

# PAC3 at JALT 2001

Conference  
Proceedings



International  
Conference  
Centre

Kitakyushu  
JAPAN

November  
22-25, 2001

## Maximizing Class Time: Teaching Short Classes of Chinese

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Language teachers struggle to teach sufficient material in decreasing class time. The average contact time of college Chinese classes is now twice a week (Miyamoto, 1993) and each class time has been shortened from two hours to now ninety, and then sixty, minutes. This paper discusses practical strategies, which were developed over three years to help learners engage learning a new language, overcome constraints in conducting short classes, and maximize available class time. Students' evaluations on these strategies are also analyzed and pedagogical implications and suggestions are presented for teachers of various languages to consider adopting in their classes.

語学教師は短くなりつつある授業時間の中で、いかに十分な内容を学生に伝えるか日々苦闘している。大学の中国語課目の授業時間は週2日が一般的で（宮本、1993）、一コマは2時間から現在は90分から60分の間へと短縮されつつある。この論文では3年間の中国語カリキュラムの推移のなかで編み出された実用的な教授法について述べる。この方法論は学習者が新しい語学の学習を始めるのを援助し、また短い授業時間の制約を克服し授業時間を最大限に活用することを目指としている。さらに学習者のこの方法論への評価を分析し、その教育上の意義と提案を付して様々な言語の教育者がこの方法論を自らの授業に取り入れる際の参考とした。

## Background *School and Students*

Kanazawa Institute of Technology (KIT) is a private college of approximately 8000 undergraduate students and 500 graduate students. They are all engineering majors. Their background in foreign language education is mostly for mandatory English study in junior high school and high school. When interviewed, many students expressed their lack of confidence in using English both in speech and in writing. Actually, many of the students registered for Chinese responded that the reason for the study was to avoid taking any more English courses.

## *Language Program*

At KIT, students are required to take English courses for four consecutive quarters (Table 1). Only after finishing English V, are they free to take elective English courses, German I, or Chinese I.

All language classes meet twice a week for sixty minutes each time. One quarter lasts nine weeks; therefore in-class instruction time is eighteen hours per term. Even if students take three consecutive Chinese courses, total instruction time is only fifty- two hours.

*Table 1: Foreign languages courses at KIT*

	Spring term (April-June)	Summer break (July-Aug)	Fall term (Aug.-Nov.)	Winter term (Nov.-Feb.)	Spring break (March)
Freshman year	English (placement) →	*Intensive English (optional)	English I → English II → English III →	English II → English III → English IV →	*Intensive English (optional)
Sophomore year	English III → English IV → English V →	*Intensive English (optional)	Chinese I → German I → More English	Chinese II → German II → More English	*Intensive English (optional)
Junior year	Chinese III German III More English		No further language courses offered		

\*Intensive English courses are held in the United States and in New Zealand.

## *Constraints*

This limited class time poses a significant challenge for an instructor. Students want, and expect to see, concrete results upon the completion of their studies. Some expectations are unrealistic. On before-the-program questionnaires, a number of the students wrote that they want to develop the ability to speak fairly fluently,



hope to travel in China without much trouble, and want to become able to understand Chinese movies. This means the instructor needs to fulfill at least part of these expectations after a mere fifty-two hours of instruction.

Furthermore, the majority of the students have not acquired effective study skills for foreign language study. They have not made vocabulary lists for self-study throughout junior high school or high school, have not used audio tapes, nor do they have a clear idea on how to prepare for classes. In addition, the students do not spend much time for preparation or review. In a fall term in 2001 survey, one-third of the students spent less than an hour per week outside of the class for preparation or review, another one-third spent a maximum of two hours (Kanazawa Institute of Technology, 2000).

Thirdly, as the students expressed a lack of confidence in using their first foreign language, English, they carry a sense of failure. They do not feel that they can succeed in a new language either. This can reduce their motivation and hamper continued study.

### **Maximizing Effectiveness of the Class** *Utilizing break for warm-up*

To overcome the lack of class time, the fifteen-minute breaks between classes can be utilized. The purpose is to make the class easier for students to engage. Students are taking not only the language course but also taking other

courses. When they come to the language class, their thinking is still on other subjects and, most importantly, they are thinking in Japanese. To switch the language mode requires time.

In order to make the transition easier for the students, two strategies can be effective. One is to tell the students that they should try to think in the language as soon as they step out of the previous class. This is in fact the author's personal experience as a graduate student and a teaching assistant of Japanese in the United States. To be required to use three languages - Japanese, English, and Chinese - for work and for study, I tried to switch my mental language mode while walking towards the next class. By the time I reached the class, I was able to start speaking the language required for the class. Many of the students were persuaded by my sharing that experience in the class and started employing this strategy. Greeting and talking to the classmates in the language is also encouraged.

The other strategy is to try coming to the next language class as soon as possible where a language audiotape or CD is played. Students can be exposed to the sound and can mentally prepare to use the language as soon as the class starts. To enhance the effectiveness, a small dictation quiz can be employed to test the students' preparedness for a new lesson. By informing them ahead of time that there will be a quiz for a new lesson and that they are expected to be able to write

down words and sentences in the textbook when read. This encourages the students to focus on listening to the tape or CD.

It is important to let students know at the beginning of the course that the instructor will be there as soon as the previous class is over and will play the audiotape or CD. It takes time for them to get accustomed to the new structure of the class, but young learners are quick to adopt the new habit.

### *Utilizing out-of-class time*

#### *•Code-switching training*

It is also effective to encourage the students to use the language outside of the class with their classmates, with native speakers, and with the instructor. At the beginning, the students are usually quite resistant to using the language outside, but as the course proceeds, with the instructor's persistent attempts to make them talk, they try to greet or respond in the language. It is also very important to explain to the students at the beginning of the course the rationale and the reasons for this code-switching training.

#### *•Tape/CD listening, recording and reflecting*

It is a good idea to distribute a form for the students to record when, how long, and to what they listened in the language. It encourages the students to listen more frequently, and sometimes, create positive competition

among the students. In addition, writing down how they felt while listening helps them become conscious about their listening training skills.

A text with a CD seems to be more effective to promote students' listening development. First, audiotapes are more costly, and even if a school supports them, many students do not come to a language laboratory to listen to them. On the contrary, a CD can be more easily obtained as the students purchase the textbook, and by having the CD individually, the students have no excuse not to listen to it.

However, it is important to let the students understand that the CD is not simply for possession, but for listening. It might even be necessary to ask them to open the package in the class, take the CD out, and actually demonstrate how to use it.

#### *•Language lounge*

If the circumstance allows, it is good to have a language lounge to supplement classes. There, the students and the instructors can freely use the language and discuss cultural issues which are not usually available in class due to time constraints. The place can also be decorated with cultural artifacts, and cultural information may be displayed to enhance the students' awareness.

#### *Teaching study skills*

It is crucial that the students know how to study



effectively in order to succeed. Often, college language teachers assume that the students already possess study skills. However, many students are not very sure how they should prepare for the class and review. Although each student has a different learning style, examples of good learning strategies should be presented for them to choose or modify.

For Japanese speakers, the challenge in learning Chinese lies in the sounds. Familiarity with Chinese characters makes it easier for them to read and to write. However, it is not nearly as easy for them to speak or to listen and understand. For balanced development of the four skills of the language, it is important to really internalize the Chinese sounds. To do so, recitation and dictation of Chinese texts can be very effective. By using the lips, tongue, and other areas of the mouth will promote the development of the brain portion that understands the meaning of the language (Caplan and Dapretto, 2001). I have modified Kunihiro and Senda's (2000) methodology for learning English to learning Chinese. The process is stated in table 2 below.

*Table 2: Preparation steps for each lesson*

1. Pronounce each word in "new vocabulary" in the textbook.
2. Listen to the respective part of the CD to check the sound (listen at least twice).
3. Write the words while pronouncing them and memorize the spelling and the meaning. Be sure to pay attention to the difference in Japanese Chinese characters and Chinese simplified characters.
4. Listen to the CD of the text part without looking at the textbook (listen at least twice).
5. Open the textbook and follow the text while listening to the CD.
6. Read the "summary of the grammatical points" and understand the text.
7. Read the text aloud (at least three times until you can read it smoothly).
8. Write the text while you read aloud (at least three times until you can write correctly).

Listen to the CD and make sure you understand the text thoroughly.

(Right before the class → break period)

Write the new vocabulary and the text sentences while listening to the CD played in class. Make sure you understand the meaning of both the vocabulary and the text. If you have any question, ask the instructor to clarify everything.

The method is discussed and demonstrated in class at least once and more if time allows. This way, the students are given the opportunity to experience it themselves with the instructor's guidance. This helps them to start following the method correctly and with ease. An experiment was conducted in fall term 2001 that two classes of students were given only instruction of this study method and were asked to prepare for a dictation quiz of the first lesson. In the next class, they took the quiz containing five new vocabulary and one text sentence, and then were given the demonstration of each step of the method by the instructor, and asked to follow. The next time they took the quiz, which had different vocabulary and one text sentence different from their first quiz but within the same lesson. The result showed that the case when the students were given only the instruction, they achieved an average 3.42 in Class A and 3.06 in Class B. With the demonstration, Class A achieved 9.15 and Class B, 8.53. This shows the importance of the demonstration and experience.

When the method is presented, it is also important to give the students choices. As discussed before, people have different learning styles. Therefore, the students should have freedom to choose what is suggested, to modify it, or to create their own. I always present this method to my students with the comment that it is merely a suggestion, not a requirement.

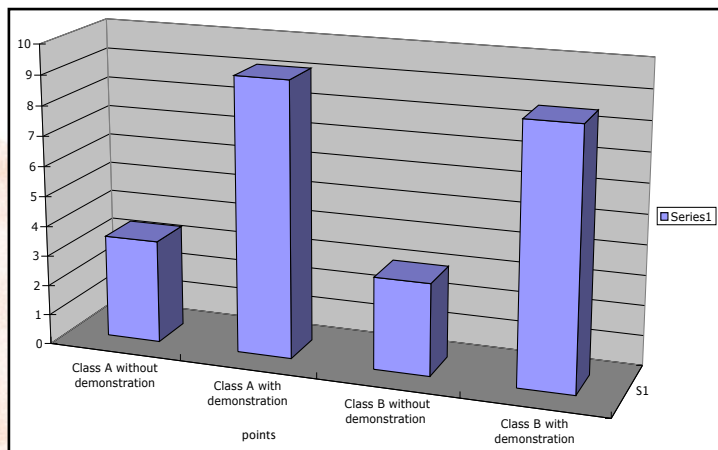


Figure 1: *Study Skills Instruction*

### *Encouragement and Experience Sharing as a Learner*

With the students lacking confidence in learning a new language, it is of utmost importance to give them ample encouragement, by expressions of “very good,” “good job,” “excellent,” by an approving smile, or by a gesture such as nodding. The amount of encouragement the students actually need very often exceeds the instructor's expectation. Therefore, it requires a constant effort for the instructor to encourage students' participation at all times. The instructor also needs to show that it is all right to make any kind of mistakes and that it is a



natural process of language acquisition.

Also, it also works well if the instructor assumes a position as a learner rather than a teacher in order to make him/herself accessible for the students. Telling the students that the instructor is also a learner studying the language just a little ahead of them makes the students easy to feel rapport with the instructor. The students appreciate sharing experiences and difficulties of learning the language in and outside of the class.

### Students' Evaluation

A students' evaluation conducted in fall 2001 showed that the CD playing has proved to be very helpful. Many noted in separate comments that it helped them to recall what they had studied before the class. Many also appreciated the study skills instruction. It was found that the students were quite anxious when they started studying the new language and were not sure what to do or how to study. These students seem to have difficulty applying their previous language learning experience in English to a new language study. However, in previous years, after acquiring these skills some students went on to apply to other language study such as German.

### Implications and Suggestions

There seem to be discrepancies in teacher's assumption on students' language learning and the students' actual thoughts and behaviors. Class time can be stretched by utilizing the break between classes and be maximized by using the CD effectively. Creating an environment within the campus where the learners have to use the language is also helpful to enhance the students' language switching skills.

On learning strategies, the detailed demonstrations are probably needed for many learners even if teachers feel that their students already know them. The demonstrations should be done with the caution that it is a suggestion of a proven method but not a requirement.

Encouragements of various kinds are needed for the students, particularly the students who have not succeeded in foreign language study. The amount of encouragement cannot be overemphasized.

All in all, teachers cannot study for the students. We are here to only help the learners acquire the language of their study. To find out what works for the learners should always be the center of our concern.

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