors about their respective cultures. It was a kind of armchair travel that was very educational and stimulating.

As the grant that has funded the program is running out this year, another grant has been applied for to continue the program. This year the program will continue with school funds whether or not the new grant is approved. However, if new funds are not found for next year, the program will be discontinued. That means that the conversation classes

would continue as they always have—about 20 students and a teacher. However, it is hoped that the program will survive.

John F. Maune teaches ESL and Life Science in the department of English at Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College in Sapporo. He is interested in many things including evolution, Shakespeare, and mountain biking. <maune@hokusei.ac.jp>

References

- Churchill, E. (2002). Interview with Bonny Norton for The Language Teacher. *The Language Teacher* 26 (6) 3-5.
- Dyer, B., & Bushell, B. (2004). World issues or a global perspective. *The Language Teacher* 20 (11) 10-18.
- Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Holliday, A. (1994). Student culture and English language education: An international perspective. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 7 (2) 125-143.
- Jenkins, J. (1998). Which pronunciation norms and models for English as an international language? *ELT Journal* 52 (2) 119-126.
- Maune, J. F. (1997). Teaching life science in English to second year English majors at Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College. *Journal of Hokusei Jr. Col.* 33, 51-57.