

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Teaching English conversation at a factory

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## Reference data:

Peterson J. A. (2008). Teaching English conversation at a factory.  
In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Many manufacturers in Japan provide English training to their staff. However, for the most part, the instructors providing the training are not on-site, and teach only a few hours a week at the company. In this article, I propose eight guiding principles for maximizing the effectiveness of these lessons, focusing on the natural information gap that exists between the student and the English instructor.

日本の多くの製造業では、雇用者に対して英語の授業を行っています。しかし、英会話の講師はその製造業に常勤してゐるわけではなく、外からきて週数時間だけ教えるというケースがほとんどです。このレポートでは、生徒と英会話の講師の間に生まれるインフォメーションギャップに焦点をあて、英語の授業を最も効果的にするための8つのガイドラインについて提案しています。

**M**y early days as an unskilled and untrained English conversation teacher were characterized by missed opportunities. I would sit in a room for several hours each week with various experts – doctors, news reporters, rice farmers, factory workers, or even a sake maker – and I would ask questions such as, “How was your weekend?”, “Do you like Sumo?” or “What time did you go to bed last night?” Despite spending hours in the company of very knowledgeable people, I consistently missed opportunities to learn what they knew and my students missed opportunities to discuss topics that would really challenge their English communication skills.

Now that I am responsible for improving the English training program at a factory where I work, I frequently reflect on these early teaching experiences.

What do successful and unsuccessful English conversation instructors do differently?

How is communication in a typical English conversation class different from authentic business communication?

What simple things can inexperienced instructors do to enhance learning in their classes?

Reflecting on these questions I created a list of eight guiding principles to help new English instructors improve the effectiveness of their conversation classes. While my focus is on teaching English at a factory, the principles could be applied to other teaching contexts.

### Eight guiding principles for improving English conversation classes

These eight guiding principles are to be viewed as a whole. There is nothing original about each individual principle. Many of the ideas come from observing experienced instructors in one-on-one conversations. Other ideas come from the business world. What questions do Japanese managers ask their staff? What questions do foreign visitors ask their Japanese hosts? How do Japanese professionals with a limited English ability actually communicate with their foreign counterparts on important business topics?

The teaching approach I am advocating can be summarized as follows. Recognize that there is a large natural information gap between you and your students. Become a good interviewer and interview your students with a purpose. Don't interview to practice English. Interview your students to learn and truly understand what they know for this accurately simulates real business communication.

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand this approach is to view the complete opposite. The conversation below is contrived and somewhat exaggerated. However, it is not unlike some of the classroom conversations I have observed or even participated in.

*Teacher:* What do you do?"

*Student:* I'm an engineer.

*Teacher:* Oh, really. Do you like your job?

*Student:* Yes, it's very interesting.

*Teacher:* What time do you start work?

*Student:* 8:00.

*Teacher:* What time do you finish work?

*Student:* 5:00.

*Teacher:* What do you like to do after work?

*Student:* Watch TV.

*Teacher:* How about weekends?

*Student:* I like skiing.

I call this kind of conversation "skipping stones". The instructor strings together a sequence of questions that bounces off the surface of several different topics. None of the topics are probed very deeply. In fact, the instructor is probably not very interested in the information obtained from this exchange. This kind of conversation does not simulate real business communication nor does it challenge a student's language ability. Lessons of this sort are unmotivating, not just for the student, but for the teacher as well.

The approach that I am advocating is based on two ideas. First, when instructors try to learn and truly understand what their students know they are simulating real business communication. Second, when instructors listen deeply

to what their students say and ask for clarification when needed, they are negotiating meaning, and this negotiation of meaning is thought to be beneficial to language learning. (Long & Porter 1985 p. 214, Ellis 1994, p 260). The eight guiding principles of this approach are as follows.

### ***Principle 1: Recognize the size of the information gap***

The gap in information between any two people is often huge, but it is also hidden. It takes good interviewing skills to truly understand the depth and the breadth of the gap and it takes even deeper communication to narrow the gap. Keep the following in mind.

#### ***Don't assume that you understand***

As Scollon and Scollon (1995) write, language is ambiguous. "...In order to communicate we must always jump to conclusions about what other people mean" (p. 10).

When a student says, "I'm an engineer" an image comes to mind about what an engineer is. In a conversation we typically move on without questioning these images. Yet, is our image accurate?

In observing experienced and inexperienced instructors, I have reached one striking conclusion. Experienced instructors don't move on so quickly. They question their most basic assumptions. For example, the engineer is asked, "What are your main responsibilities?" or "Tell me about a project you are working on right now." When a student says, "I make camshafts", experienced instructors respond with, "What is a camshaft?"

In contrast, inexperienced instructors are more likely to "skip stones". The engineer is asked "What time do you start work?" or "Do you like your job?"

In every conversation you will hear hints about the information gap. The basic advice here is to always question your own knowledge and to avoid making assumptions. If a student makes camshafts, ask yourself if you truly know what a camshaft is. Do you know its size or purpose? Do you know how it is made? Could you draw a picture of it? If not, the best follow-up question – the one that will lead to the most discussion – is, "What is a camshaft?"

#### ***Recognize that people make decisions***

Recognizing that people make decisions may seem to be an obscure or obvious point. However, recognizing the decisions your students make and why will help you appreciate the depth of the information that they have. You quickly learn about the alternatives your students consider and the costs and benefits of each alternative.

To provide a real example, one of my students reported that she did Japanese archery. We started talking about equipment. A simple question of "how did you decide which bow and arrows to buy" led to a very detailed explanation about the different types of bows and arrow and the characteristics of each type.

Discussing the reasons behind decisions is very common in the business world. "Why did you choose this method?" is a frequently asked question at the factory where I work. Similarly, Masao Nemoto, the former president of the auto parts maker Toyota Gosei, required his staff to answer the

question, “Why was this theme chosen?” when explaining improvements made to their work areas (p. 78, 1987).

For the English instructor, asking students about the choices they make leads to extensive discussion and this discussion simulates real business communication.

### **Principle 2: Ask “good questions”**

When I first started teaching, I thought I had to ask “intelligent questions” or have “intelligent opinions”. To avoid embarrassment I avoided asking questions, which might display my ignorance. I would wonder, but I would not ask. And then I came across the proverb, “*The fool wonders, the wise man asks*”, and I felt impelled to change my strategy.

Business professionals are trained to ask good questions and the strategies presented here are largely from the business world but also, as I have observed, practiced by experienced instructors. In general, I use three question strategies, general to specific, why-why, and 5WH.

#### **General to specific**

This is a fairly straightforward strategy and usually my first step. You start with very general questions and then go deeper and deeper. To illustrate with an example, if a student says, “I make camshafts”, I might ask a sequence of questions like this:

1. What is a *camshaft*? (Please draw a picture.)
2. What is its purpose?

3. How does it work?
4. Are there different types?
5. How is each type different?
6. How do you make it? (Please draw a picture.)
7. What is the biggest problem you have making it?
8. What is the key point for quality? Reducing cost?
9. How has this device changed in the last 10 years?
10. How will it change in the future?

This sequence of questions, going from general to specific, can be used to ask about most products. Of course, questions will be added, deleted or changed depending on the direction the conversation takes. Similar sequences of questions can be used to ask about other topics. Factory visitors, in my experience, frequently start discussions by asking questions using the phrase, “What kind of ...?” For example, visitors might ask, “What kind of training programs do you have?” or “What kind of visual management systems do you have?”

The key point for the English instructor is to start wide. Make sure you understand the basics before you delve deeper.

#### **Why-why**

Why-why analysis, also called 5-why analysis, is frequently used by industries as a method for identifying the cause of problems such as machine failures. Basically, a series of why questions are asked until the source of the problem is found (Japan Institute of Plant Maintenance, 1996). To illustrate, a Japanese manager might use why-why analysis like this.

Problem: The forklift is not running.

1. Why? The battery was not charged
2. Why? The forklift was not plugged into the recharger.
3. Why? A freshman worker did not plug it in.
4. Why? He did not know that he was supposed to.
5. Why? He did not receive appropriate training.

Solution: Improve freshman training

While why-why questions are usually used for problem solving, English instructors can use why-why questions to probe any topic.

### 5W1H

The 5Ws are what, who, when, where and why and the 1H is how. While it might seem that this should be the first questioning strategy, for me it is usually the last. If I think about 5W1H too early in the conversation, my sequence of questions is like skipping stones, never probing any topic very deeply.

Of course, when going from general to specific I am asking 5W1H questions, particularly “what”, “how” and “why”. However, I consciously think “5W1H” only when I am ready to change topics. It reminds me what topics I have not yet discussed. For example, after discussing “What is a camshaft?”, I might change direction by asking “where”, “when” or “who”.

1. Where does the material for this part come from? Where do you make this part? How much space do you need? Where does this part go after you make it?
2. When do you make this part? Do you make it continuously or do you make it in lots (batches)?
3. Who makes this part? How many people? Do they have special training? Who checks this part’s quality?

To conclude, the purpose of asking questions is not to ask questions. The purpose is not even to practice English. The purpose is to learn what your students know. And with this purpose in mind, ask the questions that you need to ask.

### Principle 3: Listen deeply... Learn ...

#### *Remember what people say*

In order to ask good follow-up questions, you need to listen to your students and remember what they say. Take notes. Use information obtained in one class in your next class. The goal is to continually challenge your students with deeper and deeper communication. The only way you can do this is to actually learn what your student is teaching you.

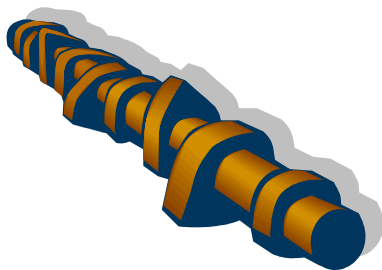
#### *Evaluate communication according to how much you learn*

Your student is an expert. You are likely a non-expert. In real business communication, experts must be able to make themselves understood, not just to other experts, but to

non-experts as well. You probably cannot simulate expert-to-expert communication, but you can simulate expert to non-expert communication. Evaluate the effectiveness of your student's communication based on your ability to understand. If you can't understand what your student is saying, then give your student feedback. Either your student is overestimating your knowledge or communication is breaking down because your student lacks the language skills necessary.

#### ***Principle 4: Allow students to use props and other conversation support***

Some topics are very difficult to explain. Give your students time to draw a picture or plan what they want to say. If a student says, "I make cam shafts?" ask them to draw a picture of a camshaft and explain what it is. Figure 1 shows a picture of a camshaft. It would be very difficult to describe this device or explain how it works without using a diagram.



**Figure 1. Camshaft**

Basically, I allow students to do anything that helps communication. This includes using dictionaries, gestures, drawing pictures or taking time to plan their communication. I discourage activities that tend to hinder English communication, such as switching into Japanese or relying too much on dictionaries.

#### ***Principle 5: Get everyone involved***

Perhaps you have assumed that these principles only apply to one-on-one lessons. Not so. I follow the same principles with small groups. However, with multiple students I do more group work and I keep the following in mind.

#### ***Recognize the information gap between students***

There are two points to keep in mind. First, don't assume that students know each other. Make sure everyone introduces themselves. Second, don't assume that students who work in the same factory have the same information. Different students have very different jobs: purchasing, quality control, design, human resources, assembly or maintenance. One side benefit of your English class is that students from different sections are gathered together in one room and can communicate together and learn from each other.

#### ***Have students ask each other questions***

Don't ask all the questions yourself. Have students actively involved in asking questions. Japanese workers are often trained to ask specific questions and managers often have

specific questions, which they ask their staff. As a result, your students often know the best questions to ask. I have learned several great questions from my students which I now use frequently. Among them are:

1. What is the biggest problem you are facing *with this project*?
2. Why did you choose this method?

These two questions lead to extensive responses.

### ***Principle 6: Know when to delve deeper; know when to move on***

Be perceptive. First, don't miss opportunities for deeper communication. Recognize the information gap and try to narrow it.

Second, avoid pursuing topics that your students don't know about. As an inexperienced instructor, I frequently chose topics based on the type of company my students worked at. For example, I would choose car topics for students at car companies, and would then try to get these students, whether they be from the human resources section or the paint shop, to teach me exactly how a hybrid engine works. They didn't know. Clearly, my discussions would have been much deeper if I had asked the person from the paint shop about how cars are painted or the person from human resources about recruiting, freshman training or staff evaluation. Let your students guide topic choice.

Third, if communication breaks down, know when to give up. Some topics may be beyond your student's language ability. Either give up the topic completely, or give your student a few days to prepare.

Finally, save something for next class. A student responsible for making car doors might say, "The door panels are spot welded". With this very simple sentence, two large topics have been introduced: "What is a door panel?" and "What is spot welding?" Why not save one of these topics for next class?

### ***Principle 7: Do your own research and use it in class***

The Internet is an incredible resource. It can be used to study topics on your own or sources can be taken from the Internet and brought to class. If a student says "camshafts" during class, look it up after class. Wikipedia.org is a great website with information on almost any topic. The animations and pictures that you will find there can be freely copied as long as you cite your source. If you copy the animations into PowerPoint, they will be fully animated in slideshow view. Bring a notebook computer with the PowerPoint file to class and just ask your student, "What is this?" Often it takes less than five minutes to prepare this kind of activity, but your student's explanation could last for thirty minutes or more. Further, the PowerPoint slides can be used for future classes.

### ***Principle 8: Keep the purpose in mind: Learning English***

In this article I have recommended a kind of role reversal. The student is the teacher, and the teacher is the student. However, at this stage it is important to keep the real purpose of these eight principles in mind: learning English.

### *Write vocabulary on the board*

Throughout your conversation difficult vocabulary will come up. Write it on the board in an organized manner and give students time to copy the vocabulary into their notebooks.

### *Give feedback*

Take notes during the conversation and keep track of grammatical or word choice problems. I usually give minor feedback during the conversation and more extensive feedback at the end of the conversation.

### *Use the contents of the conversation to identify needs and plan future lessons.*

These conversations will help you truly understand the English needs of your students so that you can prepare future lessons and the lessons that you plan will be more realistic because of the information that you have learned.

### **Conclusion**

This approach, striving to learn and truly understand what your students know, is just one tool that can be used for improving the effectiveness of business conversation classes. Among the benefits, this approach leads to a deep negotiation of meaning that promotes language learning and simulates real business communication. It is a simple method that can be used successfully by inexperienced and experienced instructors. In addition, the information obtained from these conversations can be used to identify student needs and plan future lessons.

However, perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of this approach is that both the instructor and the student benefit. While the student is learning English, the English instructor is being apprenticed in a wide range of business skills. There are very few jobs in this world, which can provide this kind of opportunity for learning.

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