

An Effective Approach to Oral Work: The Immediate Approach

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Confronted with a university population which generally has low motivation for foreign language learning, especially in terms of oral ability, and with highly unfavorable conditions for teaching, we are faced with the challenge of how we can attract the largest number of students, and then how to maintain their interest in the subject matter.

As one solution, we present a teaching method we have termed 'the instant method'. It is characterized by an 'immediate' evaluation, and the lack of a clear distinction between the presentation of the educational material, practice and the evaluation. This method might be described as one in which each student has responsibility. It focuses on the sense of immediacy inherent to the learning and acquiring of the target language.

日本の大学では、外国語（特にオーラルの）教授にあたり、二つの問題に直面する。一つ目は、多くの学生は外国語（特に第二外国語）の知識を得るのに、あまり意欲的ではないこと、二つ目は、教育環境としても、人数が多すぎる等の点から、あまりいいコンディションではないこと、である。では、どのようにしたら、より多くの学生に外国語に興味を持たせることができるのだろうか。その解答として、“la Methode Immediate” を挙げたい。この方法では、それぞれ一人一人が、すぐその場で自分を評価する。又、学習と実践と評価のはっきりした境界はなく、同時に行われる。この、学生自身に直接関連した方法により、学生は

その場で即座に考え、話す必要があり、言語を学ぶ自分の学習、レベル、姿勢は、学生自身の責任となるのである。

When I arrived in Japan, I was immediately confronted with a relatively new teaching situation. Indeed, the Japanese university class has some unique problems as far as speaking is concerned. With infrequent classes, students with low motivation for regular work as well as study outside of the institution, and for oral participation within the course itself, we have been forced to develop a means to deal with these special conditions. Complicating this picture is the existence of non-major students with an instruction time of only 6 months or one year, three course hours per week. We are challenged to reach the greatest possible number of students, and also to help them profit as much as possible from the learning situation. Which goals should be set? In this paper, I propose some possible solutions, and consider their advantages and also their drawbacks.

Framework and Objectives

I arrived in Japan 4 years ago. I had had about 2 years teaching experience at a private school. Since April 2000, I have been working at Ehime National University. My classes mainly consist of 1st year students (5 classes, about 250 students). Non-major students come from different faculties, including

agriculture, medicine, law and letters, and technology. These students have to take a second foreign language during their first year. With English as their first foreign language, their choice is between German, Chinese, Korean, Filipino (Tagalog) or French. Out of these 5 classes of beginners come two classes of 'majors' (not actually majors, per se, but students who have decided to continue their learning of French) with a heterogeneous class of intermediate or advanced level students coming in their 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year of studies.

The situation imposes certain constraints, forcing the teacher to adapt to his class in order to try and better respond to the problems imposed by the global characteristics of the imposed framework. Large classes, poorly motivated students, and instruction limited by time constraints; these are the factors we have to take into consideration. Which objectives can we then aim at? And what are the means to achieve them?

Directing the teaching to only a very small percentage of the students is appreciated neither by the teacher nor by the learners. Everyone has the impression of wasting his/her time. As a consequence, and in acknowledgement of the general characteristics of the Japanese university classroom, it is preferable to make all of the students speak during the class. More specifically, it is essential to have them speak to each other, because this is the only practical way to involve everyone. The goal is to work with uncomplicated materials, available

quickly and accessible to all. This allows the instructor to devote a maximum amount of class time to speaking and also to make the students responsible for their language learning.

We have thus established immediate conversational objectives. That means:

- establishing a natural conversation centered on the students (in reverse of the immersion method);
- to learn, at the same time, to dare to express oneself directly in the target language—not doing any, or very, little grammar;
- meeting cultural objectives, such as learning to think differently in accordance with a typically French way of conversing.

The Immediate Approach

Development of the Immediate Approach

During the past three years, attempts have been made to systematize this method, which has arisen due to constraints imposed by the Japanese classroom, in order to allow other teachers to apply this methodology here in Japan. In addition, we as a group of teachers met ten years ago and exchanged our points of view and have continued to develop our ideas. We recently created a textbook out of these meetings, called “Conversations dans la classe” (Conversations in class). It consists essentially of structured “pieces of conversation.”

A piece of conversation is a way of presenting

instructional material meant for immediate practice in a conversational exchange.

Generally speaking, the teachers constructed their textbook and their oral pedagogical approach to foreign languages into what they call, quite logically, the immediate approach. Its main characteristics are best explained by the authors themselves: “It is a method of teaching which gives every class the elements of a real communication. This conversation develops face to face between the teacher and one or two students. In every class, the teachers transmit or establish the elements of a conversation in the shape of questions, answers, and reactions to these answers. The evaluation is done in real time. In contrast to many other teaching methods, there is no clear border between the presentation of the textbook, the practice activity and the evaluation.”

In summary, the learning is done through open conversations in every class, where the learners take chances to communicate in the foreign language. The strategies to which they turn to express themselves lead them to create language.

My application at Ehime University

At Ehime University, I have used this method for all of our first year classes. I also use, in certain classes, the textbook “Conversations dans la classe.” My class is divided in two parts. The first part, lasting about 30 minutes, is devoted to the discovery and the group study

of the piece of conversation for the day. The second part, lasting about one hour, is left to the practice and memorization of the textbook and the construction of a conversation between the students, grouped in pairs or groups of four, and the teacher.

The first part, done together in class and meant to treat the new elements, is done relatively quickly. It involves group work with a simple teaching method (adjusted by every teacher), the only necessity being that the class time is always devoted to speaking.

The second part of the class is, in our opinion, even more important. Indeed, it gives the teacher the possibility to systematically and regularly speak face-to-face with each of the students. At the same time, certain conditions necessary for the success of the students talking in the target language need to be met. To achieve this objective, several rules are introduced in the first class. The teacher then makes sure all the group members observe them in every class. This allows for the constant, uninterrupted global evolution of the class.

Let us return to the rules: What are they? The authors of the textbook “Conversations dans la classe” recommend a regular communication test. “Combine the conversation test with a grade. This is often a primary motivation.” In one term, the student has to pass at least 4 tests, and decides himself when he wants to do them. In addition to these 4 mini-tests, there is an additional final test. I personally administer

two mini-tests and one final test. My tests are done in groups (the groups are the same from start to the end). If one member in the group cannot speak, it endangers the whole group. It is not necessary, here in Japan, to explain to the students the responsibility which this entails. The conversation within the group and with the teacher, if he/she intervenes, should be as natural as possible. It should also, for intercultural reasons, be as authentically “French” as possible. The act of speaking, communicating and exchanging information is more important than making grammatically correct sentences. The teacher does not interfere, but merely participates in the exchange. “Keys to help”, such as “Excuse me, I don’t understand,” “How do you say this in French/Japanese?” “Could you repeat this please” are also introduced. As a consequence, a silence longer than 10 seconds jeopardizes the interaction. In short, these rules, which the students have in their possession from the first class on, contribute, on the one hand, to every student being responsible for his/her learning. On the other hand, they help make the conversations as lively and natural as possible.

The topics treated are those which concern the students directly: Their lives, what they do, their wishes, their hopes, their loves, what they like, what they think, etc. The teacher also has to be prepared to talk about her/himself.

Advantages and problems:

Such a teaching method gets everyone involved in oral practice and the immediate utilisation of the language. It makes the students responsible and consequentially motivates them. The immediate approach works with classes of three as well as with a class of seventy. But what appears to us to be the most important are the regular personal contacts which result from this method. The students are eager to know who we are. They have a certain pride and fun in talking with a foreigner in his/her mother tongue. They also have fun in saying who they are. All this motivates them. As far as teachers are concerned, the immediate approach allows them to get to know their students rapidly (their characteristics, wishes, etc.) as well as their class, the group, and its members. In this way, he is also able to activate the class quickly and functionally.

Resources

(1) Research group for French conversation (teachers in Japan)

- Jean-Luc Azra -- Université de Kitakyushu
alma@injapan.net
- Bruno Vannieuwenhuyse -- Université d'Osaka vannieu@lang.osaka-u.ac.jp
- Louis Benoit -- Université d'Osaka
benoit@lang.osaka-u.ac.jp

This leaves the problems of writing, but we are in accordance with Louis- Benoit (2001): “The spoken word is not spoken writing.” Of course, certain parts of the conversation are remembered mechanically, and there is the risk of an unequal work distribution between the students which destabilizes the communication, but the direct relationships between everyone and the teacher reduce such potential problems.

In addition, the teacher should find methods to keep his students autonomous and should have at least some language in common with his class, e.g. to guide the potentially confusing mass of conversations which the practice period may generate. However, from experience and reports of others utilizing this method, this places less stress on the teacher and the students than long silences in the midst of a language course. We highly recommend this method.

(2) Conversations in the Classroom

- Jean-Luc Azra & Bruno Vannieuwenhuysse (1999). *Teacher's manual* Complement to the textbook "Conversations dans la classe" ALMA FRANCE-JAPON, ISBN: 2-9514729-0-0.
alma@injapan.net
<http://www.almalang.com>
- Jean-Luc Azra & Bruno Vannieuwenhuysse (1999-2000). *Conversations dans la classe* Textbook + CD audio. ALMA FRANCE-JAPON, ISBN: 2-9514729-0-1.
[email & URL as above]

(3) The Immediate Approach: Resources

- Jean-Luc Azra, (1999), Faire de la conversation dans de grandes classes peu motivées, *Bulletin des Rencontres Pédagogiques du Kansai*, Rencontres 13 Université d'Osaka, Japon.
- <http://www.lang.osaka-u.ac.jp/~vannieu/lecons/lecons.html>
vidéo: *la Méthode Immédiate en japonais langue Etrangère a l'université Jussieu.*
vidéo: *trois tests de conversation de première année.*

References

Benoit, L. (2001) *Laboratoire d'automne de la Méthode Immédiate*. Osaka University, Oct. 6-7