

# An Overview of a First Semester Teaching Junior College English

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This paper seeks to present an overview of the first semester of an English Speaking Skills class which was for both teacher and students the first time to participate in such a class. It shall describe the class content and methodology and explain the rationale behind these. An assessment will follow based on the teacher's impressions of the class and on the results of questionnaires filled out by students at the end of the semester. In this way, the paper aims to consider what the implications are for future syllabus design of a junior college freshman English Speaking Skills class.

## A New Type Of Class

Until now, the students had studied English at junior high and high school through the grammar-translation method. Apart from their lessons with AETS or, in a few cases, the chance to travel abroad, they had had little contact with foreigners. For all the students, then, this would be their first experience of taking a class devoted to the speaking and listening skills, and one taught entirely by a native speaker. Similarly, after five years of teaching college-level English in Japan, this would be the teacher's first junior college class. That the students would be all girls was also new.

## Course Expectations

### Goals

With no experience of a junior college class, and with precious little literature devoted specifically to this level, the teacher relied heavily on colleagues' accounts of their own experiences and on their advice about how best to proceed. Those accounts and pieces of advice had a common thread which went, "Aim low and be prepared to plod along." The planning and goal setting for the course proceeded with this in mind and the fact that the students' major was information sciences (and, thus, that they were presumably more inclined to math-related subjects than to languages<sup>1</sup>). The English version of the course outline stated that, "The aim of this course is to *develop* students' conversational skills so that they *gain confidence* in *talking about themselves* and their everyday lives in English."<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the author has underlined those words which relate to what were considered the essential goals of the class. While some of the students may one

day need to use spoken English in their workplace, with foreign acquaintances, or during trips abroad, it is probable that such cases will remain the exception to the rule. Thus, while not denying the possibility that the students might one day use what they learn in the speaking skills class in a “real” situation, the emphasis of the class would be on the communicative aspect per se of English. In other words, the students should see spoken English as a tool which they can use in their *immediate* lives to express themselves (“talking about themselves”) in front of others and thus, “gain confidence” in themselves. The speaking skills class, then, should provide an opportunity for personal growth, an idea already articulated by many, including Sano et al. (1984) and expressed succinctly by Kelly, “The needs of these [Japanese higher education] students - to develop self-esteem, to express themselves, to clarify their positions within society - are among the most basic needs for which language study exists. As such, language, even a foreign language, has the potential to satisfy these needs.” (183-184) Although it was unrealistic to expect that the students would articulate their positions vis a vis the rest of society during class, the hope was that, by giving them the opportunity and the necessary tools, they would be able to talk in English about their own immediate lives and experiences, even if that was at a very basic level.

### **Textbook**

In spite of some misgivings about the usefulness of textbooks, two factors decided the teacher in favour of setting a textbook for the course. First, since the class was new to teacher and students alike, the teacher lacked the confidence to go it alone. Second, it was not anticipated that the textbook would serve as the be-all and end-all of class activities. Rather, the textbook would serve as a resource for the class, whose activities could be expanded or omitted, and to which supplementary activities would be supplied by both teacher and students. Thus, the textbook would provide the framework for the class, in much the same way as that described by O’Neill:

Textbooks can at best provide only a base or a core of materials. They are the jumping-off point for teacher and class. They should not aim to be more than that. A great deal of the most important work in a class may start with a textbook but end outside it, in improvisation and adaptation, in spontaneous interaction in the class, and development from that interaction. Textbooks, if they are to provide anything at all, can only provide the prop or framework within which much of this activity occurs. (110)

The text selected was the beginners’ conversation book, *Fifty-fifty Book One*. Structural in approach, it provides students with the basic structures necessary to talk about themselves; for example, about their daily routines, families, school, part-time jobs, past experience, future plans, interests and hobbies. The only function-based unit in the book, the last, deals with ordering in a restaurant, and students have fun imagining that they are eating out, ordering their favourite foods. In addition to its content, *Fifty-fifty* is appropriate to the goals of the course for its methodology. Its emphasis on pair- and groupwork activities provides plenty of opportunity for learner-centered activities, training students to assume more responsibility for their own learning and taking off some

of the stress which inevitably accompanies the teacher-fronted learning mode. These learner-centered methods, then, would contribute to fulfilling the previously-stated goal of helping students to gain confidence in themselves.

### **The First Day**

To make clear to the students from the start what the goals of the class were, how it would be conducted, and how they were expected to participate in it, the first class was devoted to an explanation of class policy. This was done in Japanese to ensure comprehension. The five rules of the class were set forth: 1. English Only (The teacher joked with the students that she alone was permitted to use Japanese during class!) 2. Participation (It was stressed that students were expected to participate actively in the class and to use English whenever they could.) 3. Attendance 4. Homework and Quizzes 5. English Diary (Students would keep a daily account in English of what they were doing.) Once the policy had been digested and understood by all, teacher and students launched into its first rule—that is, the rest of that class (and every class since) was conducted almost entirely in English. This was in accordance with recent trends in language education which favour as most effective classes where the language of instruction is the target language. After a brief teacher introduction, the students filled out an “information card” to which they also attached a photo of themselves. These cards provided a convenient reference source later in the semester whenever tidbits of information were needed about the students for use in class activities.

### **Assessment of Class Activities**

#### **Class Content**

Four units from the text were covered in the first semester. The subject matter of these dealt respectively with abilities, times and dates, daily routines, and surroundings. The basic format for each unit consisted of an explanation of the target structures, drills, a pairwork speaking task, a group or whole class speaking task, a homework assignment, and teacher-fronted question and answer sessions for review and reinforcement. Supplementary non-text activities were also included, usually at the start and end of class.

#### **Questionnaire**

At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire in order to gauge their response to all of the class activities as well as to the different learning methods employed during class. One hundred and ten of the total one hundred and twenty-three students completed and returned the questionnaires, thus giving a response rate of 89%. The questionnaire was a three-scale type with “very useful,” “useful,” and “not useful” as responses to each of the questions. Although the questionnaire itself was written in English, the students were encouraged to write their answers in Japanese if they preferred. They were also instructed not to write their names on the questionnaires, in the hope that anonymity would ensure they wrote their opinions freely and exactly. The questionnaire is given below.

## Class Comments

Please help the teacher by answering the questions below.

1. These are the activities we have done since April. Please give each activity a score like this:

1 = very useful

2 = useful

3 = not useful

diary-----homework-----mini quizzes-----

end-of-term speaking test-----

unit one (can/can't)-----unit two (times/dates)-----

unit three (daily life)-----unit four (in, on, under, etc.)

pairwork-----groupwork-----listening-----

question & answer practice (teacher and students)-----

clap hands game-----draw-a-banana game-----find-the-famous-person

game-----crossword game-----half-a-conversation game-----

songs (Let It Be / Imagine)-----

2. What do you like about this class? (Explain why.)
3. What do you not like about this class? (Explain why.)
4. How can the teacher make this class better?
5. Any more comments?

### Results of Text Activities

Each unit of the text received favourable scores - in particular, the times and dates unit. Moreover, one student remarked that she had already been able to use the material from the text in "real life" when a foreigner in town had stopped her to ask for assistance. As for the methods used - listening exercises, pair- and groupwork, and teacher-fronted question and answer sessions - the results were again rather positive with only groupwork receiving "not useful" marks (6%). Somewhat surprising were the results for listening: 76% of the students described the listening tasks as "very useful" and 21% as "useful." Since the listening tasks always seemed to cause the students most difficulty and since their importance was purposely de-emphasized in view of the fact that the students were getting a fair amount of listening practice just by following the teacher, it came as a surprise to see them favourably ranked. Presumably, the high scores came from the students' lack of confidence in their listening skills and their consequent belief that they needed as much practice as possible. From the teacher's standpoint, the students seemed to cope reasonably well following what she said during class. Since this listening interaction with the teacher was a lot more "real" than that with a taped, scripted dialogue (albeit the teacher's speech was slowed down), it would appear that the teacher had a lot more confidence than the students in their listening abilities. The lesson learnt for the teacher here, then, is that she should not overlook the importance for the students of the listening exercises and should spend more class time on them in the second semester. It is also important that the teacher make a more conscious effort to point out to the students their success in listening in a "real" situation - namely, the Speaking Skills class.

Also significant were the results of the teacher-fronted question and answer sessions (in which the teacher calls on and asks individual students conversational questions related to the target topic and structures). Only one student reacted unfavourably to this activity. Otherwise, the results were overwhelmingly in favour of the method, with 80% judging it "very useful" and 18% "useful." As students always displayed an enthusiastic and focused attitude during these sessions, these results did not come as a surprise. Nonetheless, they were somewhat troubling. The question and answer method is, after all, out-of-fashion in the world of English teaching and has been rejected by many teachers in favour of learner-centered methods. So, how to account for its popularity with the students? Nolasco and Arthur (1986) encountered the same dilemma when they studied some English language classrooms in Morocco and discovered that teacher-dominated question-answer methods - or, in their words, the "lock-step" method - were preferred over learner-centered methods. Their explanation for this is applicable to what was discovered in the Japanese class in question:

It seemed reasonable to assume that these new [learner-centered] techniques did not match the expectations that students brought with them. . . . students often apparently rejected new ideas or complained that the teacher was not teaching, because the security and sense of order found in the familiar routines, in which they knew their status and role, had suddenly been violated by something new. (102-103)

What did differ from Nolasco and Arthur's observations was that the Speaking Skills students did not reject the learner-centered components of the class: pair- and groupwork activities also enjoyed favourable marks. It was just that the question and answer sessions were by far the most popular activity. To explain it as due to the students' familiarity with the method is plausible. The research in this area is not conclusive, however, and further investigation in a future study is needed. In the meantime, the method will be retained as one of the components of the class as much for its popularity with students as for the balance and variety it brings to the class format.

Fifty-eight per cent of the students judged pairwork "very useful," while 42% found it "useful." Groupwork ratings were lower with only 49% giving it a "very useful" rating and 45% giving it a "useful" rating. These results did not come as a complete surprise for the teacher since the students always seemed more focused in pairwork than in groupwork. In the latter activity, the typical scene in class was of some students drifting off into dreamland or into chatting with each other about this and that (but not in English and not about the activity at hand!).<sup>3</sup> This rather undesirable situation arose no doubt because the students were not used to the learning method (in accordance with Nolasco and Arthur's conclusions above) and because the teacher failed to give them sufficiently detailed and structured guidelines as to how to proceed with the activity and as to what the end-product of the activity should be. The success of pairwork no doubt came about because the learning bond between just two people is necessarily more intimate, and therefore tighter, thus making it more efficient as a learning method. The benefits of groupwork in terms of the students cooperating with each other and taking responsibility for their learning, and thus ultimately of building confidence and promoting personal growth, are too great to be wasted. In the second semester, then, groupwork activities should be better explained and more tightly controlled by the teacher so as to promote a more student-centered class.

### **Results of Non-Text Activities**

Non-text activities were generally used at the beginning and end of class. Warm-up activities usually took the form of games but occasionally involved conversational activities unrelated to the text. The purpose of these activities was to establish a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere to prepare students for language learning. Although students seemed to enjoy these activities, the results from the evaluations gave them more "useful" than "very useful" ratings. Moreover, in contrast to the text activities, these activities received "not useful" scores. To take an example: a game in which the students had to guess the famous person's name written on a sticker attached to their back by asking questions to other group members was judged by 53% as "useful," by 44% as "very useful," and by 6% as "not useful." This indicated that, while the students may have found the activity enjoyable, they did not find it as useful as the more obviously study-based tasks of the text, and this, in spite of the impression students sometimes give of "just wanting to have fun." When time permitted, students listened to a song and did a listening cloze exercise at the end of class. This was a popular activity, and some students made a point of asking in the questionnaires that they have more opportunity to do this kind of exercise in the second semester. The teacher hopes to heed that request.

### Results of Out Of Class Activities

Apart from homework and review for tests, as mentioned above, the students were required to keep a diary as part of their out-of-class assignments. They had to write “just a little something” (as the teacher always told them) every day, and the diaries were periodically collected to be checked. The diary was the least welcome component of the course for the students: 62% judged it “useful,” 35% “very useful,” and 4% “not useful.” In addition to these ratings, students expressed their dissatisfaction through messages written in their diary. Typical messages were, “Teacher, do we have to keep a diary in summer vacation?” or, “Why do I have to write a diary in English?” or, “I’m sorry I don’t know what to write today.” So, why was the diary assignment set? Purely to satisfy the teacher’s own curiosity; academic considerations played absolutely no part. In short, the purpose behind the diary assignment was to give the teacher an idea quickly of who the students were. This being her first semester in the junior college, it was important for the teacher to understand the students fast - their lives, their way of thinking, their interests. Their skill in writing English was a secondary interest. Why then writing? Because past experience had taught the teacher that while Japanese students can be inhibited in the classroom situation or even in one-on-one conversation, in writing they open up. This experiment with junior college students was to prove no different. For, while the reactions listed above are negative, the overall results did serve the purpose of finding out about the students. In fact, all kinds of things about them became evident that would probably not have been possible in the limited time frame of one semester had there not been this writing medium for communication between the teacher and students. Listed below are just a few examples. The second year student who was retaking English after failing in the first year. Early impressions gave every indication that she was going to fail a second time - that is, until she handed in her diary for the first time (late!). It was then, and has remained, the best diary of all. Not only did she write fully every day about her life and her family, but she also wrote correctly. After getting back her diary that first time, her whole attitude in class changed for the better. Without the diary, the misunderstanding, the communication gap with the teacher may well have continued. Then, there were the quiet students, very unassuming in class, who, in their diaries, could not stop talking and who took great pride in relating their favourite shops, movies, rock stars, poems, and so on through illustrations, stickers and pasted-in articles.

Despite these favourable results, in the second semester the students will not be required to write every day in their diaries. Rather, topics related to their daily lives will be assigned once a week and students will write a page or so about it. The reason for this change is that the diary’s original purpose (to learn about the students) has been achieved. The teacher also feels slightly uncomfortable with the private element of diary writing. By reading the students’ diaries, she is intruding into their privacy. Moreover, being herself a less than conscientious diary-writer - in her own language, never mind a foreign language! - it is unfair of the teacher to expect the students to do something that many of them understandably consider a chore. With the diary’s original purpose attained, the weekly topic is now more appropriate. Whereas the stress in the first semester was on writing as communication, in the second there will be more balance between writing as communication and writing as process. Thus, the students will gradually get into the habit of more

composition-style writing.

### **Class policy Modification**

By and large, the students followed the class policy given to them on the first day. The one rule that they regularly forgot was the English Only rule. The teacher soon decided not to enforce the rule: it has become an ideal to aim for rather than a strict class rule. In its place, teacher and students have reached a suitable compromise - the students have to use only English during all tasks. Japanese is used to check comprehension, to check instructions have been properly understood, and so on.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has described the first semester of an English Speaking Skills class - a class that was new for both instructor and students. The goals, methodology, and rationale for the course have been outlined and the results of the class discussed based on the teacher's own assessment and on that of the students. It has been shown that questionnaires provide a useful means to gauge students' impressions and assessments of a course and that, by analyzing the results of such questionnaires, the teacher can devise options for modifying a future course syllabus. The author now looks forward to the second semester and to putting to work a new, slightly modified Speaking Skills course syllabus, and that, with the same sense of challenge and satisfaction which accompanied the first semester's work.

### **Notes**

1. A fact substantiated on personal information cards students completed at the start of term in which they invariably listed all kinds of weak points regarding their study of English but nothing at all as a strong point. Quite a number of students did, however, write in the "My Dream" section that they wanted to travel overseas or to become fluent speakers of English. This indicated a potentially positive view of English lurking inside some of the students' minds.
2. Taken from an outline which was later translated into Japanese for the school prospectus.
3. Indeed, several students wrote in the "comments" section that they were dissatisfied with group work because they wasted too much time during it and did not take it seriously enough.

### **References**

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