

Perspectives

Introductory Lessons: Setting the Stage for Communicative Language Teaching in Japanese College English Classes

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This article first discusses the styles of communication common to Japanese and English speakers and some of the difficulties the differing styles may cause. It then suggests ways to provide a safe and protected environment for Japanese learners that allows them to participate fully and naturally in a second language. Activities for establishing a three-part conversation framework comfortable to Japanese college students are given.

この記事は、まず、日本語話者と英語話者に共通したコミュニケーションのスタイルと、異なったスタイルが引き起こすかもしれない困難について論ずる。そして、日本人学習者に、第二言語を使って、十分に、また自然に参加できる、安全で保護された環境を提供する方法を提案する。日本人大学生が抵抗なく参加できる三人の会話の枠組みを作る学習活動が紹介される。

Conversation styles are far from universal—they vary in important ways from culture to culture. Unconscious cultural values condition and shape the communication patterns employed by different peoples. In Japan, for example, “the prevailing social virtues [of] restraint, patience, and modesty [are] in clear contrast to the Western values of self-confidence, decisiveness, and individuality” (Kennedy & Yaginuma, 1991, p. 30). These opposing values give rise to significant contrasts in conversation style.

The conversation pattern typical to English is often compared to a game of ping-pong. The ball is hit back and forth across a table from person to person. If one partner doesn't return the ball (i.e., doesn't fully participate or ask enough questions), the conversation stops. Conversely, if the other partner repeatedly “smashes” the ball (i.e., doesn't give the other person the chance to adequately respond), he or she is

seen as monopolizing the conversation (see Levine & Adelman, 1993, p. 70; Kobayashi & Alter, 1991, p. 17).

The Japanese conversation pattern, on the other hand, is frequently compared to bowling:

Each participant in a Japanese conversation waits politely for a turn and knows exactly when the time is right to speak. That is, they know their place in line. One's turn depends on status, age, and the relationship to the other person. When it is time to take a turn, the person bowls carefully. The others watch politely, and do not leave their places in line or take a turn out of order. No one else speaks until the ball has reached the bowling pins. Answers to questions are carefully thought out, rather than blurted out. In Japanese conversation, long silences are tolerated. (Levine & Adelman, 1993, p. 72)

One of the most effective situational settings for illustrating the English conversation pattern is the ubiquitous Western cocktail party. At these get-togethers individuals initiate, participate in, and terminate a seemingly random series of conversations in an informal, direct, and relaxed manner, moving smoothly from person to person or group to group. Light conversation or "small talk" is the norm, and people seem to chat as easily with complete strangers as with close friends. In the West, all this seems perfectly natural, but as anyone from another culture will tell you, participation in cocktail parties is definitely a learned skill. In fact, the Japanese often have a very different view:

... traveling outside Japan still seems to many Japanese like going on a trek in the jungle. They are convinced of this when they happen upon their first cocktail party (for which there is no Japanese equivalent), an occasion in which a varied assortment as possible of people who have never met before are brought together for no discernible reason. The Japanese wonder if this is not complicating life unnecessarily, rather like playing roulette with people instead of playing with a little ivory ball. It seems very reckless because the results are so unpredictable (and, of course, so eerily fascinating). Cocktail parties seem like a microcosm of Western society: a very noisy forum for people to practice trumpeting their individuality. (Kennedy & Yaginuma, 1991, p. 28)

These socially-conditioned, contrasting styles provoke certain, easily-definable reactions. The Japanese sometimes feel that Westerners are pushy, ask too many questions, don't give a person enough time to answer carefully. Westerners tend to think that the Japanese are overly reserved, excessively polite, or lacking in real opinions. Many Japanese students of English are deeply hurt to discover that they are seen as having no opinions or as being unintelligent. Many Westerners have a

similar reaction when they learn that they are judged as being egotistical, aggressive, or insensitive.

Although it seems to be human nature to make this type of ethnocentric judgment, students should understand that these cultural differences are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad — they are simply different. Language cannot be separated from its cultural context. It is just as important to make students aware of the cultural values that underlie communication, as it is to teach them the specific language structures involved. When teaching English as a second or foreign language, particularly at a college or adult level in Japan, it is essential to provide students with a conversational framework that is appropriate to English. Students need repeated practice in a safe and protected environment so they can begin to feel at home in another cultural context and develop the confidence they need to participate fully and naturally in a second language. This is the underlying premise of this article.

The Conversation Pattern of English

The conversation pattern typical of English can be illustrated in a variety of ways as we have seen above. Levine and Adelman (1993, p. 70) describe it this way: "Each part of the conversation follows this pattern: the greeting and the opening, the discussion of the topic, and the closing and farewell." For the purposes of this article, however, we will redefine this three-part process as follows: (1) greeting; (2) social English (small talk, chit chat, light conversation); and (3) closing

At first sight, this may seem perfectly obvious or even banal, but for native English speakers it is a pattern that we repeat so often in our daily lives that it becomes almost second nature. Social English or "small talk," together with its concomitant openings and closings, also creates a necessary foundation or starting point for building deeper human relations in English. Japanese ESL/EFL students, however, frequently feel ill-at-ease with some of the egalitarian and informal aspects of this mode of communication, and need repeated practice and reinforcement in the classroom to feel at home with it.

Teaching Materials

An overview of ESL/EFL teaching materials on the market today illustrates a relatively uniform approach to this issue. Appropriate language structures and dialogues are generally introduced (or sometimes reintroduced) at intermediate or pre-intermediate levels under such headings as

Meetings and Greetings, Personal Details (*Grapevine*, Student Book 2, Unit 1); Getting to Know You, Greetings and Introductions (*Interchange*, Student Book 2, pp. 2-4); Personal Information, Greetings (*Main Street*, Student Book 3, pp. 4-6). Variations on this theme involve having students work with personal profile charts, application forms giving personal details, filling in customs and immigration forms, etc.

Surprisingly, beyond its use as a warm-up activity or as a means for students to get to know one another and their teacher, there seems to be little recycling and reinforcement of these language structures within a conversational framework that is suitable for English. In the communicative classroom, however, as students move from partner to partner, interacting with others in a variety of ways, they will need to greet one another, exchange information, and close conversations on a regular basis. This three-part framework can be used as an ongoing pattern into which subsequent lessons are embedded, creating the essential foundation for all the communicative activities of an entire course.

Introductory Lessons

The following procedures have been designed for college-level communicative courses in Japan (i.e., 90-minute lessons, approximately 15 lessons per semester, class size variable). They can of course be easily modified for other types of students (e.g., businessmen, housewives) and can be used effectively in both large and small classes. These lessons are based on the assumption that students are starting out with a fairly extensive passive knowledge of English, but with much less communicative competence. This passive knowledge needs to be activated in a way that will allow students to interact naturally in English in (as much as possible) an authentic cultural setting.

There are three main parts to the introductory lessons suggested here. The first involves an exchange of personal information, while at the same time dealing with many of the questions and responses that are commonly used in English during social interaction. The second part introduces greetings and closings to this pattern. The third lesson brings in more depth and variation to the pattern, with subsequent lessons embedding selected functions, notions, and communicative activities within the framework.

The following lessons with their accompanying appendices outline procedures that have been found to be effective in implementing this pattern in the classroom. Many specific details, however, have been left up to individual teachers, who should use strategies and approaches that are compatible with their own particular teaching styles and abilities.

Lesson I

- A. *Preamble*: The opening lesson of a new course is an important time when the teacher may wish to set down clear ground rules, such as staying in the target language (i.e., English only), coming to class on time, regular attendance, seating arrangements, and requirements for testing. Students can then be presented with their first handout, the Personal Information Chart.
- B. *Personal Information Chart* (Appendix 1)¹: This type of chart is commonly found in ESL/EFL textbooks and has many variations; the one presented here seems to suit the needs of college students. The following is an outline of steps that have been found to be effective in using this chart:
1. Whole group work: eliciting personal information questions
 - Working with the group as a whole, the teacher asks students to provide the appropriate question for each of the categories in the column on the left (name, age, place of origin, etc.).
 - When the correct responses are elicited, they are written on the blackboard and students are requested to write them in the appropriate space on the chart.
 - 2 Individual work: responses to the questions
 - Students are asked to write the answers to the questions individually in the next column in short form.
 - 3 Pair work: student to student
 - Working with a partner, students ask each other the questions and write down their partner's responses in the final column.
 4. Whole group work: students to teacher
 - As a windup activity, students ask the teacher any of the questions above.

Lesson II

- A. *Review*:
- By means of, say, a test, game, or contest,, the questions dealt with in the previous lesson can be briefly reviewed. At this point, the teacher may wish to reinforce the idea that these questions are basic to English communication and should be learned by heart.
- B. *Social English* (Appendix 2)²:
- The students receive their second handout which includes the corresponding questions from Lesson I and introduces greetings and clos-

ings as part of the pattern.

- Dialogues (shaded boxes in the appendix) for “meeting someone for the first time” and “closing a conversation” are introduced, modeled, and practiced in pairs until students feel comfortable with the language involved.
- The entire pattern can now be put into practice, with students working in pairs greeting one another, exchanging personal information, and closing conversations. Five to ten minute periods of time are generally adequate, after which students change partners and recycle the whole process. At this time issues involving group dynamics (e.g., movement from partner to partner) and the physical layout of the classroom (e.g., clear pathways between desks) should be addressed.
- The teacher’s role in this lesson is to orchestrate the entire process (a “bell-timer” is often useful for starting and ending conversations), and to circulate throughout the classroom giving feedback and maintaining an English-only atmosphere. At this point, it may also be wise to emphasize that mistakes are OK; what is important is natural communication.
- At varying intervals within this process, the teacher may also wish to stop and present mini-lessons to assist students in areas that involve important cultural differences associated with these language patterns. These issues might include:

handshakes (when and where, what constitutes a good handshake, etc.) • eye contact (always important when speaking English, especially in the West) • the use of names (first names vs family names; names vs titles; Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms; etc.) • the relaxed, direct, and informal nature of English conversation (as opposed to the more formal, indirect Japanese pattern)

- Of importance, as well, is the rhythm or pace of the lesson. There should be a constant flow of students meeting new partners every five to ten minutes, punctuated by short breaks for embedded mini-lessons or feedback to the class as a whole. At the end of this lesson students may be quite tired, but also content in the knowledge that they are participating in an authentic process of natural communication in their second language.

Lesson III

- After reviewing the contents of the previous lesson, students are presented with the dialogue dealing with “greeting a friend or ac-

quaintance." Once this dialogue has been modeled and practiced, students are asked to put it into practice in the three-part pattern of greeting, exchanging information, and closing.

- The framework should now be expanded by introducing information questions (see Appendix 2). For example:

Q "What's your favorite sport?"

A. "Tennis."

Follow-up information questions:

Where do you usually play tennis?

Who do you play with?

Why do you enjoy playing tennis?

How often do you play?

How long have you been playing tennis? etc.

Within this pattern students are now requested to ask at least three information questions to follow up every personal information question they ask.

- Conversation is never a one-way street. After responding to a question, students can be taught to use the follow-up question, "How about you?" to give the interaction a two-way flow.
- Every language makes use of certain listener expressions (back-channeling in English, *aizuchi* in Japanese), in which the listener indicates an interest in what the speaker is saying. Typical examples in English can now be introduced in the form of another mini-lesson.
- Depending on the ability level of the class, variations on the greeting and closing dialogues can be introduced (Appendix 3), as well as some practical language for communicative English (Appendix 4). Sometimes, however, the teacher may wish to delay introducing these patterns until later.

Subsequent Lessons

Subsequent lessons should focus on selected areas chosen by the teacher to enhance students' communicative abilities. These may include various functions, notions, or practical, real-life situations which fall under a broad definition of "communicative language": likes and dislikes, agreeing and disagreeing, giving and asking for opinions, frequency language, inviting, giving advice and suggestions, location and direction, further development of information questions, at a restaurant, on the weekend, etc.

All of these topics can be introduced within the framework suggested above, with students continually greeting one another, exchanging required information or solving given problems, and closing conversations with

different partners at periodic intervals. From time to time the teacher may also wish to allow "free conversation" segments, where students exchange personal information with completely new partners, or simply chat in English with partners who are already friends or acquaintances.

Summary

Every language carries within it certain cultural imperatives that students need to made aware of. In teaching a second or foreign language it is just as important to focus on the cultural values of the target language as it is to teach the appropriate language structures themselves. Presenting a conversational framework that is suitable for English at a beginning stage of instruction, following through with this pattern throughout a course, and targeting specific problems as embedded mini-lessons, within a process that maintains a constant flow of real communication should be one of the goals of effective communicative teaching. As students become aware that they are undergoing some very practical preparation for interaction in English in the real world, they will participate enthusiastically in this process. As language teachers, we will have established a solid basis for authentic communication within our classrooms.

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Notes

1. Appendix 1 originated in a long-forgotten source used by the author many years ago. It has been subsequently modified numerous times and adapted to match the social English questions in Appendix 2.
2. Appendices 2, 3, & 4 are the author's own creation and design. Readers involved in English second language teaching are encouraged to use them freely and adapt them to their own teaching situations.

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Appendix 1: Personal Information Chart

PERSONAL INFORMATION	QUESTION(S)	YOURSELF	PARTNER
NAME			
AGE **			
PLACE OF ORIGIN			
PLACE OF RESIDENCE			
OCCUPATION (JOB)			
COMPANY			
SCHOOL			
MARITAL STATUS ** (CHILDREN?)			
FAMILY			
BOYFRIEND? GIRLFRIEND? **			
HOBBIES / FREE TIME / INTERESTS			
FAVORITE FOOD			
MUSIC			
READING			
SPORTS			
HOLIDAYS / TRAVEL			
HOME TOWN			
PART TIME JOB			
** May I ask you a personal question?			

GREETINGS & CLOSINGS — VARIATIONS

MEETING SOMEONE FOR THE FIRST TIME

NAME

HANDSHAKES

EYE

CONTACT



- A. Hello. My name is _____
 B. Hi. I'm _____
- A. Nice to meet you _____
 B. Nice to meet you too _____

Hello...
 Hi...
 Good morning...
 Good afternoon...
 Good evening...

My name is...
 I'm...

I don't think we've met. My name is...
 May I introduce myself? I'm...

Nice to meet you...
 Pleased to meet you...
 Happy to meet you...
 Glad to meet you ...

A. How do you do?
 B. How do you do?
 [more formal]

GREETING A FRIEND OR ACQUAINTANCE



EYE CONTACT

NAME

- A. Hello _____
 B. Hi _____
- A. How are you?
 B. Fine thanks. And you?
- A. Very well, thanks.

How are you?
 How are you doing?
 How have you been?
 How are things?
 How's it going?

Hello... Hi...
 Good morning...
 Good afternoon...
 Good evening...

Fine thanks.
 Very well, thanks.
 Not too bad.
 Pretty good.
 OK / Allright.

A. Nice to see you again...
 B. Nice to see you again too...

CLOSING

- A. Well, nice talking with you _____
 B. Nice talking with you too _____
- A. See you again.
 B. So long.

See you (again) / later.
 Talk to you again / later.
 So long.
 Take care.
 Good-bye. (Bye-bye.)

A. Have a nice weekend.
 (Have a good day / week / etc.)
 B. Thanks. You too.

COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH

PAIR WORK: USEFUL LANGUAGE

Would you like to start?
Shall I start?

It's your turn.

Let's change.
Let's switch.

SUGGESTING

Would you like to...
Shall we...
Let's...
Why don't we...

CORRECTING

I'm sorry, but that's not quite right.
I'm afraid there's a mistake.
I think there's a problem with ...

ASKING FOR REPETITION

Pardon me? / Excuse me? / I beg your pardon?

I'm sorry, I don't understand.
Sorry, I didn't catch that.

Could you repeat that, please?
Would you mind repeating that, please?
Could you repeat that more slowly, please?

ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION

What does ____ mean?

Did you say ____?
Do you mean ____?
Are you saying ____?

How do you spell that, please?

ASKING FOR OPINIONS

What's your opinion?
What do you think about ...?
How do you feel about ...?
What are your views on ...?

GIVING OPINIONS

In my opinion, ...
I think that ...
I feel that ...
If you ask me, ...

AGREEING

(+) I think so too.
(+) You're (probably) right.
(++) I completely agree.
(++) I couldn't agree more.

DISAGREEING

(-) You may be right, but ...
(-) I'm not so sure ...
(-) I'm sorry, but I have to disagree.
(--) I'm afraid I can't agree.

Reviews

The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. Alastair Pennycook. London: Longman, 1994. 364 pp.

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As English further becomes the dominate language in the world today, educators are increasingly confronted with issues centered around its role in becoming an international language. *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language* explores these issues and provides the reader with an understanding of the cultural and political implications of the globalization of English. The book, which is divided into nine sections, is perhaps the most comprehensive to date on the subject and is part of a series entitled *Language in Social Life*, edited by Chris Candlin. This book provides readers with a blend of research, theory, and critical insight that covers a broad range of areas such as applied linguistics, inter-cultural communication, critical pedagogy, colonial history, post-colonial literature, and international politics. Thus, it could be of interest to students and practitioners of applied linguistics, English as a second or foreign language, education, post-colonial literature, and international relations.

There are three principle themes in the book. Firstly, Pennycook searches for connections that explain how English as an international language (EIL) came into being by looking at its origins in colonial history and studying its relationship to linguistics and the proliferation today of English teaching practices worldwide. Secondly, he implies that English is never neutral and that it is influenced continually by contextual, social, cultural, political, and economic factors. This he calls the "worldliness" of English. Finally, in this concept or worldliness, Pennycook addresses more practical concerns in dealing with English internationally by discussing its pedagogical implications and thereby helping teachers view their work differently.

The first section lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters by raising questions and concerns about the global spread of English. He notes that current discourse on EIL considers the spread "to be generally natural, neutral, and beneficial and [to be] concerned more with