

Setting the Mood: Making an English-Language Environment for EFL Language Learning

Mike Unher

Abstract

English is not merely a text-book language comprised of lists of rules to be memorized, with learning rated merely as a grade in school. It is a living language, and if our goal as language teachers is to give our students the ability to use it, they will need to see for themselves, first-hand, that it can be an effective way in which humans can communicate.

One way to give our students this awareness, and thus, a facility with the language, is to use communicative-based activities during the language class. Such activities will give the students the chance to communicate with each other using English.

In this article, the reader will be provided with an overview of simple, yet effective ways to make the classroom a meaningful, communicative environment in which English may be learned as a communicative tool.

Introduction

While English-language movies and television programs abound here in Japan, giving the average citizen exposure to such so-called "scripted English", the typical junior high school student first encounters the language, in a formal and personal way, in the "English as a Foreign Language" (EFL) classroom.

This is the age group where learning can often be most effective when the learner encounters the subject (the lesson objectives) in a hands-on, activities-based environment. Such an active-learning atmosphere can be seen in a variety of other school subjects, such as art, home economics, and science class experiments. We may also see a good chance for the learner to begin to acquire the English language as a real communication tool when it is taught in a communicative-based program — a program that includes a variety of task-oriented activities where the learner must use the language to communicate with others, where he or she must become able to use the English language successfully in a variety of communicative situations, and with a certain level of flexibility.

Creating the Learning Environment

If we want our students to regard English as a tool for communication where they can see the potential of using it in real life to communicate with others, a learning environment needs to be created for the EFL classroom in which communication methods can be acquired by the student. One such method has been referred to as student-centered learning, where the teacher acts as an advisor or "tour guide", guiding the students through the necessary vocabulary they will need to acquire a particular language function.

Coupled with this approach is a classroom system where the students work in groups (usually two to four students per group). When activities are done in such small groups, each student will need to spend more time speaking. Some students may feel more relaxed doing so as they aren't speaking before the entire class. The teacher, while clearly the organizer of the lesson, remains physically outside the communication circle of each group during the activity. He or she becomes a voice off-stage, making necessary corrections and giving the appropriate prompts in order to get the students communicating — i.e. using the language.

Below is a summary of some advantages and disadvantages of using such a method:

Small-Group Learning

Some Advantages:

- students may feel more at ease in small groups
- students need to speak more often
- students may feel more encouraged to try out new phrases
- memory and acquisition may be improved through the student's active participation

Some Disadvantages:

- difficult at the "absolute beginner" level (It can, however, be used effectively with more teacher interaction.)

- may require an adjustment period for the student to get used to this learning style

- the teacher needs to feel confident in using English with his/her students

Another important factor in creating such a communication-based environment is to make English the primary (if not the only) language used during the lesson. We learn our own language by hearing and imitating it often as a set of phrases. In the English language classroom the teacher needs to show the learner that it really is possible to rely on English to communicate. If the learners hear the teacher using Japanese rather than the target language in the English class, they may not believe this to be possible, and may not see any value in learning to use the language for themselves. But if the teacher speaks English with the students regularly, they may feel more confident to use it themselves.

Of course, students may have difficulties handling new vocabulary. In addition to the problems of not knowing how to use the new words properly, they may also have a more fundamental problem of not having it presented clearly to them in the first place. In a true communicative setting, new words may appear in conversation without an introduction. They may therefore have questions about spelling, or perhaps they may not have heard the word or phrase correctly .

However, rather than permitting the student to resort to using Japanese to solve these problems, the EFL teacher can give each student the means (and the confidence) to obtain such information using English. This can be achieved by teaching the class a set of simple phrases. For example, on the first day of class, and as a review during subsequent lessons, the teacher can train the students to use these phrases:

- To ask about the **spelling** of a word: "How do you spell it?"
- To ask about the **meaning** of a word: "What does [it /this word] mean?"
- To ask about the **pronunciation** of a word: "How do you pronounce [it]?"
- To ask for **repetition**: "Pardon?" or "Once again slowly, please."

These may be seen as problem-solving tools, and once the students feel comfortable using them, they may be less inclined to fall back on their mother tongue when they should be functioning in an English environment in the EFL classroom.

In addition to the above clarification phrases, ritual questions and phrases maybe used during each class, in order to set the English "mood". Here are some

phrases that the EFL teacher can use with the students during each class:

Everyday Classroom Terms

Starting Class - Greetings

Good morning / afternoon, everyone.
How are you [, Toshi]?
I'm fine, thank you.

Commands

Stand up. / Sit down. / Come here.
Quiet, please.
English, please.

Class work

Look at the board / your handouts.
Watch the video.
Listen to the tape.
Turn to page [32].
Repeat after me.
Let's practice. / Let's talk. / Let's try it.
Talk with your partner / group.
Look at the top / bottom / left side / right side of the page.
Circle / check / fill in the right answer.

Teacher responses and encouragement

Good. Not quite. Try again. Once again. Pardon?
How about you [, Hiromi]?
Do you know [, Ken]?
Louder [Yoko,], I can't hear you.
Who wants to try? Anyone else?

Ending Class - Leaving

Good-bye, everyone.
Have a good lunch / afternoon / math class!

In the teacher's day-to-day task of teaching English, especially in the communicative use of the language, new vocabulary will most likely be presented in each lesson. It may be advantageous for the teacher to present these new items in a

communicative way. The non-communicative, traditional approach has been for the students to be given a list of these new words to memorize. However, in a communicative system of language learning, the student needs to know how to use the vocabulary, to see how these pieces will fit with other vocabulary items into a meaningful conversation. If the student is introduced to the new vocabulary items in the form of phrases, perhaps there is a greater chance for the student to be able to "guess" the meaning of the new word by seeing it in a context of known items, without going to a translation dictionary. The student will also see the new word "at work" as part of a phrase that can be used.

This kind of active learning, where the student is placed in the situation where he or she must figure out the meaning, may contribute to acquisition of the word, as well as give the student a certain level of confidence in taking on this new language. This is not very different from the way young children acquire their mother tongue.

A Survey of Teachers

Results of an interesting study on communicative EFL teaching were recently published. The author, Ms. Anne Ogawa, interviewed 67 junior and senior high school EFL teachers in Yamagata Prefecture, through a series of questions on methodology and the teachers' own views toward EFL teaching. The question topics covered types of classroom activities, lesson plan and classroom organization, students' receptiveness, student in-class feedback, and so forth.

The data showed that, even though the typical EFL classroom consists of 40 students—a class size that many teachers might regard as nearly unmanageable for communication activities—about half of the lesson plans developed and used by the teachers included some kind of speaking activity.

The author of the study found this data encouraging as a trend toward an increasing use of speaking activities in the EFL classroom. However, it must be pointed out that it remains unclear whether the speaking activities really can be termed communicative in the sense that they are task-oriented, or whether they are merely repetition tasks.

Yet, the survey did reveal that when teachers used English expressions (as the Everyday Classroom Terms listed earlier) during each class, the students felt a greater interest in using English themselves. They felt less embarrassed to use it, because to speak English had been established as the expected norm of the class.

Conclusion

The EFL teacher often serves as the initial and primary role-model for the EFL learner, and this first contact with English often serves to establish the way the student will look on the language in class, and in later years.

It seems realistic to say that if the language teacher feels reluctant to use English in a communicative way with his or her students, then the students themselves may inherit this reluctance, and thus find it very difficult to feel comfortable using the language as a communication tool.

On the other hand, when the teacher creates an English environment in the classroom for his or her students, and uses the language in a relaxed, "natural" and communicative way, then it may be more probable that the EFL students will see the language as a way in which to communicate, and they will more readily enjoy using it.

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(岩手大学教育学部英語教育講座)