

Discussion and Debate for Future English Teachers

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Abstract

Despite having experienced at least 6 years of English study, by many standards, the majority of Japanese high school graduates leave school with an inadequate level of English speaking ability. Teachers at junior high school and high school have no incentive to include a speaking element in their curriculum, as most schools do not test students on their speaking ability. It is no wonder that some students entering university cannot hold a conversation with an English speaker confidently. During the Discussion and Debate class students I address the issue of students' confidence in speaking, ability to communicate their ideas with their classmates and others, and also offer students the opportunity to prepare to use these communication skills as teachers in the classroom. In this paper, I address the issues many university students have with finding the confidence to speak English in front of others, discussing topics in detail, and acquiring the skill set to pass this ability on to students from elementary to high school. I discuss methods to initially improve their basic speaking ability then go on to show methods that can be used to promote discussion in the classroom. The final outcome is for these students to then use their English skills to teach students from elementary to high school. As I have a

wealth of specialized teaching experience teaching students of elementary school age, I will focus on methods to teach children in this age range.

Specialized teaching experience: young learners

As well as teaching English courses at university, I spend a lot of my time teaching English conversation to young learners. The majority of my students are from around 3 years old (the first year of kindergarten) to elementary grade 6. I do teach older students, however, most of my experience is with these younger students. I work in a variety of educational contexts, with specialization focus in cram schools and kindergartens around the city.

When teaching at both the kindergartens and cram schools alike, my main goal is on students' output, primarily speaking. Sometimes however, I have seen loss of connection between speaking and understanding, especially with older students (recitation contests where students have only focused on pronunciation and gestures without truly understanding the English they are saying). This can have its advantages, particularly taking the goals of students into account; it looks impressive to students' peers and parents and in return it gives students confidence, and many hours are spent practicing their pronunciation.

Even from such a young age however, it is vital to also ensure that the students are speaking English in response to prompted questions or in discussion with one another. It is crucial that this is maintained as a long-term goal.

In order to emphasize this, throughout this report I will be referring to my teaching experience and how I would like to pass this on to my students at Tsuru university.

Confidence to speak

English classes in junior high and high school are predominantly grammatical-competence oriented. Within this structure, teachers are pressured to get students through the rigorous entrance exams at high schools and universities, and therefore focus on grammar-translation and memorizing vocabulary.

Many students, therefore, do not get the chance to learn English with a communicative approach or even practice their oral proficiency at all. For this reason, students graduate from school understanding the uses of English grammar and vocabulary, but without the capability to have a conversation and to communicate in English.

I have observed high school graduates, university students and adults alike, that refuse to acknowledge that they can speak English. This is not to say they do not understand the English they are hearing but that they have not had the practice and training and therefore do not have the confidence to respond when presented with the opportunity to speak English.

Improving the students' confidence to transfer their English understanding into communicative skills is the first step I take toward achieving the end goal of their communicative proficiency in English.

As previously mentioned, junior high and high school students may partake in regional recitation or speech contests and in return it might give them confidence in speaking English. However, this is usually only a select few from each grade. Getting all students in all schools to have the opportunity to practice speaking and communicating in English is a vital key to improving the English proficiency of Japanese students as a whole. Starting speaking English class seriously from elementary school is much more efficient as elementary school students are much less embarrassed about making pronunciation mistakes than older students.

Speech class

Throughout the first semester of my speech class at Tsuru university we focus primarily on speaking loudly and clearly enough to be understood. Students have the chance to present six speeches through the first semester. Volume, pronunciation, intonation, and fluency are all addressed individually, allowing the students to gradually realize the effect each has on their speech.

The topics of each speech are subjects that the students would already be comfortable talking about in their native language; topics such as family, school, hometown, sports, hobbies, and other parts of their past. Students coming from different parts of Japan and from different backgrounds can share their experiences and this allows them to develop their confidence, and realize they are all on a level playing field. Students can bring these "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al. 1992) to the classroom sharing their individualism with

their classmates and teacher. Given that the teacher is not from Japan, students are ‘teaching’ the teacher and, again, gaining confidence.

By the end of the first semester, students are speaking more loudly, clearly, coherently, and naturally. Self-reflection on this, gives them the confidence to progress into more challenging areas of language acquisition.

Discussion and Debate class

The primary objective of teaching debate at university level is to get students to think objectively about a topic, and to improve their general discussion and formal debating skills. Discussion and debate is also a perfect medium to practice students speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills.

I would also like to add to these main goals, the ability to proceed to discuss how to explain and teach the class content to future elementary, junior high and high school learners.

As this course has many nuanced goals, the content will be contextualised to raise the awareness of students to current issues and cultures around the world. The link between the informal and formal discussions, and improving their future teaching skills will stimulate students and keep their motivation high. Given that the majority of my teaching experience is to elementary school students, and taking into account the age and maturity of the university students, I find it most suitable to plan classes aimed at this age range.

As mentioned previously, Japanese students can easily go through junior high and high school without practicing their oral English proficiency. For this reason a typical elementary school class I teach would be primarily spoken. The use of flashcards is vital to expose students to a variety of vocabulary that can be used to advance the class content while employing a communicative method. Rather than drilling vocabulary to memorize, students will perform activities to practice the usage of the vocabulary within a sentence structure and within context that appeals to the students. If these activities are complex (i.e. a game with difficult rules) an ALT could find it difficult to explain, however, the Japanese English teacher (be that at any age) can be at an advantage and easily explain the rules and proceed to the activity focusing on the primary content. However, complex activities are not necessarily a good option as it often steers away from primary content and familiar games are often preferred.

Here is an example of how I would use a simple game to expose students to a lot of vocabulary and practice them within a sentence whilst communicating with each other.

Most children understand the rules of the card games such as ‘old maid’ or pelmanism (baba-nuki and shinkei-suijaku in Japanese). Flashcards are placed on the board with letters or numbers, representing cards Ace to King, written above them. Students can then proceed to play the card game in groups but when cards are picked up or placed down students create sentences. Take that to another level and

introduce them to 'Go fish' (a popular game in the west but not as popular in Japan) and students are asking questions as well as making sentences. If the topic is 'occupations', for example, then thirteen different occupations can be used as well as practicing closed questions such as "Are you a doctor?", "Do you want to be a police officer?", etc.

All this can be taught easily by the Japanese teacher without much difficulty. Students are motivated about the topic as they are "playing games" and are engaged with the topic. Teachers can then proceed to have open discussion with students, reviewing previous grammar learned, "What job do you like?", "What do you want to be when you grow up?", etc.

Students in the Discussion and Debate class at university will have the opportunity to plan such classes in groups, discussing the problems that may occur, and the changes they might make. Students will also be encouraged to research similar activities and discuss how they would be implemented into classes of different abilities.

Students must follow a clear structure of planning the lesson in groups, presenting the said lesson to the rest of the class, and presenting their discussion that resulted in the decisions made. Students must also be prepared for questions from classmates. Finally, as all teachers are expected to do, they can reflect on how the lesson went and use this experience to improve on their next lesson.

Alternatively, students have a discussion (or formal debate) in groups about how occupations around the world differ to Japan. This can be used for teachers teaching at higher academic levels such as junior high and high school. Members of the group should participate equally and be prepared to answer questions about the discussion.

Communicative and content-based methodology is used throughout the course. As well as being employed in the classroom, students are encouraged to consider how they can promote the same methodology in their prospective classrooms.

A broad range of materials are used, including videos and music. This motivates students to generate more engrossing discussions.

Examples:

1. Watching a video of children in the playground can result in discussions of the history of playground games, bullying, play versus study, etc.
2. Listening to a song can result in discussions of what the lyrics mean, what is the message of the song, the songs suitability in the elementary/junior high/high school classroom, explicit language in the classroom, etc.

Possibilities regarding the content of the discussion can vary widely. As stated above, discussion regarding the lessons the students plan are vital to the progress of the trainee teacher, however, cultural

awareness, current affairs, and education, should also be discussed.

Cultural awareness

Due to globalisation, Japan is promoting English language proficiency which then results in a more multicultural society.

In a complex, multilayered and diverse society, cultural challenges are common, especially in the classroom. Having intercultural skills is fundamental to teachers who work with a diverse group of students, as a teacher's professional attitude towards diversity in the classroom will positively influence and affect the students in all aspects of their lives. The goals of Tsuru University Teaching Program are to redefine and expand the role of English teacher in terms of diversity, train teachers in understanding methods and concepts of intercultural education in a multicultural society, and promote mutual respect and understanding among cultures. To this end, a Discussion & Debate course in particular should remain sensitive to problems involving communication across races and cultures. In particular, our students should be given opportunities to think about how to get their students to think about related issues.

Current affairs

In order to maximize the relevance of content, the teacher is very likely to make use of video resources available online. Such materials should be current and provide an insight into the reality of events in Japan and elsewhere. The choice of stimulating, relevant topics is of particular importance in a Discussion & Debate

course. Students are able to access such materials on their own handheld devices, making it easy for teachers to set up discussion or debate activities. Students should be encouraged to watch and listen to videos in which controversial issues are being discussed, and then work collaboratively in order to plan and make presentations on these topics. A natural extension of such activities for prospective teachers is to discuss and plan how to explain, simply and clearly, such sophisticated material to young learners.

Education

As well as discussing the lessons they prepare, students are also encouraged to observe education holistically and critically. In doing so, the fundamentals of English language learning will be addressed. Students and teacher alike are learning from one another and reflecting on their own teaching experience.

Similar to Kolb's model (1984) a cycle of teaching and learning occurs as the teacher teaches the students, reflects on their own teaching, and adapts to improve for next time. Students also go through this cycle as they not only reflect on their own lessons, but also think critically of the teacher's lesson. The goal being for teachers and students alike to teach and present content skillfully.

A typical class would look as follows:

1. Watch a short video of a job interview.
2. Discuss in small groups:

- a. What job is the interview for?
 - b. Do they think the interviewee got the job? (What did they do well? What criticism can they give?)
 - c. What questions would they ask the interviewer?
 - d. How did the interview differ from what they would expect at an interview in Japan?
3. Share their opinions with the class and be prepared to answer any questions that may arise.
 4. Discuss in small groups:
 - What occupations exist in Japan but not in other countries around the world (and vice versa)?
 - a. Would they prefer to work in a restaurant in Japan or the UK? Why?
 5. Prepare a 20 minute activity to teach occupations to elementary grade 6 students. Consider the following points:
 - What occupations should be taught and why?
 - a. What grammar should be taught alongside the vocabulary?
 - b. How should they aide students to memorise and understand the vocabulary?
 - c. How can they motivate students?
 6. Present the 20 minute lesson. All students in the group must participate equally. Notes are allowed, however, students must not read from a script.
7. After the lesson, the group present how they came to the conclusion for each of the above points. Other classmates are encouraged to participate and ask follow-up questions.
 8. Groups are rotated until all groups have presented.
 9. All students follow-up with a short self-evaluation to express their reflection of their own and others lessons.

N.B. Lesson duration and group sizes may vary depending on class size.

Conclusion

In designing a Discussion & Debate course for prospective teachers, it is highly beneficial to have experience teaching young learners, employing a communicative, content-based approach. Such a course offers opportunities to develop students' awareness of other cultures and current affairs, as well as communicative ability in English. At the same time, a skillfully designed course helps students to reflect on their own learning, in particular their ability to develop skills in younger learners in the future.

References

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