

## Oral Fluency, Motivation and Content-Based Instruction in the Japanese Cultural Context

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This article discusses the increasing importance of content-based language teaching for the likelihood of success in overcoming motivation problems among Japanese students of English as a foreign language. The argument presented is in part theoretical and in part descriptive. The latter considers experiences in teaching introductory anthropology to a small group of intermediate level students of English at a community college in Tokyo.

Teaching English in Japan has a somewhat venerable history, students of which can trace its development back to such early influences as Lafcadio Hearne's in the late 1800s. Of course, enormous changes have taken place since then, but many in today's profession would agree that in terms of effort (including teaching resources) and results (improvement in overall communication skills) these changes have not generally been for the better. The so-called professionalization of teaching English as a foreign language in Japan, with its attendant teacher organizations, journals, workshops, ever-increasing scholarly and textbook publications as well as regular visits from distinguished experts, along with the pervasive commercialization of the "job" of

teaching English, has led to a complexity of the field quite unmatched by any significant degree of success in its ability to produce more and/or better speakers of English. This is hardly news to most experienced teachers in Japan, and often forms the basis of cynical repartee among English-speaking teachers. Nearly a decade ago, it was remarked that situation for the more than sixty million Japanese who had had three to six years English language education was one of "inarticulate literacy" (Wordell, 1985:4). It would seem that in this respect there has been little change.

The reasons for this state of affairs, for, indeed, this failure, are many and various. Moreover, they have as yet to be rigorously formulated and consolidated into a thorough-going critique of English language instruction in Japan. However, as tempting as this may be, it is not my intention here to expose the emperor's new clothes. Nevertheless, inasmuch as cultural, political and economic factors have an influence on a certain type of motivation, posited here as a necessary precondition of acquiring oral fluency, they will be discussed below.

In the welter of methods and theories that have been propounded and promoted in the search for the 'magic bullet' or 'supermethod' of foreign and second language learning very little remains. Of interest now mainly to historians of language instruction, or as background in teacher training programs, the quest for methods has wound down and in some cases has been rejected altogether in favor of a move "beyond methods". As Richards points out:

The basic problem is that methods present a predetermined,

packaged deal for teachers that incorporates a static view of teaching. In this view specific teacher roles, learner roles, and teaching/learning activities and processes are imposed on teachers and learners. Studies of classroom events, however, have demonstrated that teaching is not static or fixed in time but is a dynamic, interactional process in which the teacher's 'method' results from the processes of interaction between the teacher, the learners, and the instructional tasks and activities over time. . . . Attempts to find general methods that are suitable for all teachers and all teaching situations reflect an essentially negative view of teachers, one which implies that since the quality of teachers cannot be guaranteed, the contribution of the individual teacher should be minimized by designing teacher-proof methods. The assumption that underlies general, all-purpose methods is hence essentially this: Teachers cannot be trusted to teach well. Left to their own devices, teachers will invariably make a mess of things. A method, because it imposes a uniform set of teaching roles, teaching styles, teaching strategies, and teaching techniques on the teacher, will not be affected by the variations that are found in individual teaching skill and teaching style in the real world (1990:37).

It is in this 'real world' aspect of language instruction that the 'real' problem lies: theories and methods have come and gone precisely because for the most part they have not been contextualized, evaluated, or, in my view most importantly, culturally grounded<sup>1</sup>.

Now, to be sure, there are a number of papers on Japanese culture-specific problems in journals such as *The Language Teacher* published by the Japan Association of Language Teachers, but these are fragmented pieces spread over a number of disparate issues. The bedrock issue in terms of oral fluency that needs to be addressed is the question of motivation in the Japanese cultural context. There are of course many answers to this question. Rather than compiling a long list, it is likely more fruitful here to simplify matters: there are those who want to learn English, who have *intrinsic* motivation, and those who have to, who apply themselves under *extrinsic* motivation. In Japan, I would argue, the latter far outweigh the former. What this means is that in practice English language study takes place in Japan largely as a result of compulsion, that is, of either the state, under the direction of the Ministry of Education and the school system, or of the domain of business and industry under employee training programs. The linkage between the two is one of continuity along two lines. Firstly, the best high school graduates attend the most prestigious universities whose graduates in turn are recruited by the biggest companies. Other graduates fall (or do not fall) into place accordingly. Secondly, the type of study is also essentially continuous, that is in Krashen's (1981) terms, one of "learning" rather than "acquisition." (Even in those company classes where English-speaking instructors attempt to employ such approaches as the communicative, student indoctrination in learning makes for tough going.) Oral fluency, rather than grammatical knowledge which results from learning, depends on a low affective filter (for example, a minimum of fear or embarrassment), which again in turn

largely depends on intrinsic motivation, especially once childhood has passed. In contrast, the dependence on “learning” and extrinsic motivation is the fundamental reason for Japanese ‘inarticulate literacy’.

The explication of the cultural components of learning and extrinsic motivation in Japan would require space not available here. It will have to suffice at this point merely to mention the existence of such influential factors as the character of pre-and post-World War II history; the largely passive, one-way transmission character of traditional, but enduring teacher/student roles; the cultural value placed on non-talkativeness (except, ironically, in Japanese during school system English “conversation” classes taught by English speakers); the almost obsessive fear of making mistakes in Japanese culture; the also ironic and implicit but widely-held view that English is not a language to be spoken (brought about by decades of grammar translation learning); the deeply ingrained, culturally-sanctioned abhorrence of contamination from outside influences; and of course all the involute contradictions of the so-called “gaijin complex.” To these limitations must be added politico-economic compulsions (read extrinsic motivations) that result from Japan’s unique position in the global internationalization of commerce and its English language base. The term ‘internationalization’ itself has become an inflated instructional catch-word, in practice signifying very little in terms of change in the basic character of English language learning in Japan. The foregoing list of cultural problems in teaching English in Japan is at best partial and of course very generalized. Nevertheless, it is meant to indicate the tip of the iceberg, one a good ethnographer of communication would provide a

great service in exposing fully.

Given this state of affairs, and the concomitant pretense among many (though of course not all) instructors that TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in Japan is not a cynical but profitable exercise in flimflammy, what can be done to improve the preconditions for attaining oral fluency and to reinforce what integrity does exist in the language instruction field? One possible answer lies in the area of content-based instruction. This is a relatively new approach in Japan and as yet there are a number of competing definitions of what content in practice entails. However, for present purposes I would agree with Mohan (1991) that a content course is one in which subject matter learning is integrated with language learning. As for rationale, "content-based instruction fulfills a number of conditions which have been posited as necessary for second/foreign language acquisition" (Snow, 1991:3). Besides providing comprehensible input and opportunities for meaningful use, content-based instruction leads to increased intrinsic motivation. Based on experience teaching a content course (described below), I find myself in agreement with Snow's observations: "Second/foreign language learners find the study of content interesting and often more related to their personal or professional needs than more traditional language courses. In addition, content-based instruction courses can provide the boost in morale often needed at the intermediate proficiency level when motivation begins to sag. Moreover, the extensive use of authentic materials and tasks... provides effective means for exposing learners to real, communicative language that is usually not found in grammar-based methods and

textbooks" (Ibid.). To these benefits can be added an increase in teacher motivation and interest which result from both the challenges of putting a content course together and from the satisfaction of having the reciprocal interest of the students.

By way of example I can now provide an account of teaching an introductory anthropology course to a small group of intermediate English language students at a Tokyo community college. This college (in fact more of community center offering a wide assortment of courses ranging from cooking to flower arrangement) has for several years had a foreign language, mainly English, conversation section. In the recent past it had become apparent that a certain level of stagnation had been reached in the market for its language programs. Student enrollment and interest in English classes seemed to be on the wane. It was thus decided to take up my offer to teach an introductory anthropology course. Being part of the "trickle of subject specialists" (Strevens, 1977:189) that have entered the language teaching profession, there was no problem with qualification.

With an enrollment of an average of six students, I have taught the course for three, ten week semesters over the last year and a half. During this period, a core group of students has returned each semester. A prerequisite for the course, with some exceptions, has been an intermediate level of English proficiency.

Using a first year college text commonly used in the U. S., I have followed a part lecture, part discussion format. Each week a five to ten page reading has been assigned, an in-class survey of vocabulary problems conducted and explicated, followed by a question-and-answer

comprehension check. As the course has progressed over the semester, less and less lecturing is done and guided discussion substituted. As a certain level of understanding of a particular topic is reached, for example, political and economic organization or belief and ritual, students have been given small research assignments which encourage using anthropological perspectives and analytical tools to look at their own society. This approach makes the topics more accessible and has also led to completely student-centered discussions. Nevertheless, these discussions have been monitored to keep students on track and to avoid slipping into idiosyncratic or anecdotal irrelevancies. This having been my objective, I am able to say the forgoing teaching strategies have been effective.

Although admittedly impressionistic and informal, my evaluation of this course reveals a sustained high, intrinsic motivation, an increasingly low affective filter as the course has continued (although this obviously has something to do with increased familiarity with the instructor), and a definite increase in oral fluency in all the students. It must also be admitted that these students were intrinsically motivated to begin with; they were not forced to take my course. However, their level of motivation was raised, and sustained for over 18 months.

From the initial needs survey when I began this course it was discovered that 'traditional' conversation classes had become too boring for the students and they felt they were not able to make further progress. The anthropology course has given them something interesting to do with their English, a purpose both transactional and interactional, and in so doing has raised their level of oral fluency.

Because this brief account can in no way satisfy the requirement of a systematic analysis of my content course activities, I can only tentatively answer Mohan's question "can a good content learning course also be a good language learning course?" (1991:6). But that tentative answer is, yes.

### Footnotes

- 1 On evaluation, see Richards and Rogers, 1986:158-67. As they put the methods question: "It is no exaggeration to say that in reality, there is virtually no literature on the Natural Approach, Communicative Language Teaching, the Silent Way, and so on; what we have is a number of books and articles on the theory of these methods and approaches, but almost nothing on how such theory is reflected in actual classroom practices and processes. Hence the crucial question is, Do methods really exist. . . .?" (Ibid.: 163). Then, as now, the answer is, not really.

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