

Worst Case Company Classes

by

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THE PROBLEM

“Sappari wakanai neh!”

Great suffering soul, I, most tragic and greedy, what did I do to deserve a man like Mr. Kumaki? There I was, fresh, clean, relatively young, moderately good-looking, red-cheeked, tall, and utterly sty-mied. I was even wearing my badge of academic achievement and social position, a good dress shirt and tie. A trifle intellectually constipated perhaps but still able to walk and chew gum at the same time, unlike most American presidents of recent vintage. I had just given a brief exposition on the relative merits of third person singular and plural subjects in responses to the taxing questions “Who is he?” and “Who is she?” and of course that all-time mind-bender “Who are they?”.

When avarice overcame better judgement and I said to my Eikyo boss that yes I would teach a once a week Saturday morning class at Aokishinyoh Kinko in beautiful Kawaguchi I had put the likely result out of my mind. She said the class was a lower intermediate one. Yeah right. And political reform is coming soon to Japan.

There are times when understanding Japanese is a decided handicap. I am not fluent in Japanese but I can hold my own, unfortunately.

Thus it was that I had a very enlightening morning the first time I went to scenic Kawaguchi. I met the salesman who had sold this class to the bank. He was with the coordinator who offered me the job. (I already knew her.) She spoke English. No one else did. I met the bank manager and one my future students. So anyway there we were, chit-chat chit-chatting in Japanese before the class. Introductions all round and then a play. Call it a comedy :

President : Well we'll go upstairs in a few minutes.

Salesman : Yes, and you can be sure that Grier Sensei will be a very popular teacher. We have been very happy with his classes.

(He had met me just ten minutes earlier and had had to ask twice to get my name right.)

President : Yes, good. Happy to hear that. It sure is hot today, isn't it?

Salesman : Yes, it is, isn't it?

President : Yes, yes, it is hot. But then again it rains a lot this time of year. We were considering organizing a baseball team but you know how it is.

Salesman : Yes, I know how it is.

(With difficulty I was keeping my polite 'I don't understand any of this "expletive deletive" ' face on.)

President : Yes, it is difficult.

Salesman : Yes, it is.

President : Yes, it is. Anything for the workers you know. That's why we want this class.

Salesman : Yes, I can see that.

On this upbeat note, that I was hired because it was too much bother to

organize a baseball team, we went up to the fourth floor to meet the rest of the students. Once again elaborate introductions all round and then the speeches.

President : Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming to the bank this morning for this Eikai seminar. This is a serious class and I want you to work hard. At our bank we take pride in our many and various worker training seminars and . . (blah, blah) . . and now I believe that the Eikyō representatives have a word or two to say to you.

Salesman : Yes, we just want to welcome you to this Eikyō class and we hope that you will do your best to have a good time and perhaps to improve your English conversation ability.

Coordinator : Yes, thank you for coming. Over the next year we wish you all the best in English and if you will just look at our brochure you will see some of the publications and services that our company can offer you. . . .

This continued, ad nauseum, for about ten minutes. They kept saying over and over how they wanted everyone to relax and to enjoy English conversation. Meanwhile yours truly was left standing with his best attentive, interested, concerned, involved face on and his mouth shut. Finally it ended. The president 'yoroshikued' a couple more times and disappeared, presumably to his golf course.

Leaving me with a class that was to meet three or two or even one time a month on Saturdays. The rigorous schedule called for twenty-one classes over a one year period. This 'intermediate' class of eight ranged in ability from Mr. Matsumura who vacations every summer in Hawaii and who really is an intermediate student to Mr. Kumaki, who

was attempting to master the language for the first time since university thirty years before. Uugh.

My high in low in company class teaching was the class I taught for five unhappy months at Toyota Technocraft, a Toyota subsidiary. It too was billed as an intermediate class. For once I wasn't saddled with a textbook chosen by a salesman for me. (A digression: It seems a near inflexible rule in the English as a Second Language business that textbooks must be chosen before the class begins by someone, usually a salesman, who can't speak English and who also knows nothing about teaching and makes his choice based on the artwork of the first and last lessons of the book.) I met my students and taught them for two classes before I chose a text. They had oodles of vocabulary but little in the way of sentence structure. They ranged in English speaking competence from near catatonic to relatively communicative - a typical company class.

I chose Interchange 1 (Cambridge Univ. Press) for them. It is a good book. I like it. It combines dialogues with realistic listening exercises and grammar points arranged in sensible do-able sections. There are phonetics exercises. It incorporates reading and writing sections. There is a good workbook. Like all texts it has its flaws, Interchange's being that it is much too optimistic about how much new vocabulary can be thrown at the students every page, but I did not think this would be a problem for my vocabulary-heavy class.

I wanted to use Interchange as my main text and supplement it with games and handouts from Elementary Communication Games (Thomas Nelson and Sons), The Card Book (Prentice-Hall), Expres-

sways (Prentice-Hall), Keep Talking (Cambridge University Press), Pair Work One (Penguin Press), Can't Stop Talking (Newbury House Publishers) and several other texts. I thought I was ready. Little did I know.

There is nothing that destroys a class plan as effectively as sporadic attendance and late arrivals. No one at Toyota Technocraft managed more than fifty percent attendance. Several of the students made it a habit, when they showed up at all, to arrive an hour late. I gave up giving homework after the first month. All of them had been attending eikai classes for years and were emphatically uninterested in my attempts to teach them simple grammar and pronunciation. After two months I was ready to scream. No text, no lesson plan will work if the students aren't prepared to carry the ball at least part of the time. I began to think of them as permanent lower intermediates.

I phoned their previous teacher and found out his solution was to speak in Japanese to them. In effect he turned it into his private Japanese tutorial with himself as student and a revolving class of teachers. My students complained to my boss that I didn't give them enough time for "free conversation." I asked her how can I "quote-unquote" have "free conversation" with students who won't learn any verb form beyond the infinitive and present continuous? Is free eikai tsukateru English-no meishi ando Japanese-no douji honto-ni conversation des ka? I omowanai.

She suggested I use videos. Her argument was to the point. If they didn't enjoy it they wouldn't come and if they didn't come, my company would lose the class and if my company lost the class someone near and

dear to my mirror's reflection would be seeking other employment.

So I used videos. I showed them hit movies I'd taped off the TV. I explained key points in English and some Japanese and made them try to catch what the actors were saying and explained some of the things they could not comprehend ; almost everything. (Friends of mine who use videos a lot tell me that they teach five, maybe ten, minutes maximum for a two hour class ; not whole movies.) I continued to use Interchange and other materials but I taught it 'less rigorously,' as I worded it in my final report to my employer, than I did at the beginning of the course. In other words I gave up. I hate to admit it but the students were happier than before. They were "quote-unquote" communicating again. They weren't learning anything but then they didn't really want to. I taught the class until the end of the contract and did not renew it. I'd had enough.

In the Eigo entertainment biz that masquerades as an education biz the teacher has to realize his lowly position on the totem pole. It has taken me years to learn that I am an entertainer and not a teacher. I am still in a state of denial on this point. Many other teachers share my position. I suggest they look at whatever current insult to our intelligence Bi-lingual and the other high quality schools are advertising as eikai. I, personally, go for the one where the pretty girl is taking her shirt off more than the one of a few years back where a different pretty girl was about to kiss her young male teacher. Then there is the endless stream of publications written in Japanese explaining English. All imply or even say flatly that second language fluency is an effort-free enjoyable experience.

This is of course the market response to decades of mind-numbing grammar-centric written English courses inflicted on high school and junior high school kids. People want to be told that language learning is easy and fun. So enterprising language companies tell prospective customers that, "Hey! Guess what, language learning is easy and fun." Then they hire teachers to make the dream come true.

So what do you do if you find yourself teaching a class that wants to believe that they are only refreshing their latent linguistic capabilities and do not want to put any effort into it?

You waffle.

I have some small skill in waffling. Actual pedagogical ability is optional but waffling is a must for company classes. I have learned to keep a friendly smile on my face and pretend that spoon-fed eigo has some relation to the real thing. The less serious the students the more the stress seems to be on pretending to be serious. This leads to opening and closing ceremonies, suits, ties, new books, always new books, but never, any commitment to study outside of class (and precious little to study in class).

SOLUTIONS

So what is the responsible course of action if you find yourself teaching an unteachable class?

OPTION 1. You could quit. Shirking is not something to rule out. Ultimately I quit my Technocraft class. No, it does not solve the problem. The next teacher will be stuck with your mess. Let him and not you handle it.

Suppose Option 1 is not a realistic choice. Maybe you have to teach

your darth vader attack force in exchange for your visa. Maybe you have gotten addicted to eating. Maybe you are a masochist. Then what?

OPTION 2. Then go for the frequent flier plan. Decide who of your students is the most likely to come. Design the class for them or even possibly him or her. It doesn't matter if officially there are twenty in the class ; if you can only depend on two or three of them to come make them the focus.

A corollary to Option 2. Ignore late students as best you can until you finish whatever activity you started before they walked in. When I began teaching I used to always try to bring late students up speed whenever they would drift in. It doesn't work. You put pressure on them to perform instantly and annoy the ones who came on time.

OPTION 3. In a worst case scenario - late students, irregular attendance, lousy or nonexistent study habits, varying levels of English ability - I recommend what my friend and mentor, Mr. Bruce McCormack, described to me as the "one-off" strategy. He told me about a seminar he conducted for JALT in 1989 called "Postponing Burnout : Teaching Company Classes." If you find yourself in an unwinnable teaching situation you should be prepared to teach lessons of three or four levels of difficulty depending on who shows up in the first fifteen or twenty minutes. We all do this informally. It is a basic survival skill. The next step is to view this as normal and necessary.

This takes preparation. It means having ten to fifteen activities in your bag that you know well and feel comfortable with that you can photocopy in a hurry if what you wanted to do will not work.

When he explained it to me I thought it was the counsel of despair. It reminded me of when I first came to Japan and started teaching English, an ice-age ago. I walked, I talked, I pretended to teach. Through a friend (Does this intro sound familiar?) I got my first ever private company class. I prepared, or more accurately I did not prepare, thoroughly haphazard lessons culled from the two or three books I knew at the time. I arrived here about a year or two after the high tide of the audio-lingual method so my lessons were very heavy on American Streamline (Oxford University Press). With that, and a lot of creative new grammar I passed myself off as a teacher.

That, thank God, was long ago. I have learned about pair work, group work, task-based learning, teaching games, even grammar. I have learned not to talk about current politics or worse yet about twentieth century history. I learned about constructing courses that, if followed will gradually help students become better speakers of the language – that is, to progress.

A one-off strategy requires that you give up the notion of progress. Progress is still something to hope for but like the Holy Grail best not actively sought. Giving up progress as a goal is tough to do if you care anything at all about teaching. However, in a worst case teaching situation it is the only way to keep yourself sane.

It is the logical distillation of Option 2. If the only dependably present person is yourself, please yourself (and you don't even need to go to a garden party). Teach something that is as relevant to your class's needs as you can each class. And yes this may be something as inherently value-free as whole popular movies in one class. Try to

make it work in that two hours or hour and a half and then go home and do not worry about it. If the five students who came tonight will not put in their next appearance at your talk show until some unspecified date in the future there is no way you can expect them, or they can expect themselves, to improve.

And remember there is still Option 1.