

# How to Make Students More Active in English Class

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Although most of the freshmen in college want to improve their speaking skills in college English education, it is challenging for teachers to activate an English-speaking class. The presenters assume that there are three main obstacles that hinder many students from speaking actively in English class. First, students feel anxiety about speaking English. Second, they lack the experience of creating output in English, although output is as inevitable to acquire a second language as input. Third, there is a gap between the students' cognitive levels and their English proficiency levels. We suggest that we can make an English class more active by using various tasks and activities to effectively deal with these problems. This article shows three examples of tasks and illustrates how they are used in classrooms.

大学の新生のほとんどが英語を話せるようになりたいと思っているにもかかわらず、英語教師にとって活気のあるスピーキング授業を実現することは意外に難しい。発表者は、クラスで積極的に英語を話さない学生が多いのには3つの主な理由があると考えます。まず、学生が英語を話すのに不安感を持っていること。次に、第二言語習得にはインプットだけでなくアウトプットが必要であるにもかかわらず、学生には英語でのアウトプットの経験が不足してい

ること。そして、学生の認知レベルと英語力のレベルにギャップがあること、である。そこで発表者は、これらの問題に対処するために様々なタスクやアクティビティを有効に取り入れることによって授業を活性化できるのではないかと提言する。本稿はタスク3例を紹介し、実際にクラスでどのように行うかを説明する。

A lot of freshmen at our college would like to improve their English speaking skills. Despite their wish, they often realize speaking English is not as easy as they had expected. The presenters believe that there are three reasons for their struggles, other than the obvious reason that they lack sufficient vocabulary or grammar knowledge to communicate in English. First, students feel anxious about speaking English and do not find their classroom environment comfortable enough to speak in English. Second, they lack adequate experience in producing output in English, although output is as necessary as input to acquire a second language. Finally, there is a gap between the students' cognitive levels and their English proficiency levels, and students often get bored with the simple topics that are frequently adopted in English speaking classes, such as family, food, shopping, etc. We believe that we can make English classes more active by using various tasks and activities effectively to deal with these problems.

To tackle the first problem, students' anxiety, we use tasks that would help build friendly relationships between the teacher and students or among students.

(Task 1, shown below, is an example of this kind of task.) Creating a non-threatening, friendly classroom environment helps give students a positive experience with English learning and minimizes students' anxiety.

The second problem, students' lack of speaking experience, will naturally be eased if students have as many chances for producing output as possible. When we give them opportunities to speak in English, there are some points we keep in mind. First, we have students try to express ideas in their own words, and then give them feedback, instead of just having them memorize model expressions. As Swain and Lapkin (1995) argue, it is very important to have them go through a syntactic process and be aware of their linguistic problems in language learning. Another point is that we should plan lessons carefully so that students can learn through a step-by-step process. We start with simple tasks, such as easy games like "Find someone who..." or "Famous person", then move on to more creative and complicated tasks, such as role-play type activities. Finally, we introduce tasks that require students' natural talk without preparation, such as free conversation or impromptu short speeches. (One of role-play type activities is shown below as Task 2.)

To fill the gap between the students' cognitive level and their English proficiency level, we sometimes give them challenging tasks such as speeches, presentations, and debates. If we help them appropriately, many

students manage to do these challenging tasks which stimulate their intellectual interest. (An example will be reported below in Task 3.)

In our presentation, 20 tasks were illustrated in our handout and four tasks were actually demonstrated. This article introduces three tasks that seemed quite effective in our English classes.

### Task 1: Seating arrangement

#### *Purpose*

In order to create a non-threatening, friendly classroom environment, teachers should remember students' names as soon as possible. This activity helps students know each other by having them ask each other questions, and also helps the teacher easily remember each student's name and avoid the situation where most of the students sit in the back of the classroom.

#### *Procedure*

1. Give each student a card on which a question in English is written. The questions would be the ones you would ask when you meet someone for the first time, such as 'Where are you from?' or 'Where do you live?'
2. Students ask their first partner the question on their card and answer their partner's question as well. After that, students exchange the cards, find another partner, and continue doing the same

thing until the teacher tells them to stop.

3. On the back of the paper, the seating number is written and each student is asked to sit where the number indicates.

#### *Variations*

We can ask students to add one more question to get extra information. We can also write the instructions in Japanese (e.g. '*shumi wo kiku*' meaning 'ask your partner what his/her hobby is') and students are asked to make questions in English.

### Task 2: Role-play based on Japanese cartoons

#### *Purpose*

This task gives students a chance to speak in English based on a given situation and roles. With visual aids, students can understand the situation and roles clearly. By comparing the lines they created and the ones of the English version of the movie, they may become aware of their linguistic problems. Also, by using a movie popular among students, we can attract students' interest.

#### *Procedure*

1. Choose a movie or cartoon that has both Japanese and English versions ('*Majo no takkyubin*' was used in the demonstration).
2. Show the students a short segment of its Japanese version.

3. Divide the students into pairs. Have them translate each line into English.
4. Students practice saying the lines they created.
5. Have each pair say the lines to the scenes as if they were dubbing in front of the class.
6. Show the students the English version of the movie as feedback.

### *Variation*

We also can use a segment of a movie without any sound where two people are talking and have students create an imaginative conversation.

### **Task 3: Presentation in front of international students**

#### *Purpose*

By talking to international students, Japanese students are forced to speak in English naturally as if they were in ESL situations. Through the preparation for this task, students also acquire a lot of linguistic skills such as writing a draft in logical sequence, giving a presentation, listening, question formation, as well as research skills.

#### *Procedure*

1. Students choose topics about Japanese culture, habits, common sense, and so on.
2. Students turn in their drafts to the teacher to get their drafts corrected

3. Students prepare some media such as photos, maps, stuff, and so on, so that the audience can easily understand their presentations.
4. On the day of the presentation, the class is divided into 5-6 groups, and each foreign student listens to their presentations followed by questions and answers and free conversation.
5. International students write feedback and peer evaluation to each Japanese presenter.

### **Conclusion**

In order to activate English classrooms, teachers need to reduce students' anxiety, give them a lot of chances for producing output, and sometimes give them challenging tasks that match their cognitive level. There are various kinds of tasks and activities to achieve these purposes, and we have shown some examples above.

As an empirical study based on statistics has not been made yet, we could not exactly measure or prove to what extent the students' speaking abilities have improved through those activities. Nevertheless, at least students' positive participation was observed in each class, and the class was surely activated to some extent.

## Reference

Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 16(3), 371-391.