

Building a Speaking Ability
A Freshman English Speaking Course at Iwate University's
Faculty of Education

Mike Unher

OVERVIEW

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has stated that English language education needs to move toward enabling Japanese students—from elementary through senior high school levels—to become ‘practical’ users of English. This, as can be seen below, indicates that the teaching of the language should be based to some extent on communicative learning and less on grammar-translation methodologies only.

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Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”

In order to be able to “make use of English”, it is necessary not only to have a knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to use English for the purpose of actual communication. Thus, in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are not recommended. Through the repetition of activities making use of English as a means of communication, the learning of vocabulary and grammar should be enhanced, and communication abilities in “listening,” “speaking,” “reading,” and “writing” should be fostered. Such techniques for instruction are necessary.

To carry out such instruction effectively, it is important for teachers to establish many situations where students can communicate with each other in English and routinely to conduct classes principally in English. (1)

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In this way, the students studying English, and in our own case, those who are studying to become language teachers, may gain some insight into how the language is used by the native speakers in accomplishing a variety of tasks.

Communicative- and task-based language teaching are recent additions to foreign language

curricula here in Japan. Examples of such syllabuses in use are rare and the methods remain little-used in junior and senior high school curricula. Yet we have come to believe that there are many high school- and university-level language teachers who might benefit from referring to one such program of study that has been in place for a number of years.

It is for this reason that we present selected examples from a current syllabus, with the intention of offering some ideas in helping other language teachers meet the goals of empowering their students with an ability to use the language in a more natural way.

This article presents a course description, procedures, and teaching methods for several lessons given in the first of a two-semester course developed as part of the language education program in the Faculty of Education at Iwate University. We will present the lessons in a step-by-step way that may be readily applied and adapted to one's English language education program.

BACKGROUND

If one studies a language, such as English, without gaining the skills necessary to put the language to use in an effective way with other speakers, it doesn't seem likely that the student can acquire the full value of the language.

It then becomes a responsibility of the language teacher to provide the student with examples of "realistic" linguistic settings where the language is being used.

A good way to understand the basis of communicative and task-based learning is to note what Keith Johnson has written:

"...Fluency in communicative process can only develop within a 'task-oriented teaching'—one which provides 'actual meaning' by focusing on tasks to be mediated through language, and where success or failure is seen to be judged in terms of whether or not these tasks are performed." (2)

David Nunan provides us with a relationship between communicative teaching and a task-based syllabus, crucial in helping to establish more communicative lessons:

"Task-based syllabuses represent a particular realization of communicative language teaching. Instead of beginning the design process with lists of grammatical, functional-notional, and other items, the designer conducts a needs analysis which yields a list of the target tasks that the targeted learners will need to carry out in the

'real-world' outside the classroom. Examples of target tasks include:

Taking part in a job interview

Completing a credit card application

Finding one's way from a hotel to a subway station

Checking into an hotel" (3)

Jane Willis writes that student motivation is important so as to help convince the student that it is worthwhile to learn the language:

"...Learners need to engage actively in processing the meanings of whatever they hear and read. A variety of communication tasks can be designed which will motivate and give learners a purpose for doing this." (4)

Often the teacher is also involved in designing materials to be used in the task-oriented lesson. Ms. Willis provides us with some guidelines:

"Thus, materials designers have three distinct responsibilities: (a) providing appropriate language data for the course, (b) designing meaning-focused communication tasks arising out of those data that engage learners in meaning and that encourage genuine use of language, (c) designing form-focused language study exercises that raise learners' awareness of typical and useful formal features of language." (4 ibid)

COURSE OVERVIEW

The semester-based courses, *English Speaking I and II*, were developed as part of our English Education program. It seeks to meet the directives of the Ministry of Education by providing the students with opportunities to develop skills necessary in order to utilize the language in an effective manner—using English to get one's point across clearly.

The courses are comprised primarily of 1st-year university students, majoring either in English education, or in elementary education with a minor in English. The classes are conducted by a native English speaker who uses only English in class (for the benefit of providing an English atmosphere to the students). The 90-minute class meets once a week, for about 14 class-times per semester.

Procedure

The classes are conducted as conversation workshops, rather than as a "straight lectures."

Students are required to take an active part in discussions, using English as their only language, contributing their own personal views and ideas. The weekly homework assignment is for the students to write a brief summary and 5 key words about any topic in the news that interests them. The summaries and key words are in English, but the origin of their news topics can be from Japanese or any other media, in any language. They must also state their sources. The students spend the first 10 minutes of each class in small groups discussing their topics, and asking each other for clarification or for additional information.

Students are not permitted to miss more than three class periods per semester. Final evaluation of each student is based on attendance, class participation, and on weekly assignments. It is of the utmost importance that all speaking and writing be done exclusively in English, the target language.

Syllabus

Following is an outline of the class-by-class syllabus of materials and methods used during the first semester of this course (*English Speaking-I*). The major themes are:

- Asking for Clarification (how to ask about a word's meaning, spelling, and pronunciation)
- Using *Wh*- Words in Sharing Information (how to use: *who/what/where/when/why/how* in conversation)
- Making Introductions
- Getting Information
- Carrying on Smalltalk
- Giving Commands & Describing Actions
- Describing Locations of Things (how to use prepositions)
- Giving Street Directions
- Talking about Habits and Frequency

The tasks or skills often carry over to the next class, or they may be referenced in later classes.

The themes and skills covered in the second-semester course *English Speaking-II* appear in the list below:

- Asking for Clarification (asking about meaning, spelling, and pronunciation)

- Making and Responding to Invitations
- Getting Information
- Describing Locations of Things
- Describing Locations of Places
- Describing People
- Making Suggestions
- Using *Wh-* Words in Sharing Information (who / what / where / when / why / how)
- Carrying on Smalltalk
- Expressing Opinions (Likes, Dislikes / Agreeing, Disagreeing)

CLASS 1

THEMES: Introduction of Course, Teacher and Students; Asking for Clarification; Using *Wh-* Words

The primary objective of this lesson is to tune the students in to the character and style of the course, and to encourage them (often for the first time) to communicate only in English. The students have the chance to introduce themselves to the rest of the class, and are given guidance (courage) in how to use English to ask clarifying questions when they don't understand what they have heard or read.

MATERIALS Course description and syllabus; interview questions (A/B pairwork handouts); a cloze activity

STEPS/ACTIVITIES/DISCUSSIONS:

1. Teacher's self-introduction (as a model)
2. Students' self-introductions
3. In small groups: They make a list of as many *wh-* words as they can. (Encourage them to come up with: who, what, where, when, why)
4. Demonstrate ways to ask for clarification: Teacher says an unusual word to the class, such as *Lackawanna* or *ambidextrous*. Encourage them to ask clarifying questions, such as:

- How do you **spell** it?
- How do you **pronounce** it?
- What does [it] mean?
- Pardon / Once again, please.

5. Pairwork interviewing. Students take turns asking and answering each other's list of Wh~ questions (from step 3) without looking at each other's list. For example:

Student A	Student B
1. What color is your hair?	1. What color is your father's hair?
2. Where does your family usually go out to dinner?	2. When does your family usually have breakfast?
3. What is your shoe size?	3. Where is your TV at home?
4. Who is your mother's favorite singer?	4. Why did you come to this school?

They can then expand their answers to generate a brief discussion.

6. Hand out the course description (written in English) and the list of topics or language functions that will be covered in the course. Encourage them to use Wh~ and clarifying questions.
7. *Listening Activity (Cloze and Discrimination)*
Handout a cloze passage, and let them fill in the missing words as the teacher reads them the dictation (at native speed). They check their answers in their groups, and then as a class.
8. Assign them their weekly homework: *Discussing a News Story*

CLASS2

THEMES: Making Introductions; Getting Information; Carrying On Smalltalk

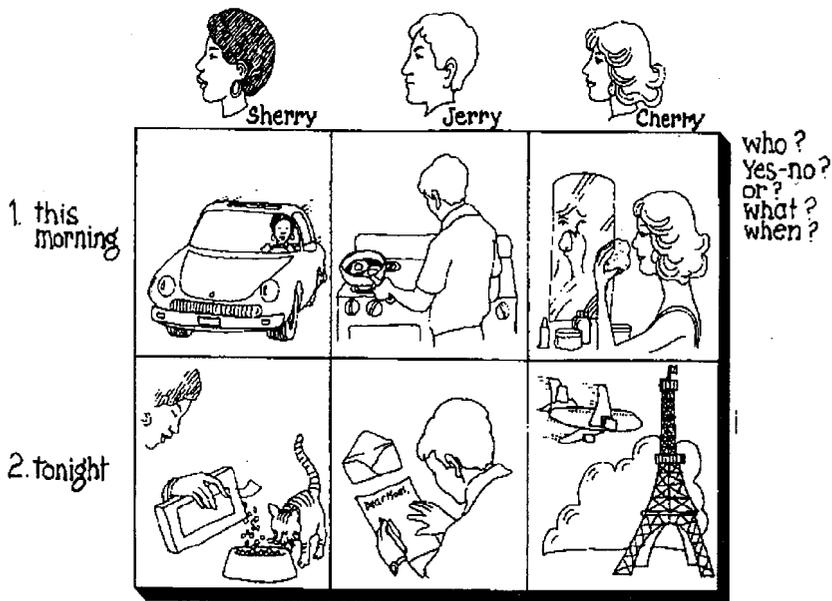
MATERIALS Handout sheets or OHP page of Fluency Square

STEPS/ ACTIVITIES/ DISCUSSIONS:

1. Pair discussion of homework: *News Topic*
2. Handout or project on the OHP *Fluency Square: Sherry/Jerry/Cherry* (5)

FLUENCY SQUARE

[ʃ] [ç] [j]



- Demonstrate and practice pronunciation of names (Sherry, Jerry and Cherry)
- Demonstrate verbs drive, cook, put on, feed, write, fly, and conjugations of past and future tenses.
- Dictate sentences that describe the squares:

1. *This morning*, Sherry drove to work, Jerry cooked breakfast, and Cherry put on makeup.

2. *Tonight*, Sherry's going to feed her cat, Jerry's going to write a letter, and Cherry's going to fly to Paris.

- Check dictation in groups, then as a class.
- Ask the class various Wh~ and Yes/No questions about the squares. For example:

Who drove to work this morning?
 Is Cherry going to write a letter tonight?
 Did Sherry or Jerry cook breakfast this morning?
 What is Jerry doing tonight?
 When will Sherry's cat eat?
 Has Cherry put on her makeup yet?
 T/F: Cherry flew to Paris this morning.

f. Students ask and answer such questions in small groups.

3. Making Introductions

a. Project the following on the OHP:

A: Hello / How do you do.
 My name is _____.

B: Pleased to meet you. I am _____.

Demonstrate and practice introducing oneself. Students introduce themselves to others around the classroom.

b. *Introducing Others*: Project the following on the OHP:

A: (name), I'd like you to meet (name).
 or: (name), may I introduce (name)

B: Pleased to meet you. (*ask B for more information*)

Demonstrate and practice introducing others. Students introduce others around the classroom.

4. Getting Information (Carrying on Smalltalk): Choose a name/character to be from the Fluency Square (Sherry, Jerry, or Cherry).

Situation: Everyone is at a class party at a high school in Vancouver. No one at the party is able to speak Japanese. Introduce yourself and others, and chat about what you did this morning, and what you will do this evening. Be sure to add other information to make the discussion more interesting.

CLASS 3

THEMES: Giving Commands & Describing Actions (based on methods initially described by James Ascher (Total Physical Response) and Earl Stevick)

MATERIALS Colored pieces of paper (or colored rods)

STEPS/ ACTIVITIES/ DISCUSSIONS:

1. Giving Commands/ Describing Actions

- a) Handout pieces of colored paper or rods
- b) Demonstrate verbs and grammar describing actions:

going to	He's going to carry a blue paper (rod) to the door.
am doing	I'm giving him a red paper.
did	I ran to the green paper. She jumped to the yellow paper.

- c) Demonstrate and practice common verbs:

Give (me/him/her)	catch	look at -	write
pick up	put down	jump (to)	slide
touch	take	point to -	eat
stand up	sit down	balance	drink
swim	walk to the...	run to the...	push
carry	drop	throw	knock down

- d) Substitute colored paper/rods for real objects:

red = an apple green = a volleyball

yellow = a balloon blue = a glass of water

black = a suitcase brown = a wallet

orange = an orange purple = a chair

Encouraged to use their imaginations, students practice with the above vocabulary of objects

- e) Demonstrate sequencing prepositions such as first, then, before, after, while, and then practice with the above commands.

2. Give the following dictation, and then check in groups and as a class:

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put a pencil on your head, and then sing. 2. After you finish singing, jump up and down. 3. Put the book on the chair. 4. Bring me the bicycle and give it to Ken. |
|--|

CLASS4

THEMES: Describing Locations of Things (using prepositions)

MATERIALS: Handouts, some objects for demonstrating prepositions, colored pieces of

paper (or rods)

1. a) Demonstrate the following prepositions with various objects (pencils, a glass of water, a chair, etc.) :

1. to the right of the~	5. above the~
2. to the left of the~	6. below the~
3. in front of the~	7. on the~
4. behind the~	8. in the~
	9. between the~

- b) Handout colored pieces of paper, and in small groups have the students practice using the prepositions.
2. a) Divide students into **A** and **B** pairs. Student **A** is asked to look at the OHP screen. Student **B** must **not** look.
 - b) Show a simple drawing or photograph on the OHP
 - c) Student **A** describes the picture (using the above prepositional phrases), and Student **B** must draw it. Student **B** may ask questions for clarification, but must not look at the original picture until it is finished.
 - d) Students **A** and **B** both look at the original, and discuss the differences using the above prepositional phrases.
3. a) Handout two pictures that are slightly different, to each pair of students.
 - b) Without looking at each other's picture, the students use the language they have learned to identify the differences in the pictures. For example:

A: "The boy is sitting on the chair."
B: "No. He is standing to the right of the chair."

(Note: This lesson and the previous on Giving Commands can then be combined to promote further language use.)

CLASS5

THEMES: Getting Information/Carrying on Smalltalk

MATERIALS: Handouts, Photos

STEPS/ACTIVITIES/ DISCUSSIONS:

1. a) Review *Fluency Square: Sherry, Jerry, Cherry*, and Wh~ and Yes/No questioning formats.

- b) Add an activity to demonstrate present tense for Now (example: Sherry is reading), and then practice with all three tenses.
- c) List several other activities in the present tense, and demonstrate (example: watching TV, riding a bicycle, sleeping, going for a walk, skiing).
- c) Students interview each other (using their imaginations) in groups of three, and complete the following grid:

	(name)	(name)	(name)
This Morning			
Now			
Tonight			

2. Getting Information

- a) Review Wh~ and Yes/No question formats
- b) Project the following on the OHP and demonstrate how to put these into questions:

- Find someone who likes the same sport as you do. (*For example* → “Do you like soccer?”
Or “What sports do you like?”)
- Find someone who hates the sport that you like.
- Find someone who did the same thing last night as you did.
- Find someone whose sister or brother was born the same year as yours.
- Find someone who has the same number of grandparents as you.

CONCLUSION

Many might agree that the best way to acquire a foreign language is to take an active part, on a daily basis, in the culture or society in which that language is in common use. But when this desirable situation cannot be provided (for reasons such as time, cost and distance), the English language teacher here in Japan can still offer examples to the class of how the language is used in a setting representing natural use. Such activities can make the language come alive for the student, which can help the student move from having a knowledge about just the components of the language (vocabulary and grammar) to being

able to use it in an effective way.

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FURTHER READING SUGGESTIONS

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(岩手大学教育学部英語教育講座)