

## Introduction to Communication Skills

Andy B., Eric, Jay, Jean-Pierre, Yuriko

**We split into two groups, with Yuriko and Jean-Pierre, and Andy, Eric & Jay. After about 45 minutes, we came back together as one group; Andy left to go and see some other groups and keep people on schedule, so Eric, Jay, Jean-Pierre and Yuriko reported back to each other and then continued the discussion.**

**Eric:** We started by talking about the graded readers. Since I've started late, I feel that I don't yet have a good sense of how much the students are enjoying the books, nor have I been able to determine if the books are too difficult for anyone. I hope I can get a better feel for this over the next few weeks so that I can anticipate and avoid having anyone feel left out or feel left behind.

Jay mentioned that he thought it would be a good idea to have a handful of Level 1 readers for students who find the Level 2 books to be too challenging. Andy added that there are a lot of administrative and financial restrictions concerning the libraries, and the availability of books. I thought later that this seemed unfortunate, especially since students are not required to buy any books (especially overpriced textbooks) at all. I'm not suggesting that students should be asked to buy any of these readers. But it seems that if an educational institution has any money at all to set aside for something, that something should be books, especially as they can be used for years and decades as long as they're kept in good shape. I also get the sense that some (actually, maybe just one) of my students is not interested in reading suspense books, as they often involve violence, murder, etc. (She probably got over it by now.)

We also talked about the number of readers students are asked to finish over the course of the year, and wondered why there were 8 in the first term and 4 in the second term. This discussion helped me a lot, as I wasn't sure yet what students in the second term were supposed to be doing in lieu of the readers. We talked about the selection of readers—mostly fiction, though some of the selections are not fiction (there's a book on Mandela, one called French Fashion Design, etc.) We also wondered if the reading of fiction or literature in general is not suitable for students who are interested in discussing current social and political issues. I think certain books (*Huckleberry Finn*, for example, as opposed to Sherlock Holmes) are in fact suitable for these kinds of discussions, though maybe for *much* higher level students, probably in a literature department. At any rate, I realized that the initial use of readers is meant to increase fluency and confidence so that students can later read and discuss articles and such from newspapers, internet sources, etc.

Another thing we discussed was testing for and predicting students' vocabularies. We talked about a couple of tests that are available, and the general conclusion seemed to be that these kinds of tests are not necessarily accurate indicators of potential student success. My feeling about it is that students seem to be pretty forthcoming about whether they think a book is too easy or too hard (it must become obvious when the book is too hard). Perhaps it's best to let them tell us themselves what level is best for them, though this may take time and cause some early frustration. Starting them low and letting them work their way up may be the best course to take.

One thing I brought up is that some of the students feel uncomfortable speaking English when they know I can hear them. At one point, as I mentioned in our talk, a student in my class asked me to simply go away. (I went away.) I think it's best to let the students find and indicate their own comfort levels with me and with each other. It's important to remember as well that this comfort level will change over the course of the year, at different rates for different students. But putting pressure on them to 'perform' in front of the teacher will only

lead to reticence, even aggravation. *Eric*

**Jay:** This session began with a discussion about the graded readers. The benefits of extensive reading cannot be denied as it has consistently been shown in research to improve learners' vocabulary, reading skills, grammar, spelling, and writing. That being said, the goal of extensive reading is to ensure that students are reading massive amounts of English that is both easy and enjoyable. It was a concern that for some of the learners the graded readers may be too difficult. So it was requested that the university purchase some level one graded readers in order to ensure that all learners can read the books without relying on a dictionary.

Another item that was brought up concerned the amount of books the students are required to read. Twelve graded readers a year seemed like an adequate number; however, the concern was regarding the number that was suggested for each semester. Reading eight books in the first half of the course seems to be a lot. Take away the first week for introductions, then students getting time off for measles or missing classes for other personal reasons, and it seems like the emphasis of the class is reading homework. If the requirement is 8, teachers are not given a lot of flexibility to give other homework, as it takes students 2-3 hours to read a book. On top of this, for a learner to be reading a book almost every week may start to get monotonous, thus defeating one of the purposes of extensive reading. Therefore, it was asked whether or not teachers could be given the freedom to decide when they want their learners to read the books. This means a teacher could make the learners read 4 books in the first semester and 8 in the second, or 6 in the first half and 6 in the second half. The number of books could remain the same, but the teacher is given a lot more flexibility to match the needs of his/her students.

We then looked at classroom dynamics. Some students do get a bit anxious when the teacher approaches, and we looked at how to handle such a situation. It was suggested to pull back and monitor from afar until the learners are more comfortable with both their English ability and the teacher.

Great discussions, thanks a lot, *Jay*

**Andy:** We started by checking in briefly about the exit objectives of the Introduction to Communication Skills course, and the general assumption that students need plenty of repeated practice through the year to develop their fluency. We also talked about our positive general impressions of the classes and how this course usually has a lot of energy about it. In the first half of our discussion, Jay explained in detail some of the sequences that he uses in class for helping his students to talk about the books that they are reading. (*Jay, it would be great if you could share a top copy of what you showed us – we can then pdf it and add a link to the summary write-up*). The activity sequences including short summary writing and ranking of book interest and difficulty; mixing and matching useful phrases and collocations for talking about books; brainstorming about useful things to say about books; guided prompts for talking about the main points in a book and giving an opinion. Jay also explained how he had done a low-level Vocabulary Levels Test (à la Paul Nation, but in a bilingual format) and found that Level 2 books might not be suitable for some of his students.

We shared our impressions here with each other, and this moved us into talking about confidence and fluency in the classroom. Eric started to talk about what he had noticed about some of his students and how he was trying to be very sensitive to their needs for space in which to feel confident about using English. Both Eric and Jay suggested that it would be good to have Level 1 books in the ICS class libraries. I gave a kind of typical bureaucratic response, sucking through my teeth and saying "Could be difficult..." I guess I was remembering some earlier struggles that we had had in getting resources....Mmm... getting institutionalized!

On reflection, I think it is something that we should try if there is a commonly perceived need across the ICS courses: Definitely it would make the start-up of this course easier for students and their initial experience of reading simplified content uniformly motivating, so let's hear from ICS teachers about this!

We talked briefly about the reading requirements for the ICS course and how this had been reached after some trial and error. I talked, too, about how the second semester of this course is seen by many teachers as moving towards simplified readings to do with social, legal and political issues, so that there is a bridge towards the next level of class in the taught-in-English curriculum, Basic Discussion Skills. I mentioned my concern with note-taking in the ICS course as I tend to see this as one of the common links and manifestations of an engagement with academic literacy through English across different courses. (It is also (for me) a key part of reading courses in a curriculum focused on academic literacy, and something that I have recently talked with Meg about quite a bit.) I shared some examples of student notes on different graded readers (pdf and hyperlink to follow). I have used these examples as near-peer models for students this year to develop their own style of making notes. I explained that I was less concerned with written summaries and more with students making notes to use as a basis for talking about their books and explaining key points.

Finally, I also showed some examples of mini-learning diaries that my students are doing each week for their out-of-class contact with English. The focus here is on out-of-class listening and shadowing, and helping students plan their time over a number of days for reading their graded reader. The mini-learning dairies ask students to try to keep contact with English out of class on five different days for about 15-20 minutes each time. They record what they did; how they felt; what they noticed about their practice—and they use the dairies in an early part of the lesson each week to report on their out-of-class English contact before writing down their goals for their in-class work. (Again copies will be made available.)

Many thanks to Eric and Jay for a great discussion—and for raising lots of interesting questions about this course for ICS teachers to discuss further during this year. *Andy*

**Jean Pierre:** Yuriko and I talked about ways we help students develop confidence since most of our students are in their first year. We exchanged a few ideas and activities such as student designed posters of themselves or of an interview partner in which there is no text or text is limited to key vocabulary. The posters can be used in various ways to assist conversation.

We talked about how to go beyond confidence into developing more sophisticated, accurate and appropriate ways of talking without resorting to drills and grammar lessons.

Our biggest concern was about evaluation for a grade at the end of term. We believe that ongoing assessment of performance in activities is occurring smoothly; the problem is always on how to turn a combination of anecdotal and performance “points” into a credible grade. The problem, we felt, would be aggravated if the faculty decided to go on a two-semester graded system in that one would be forced to make a judgment after only 13 weeks of contact with these young developing students. It would be beneficial if the university were to adopt a different approach to grading a performance based, active, non-lectured style course.

Once the two groups merged the discussion went to the graded readers. It was interesting to see how different teachers approached the use of the readers and the thinking behind using extended reading as a feature of the classes. It was thought advisable to widen the available levels and types of readers. In my classes, students are quite free to choose reading, and I do not dwell much on the 8/4 requirement as the eager and the able are devouring books, while the less experienced go slowly (or not at all). Not everyone is ready to read in the

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way the extended reading is meant to be done. This said, I am glad there is an “administrative requirement” set that is outside of me. It takes pressure off me much as the 80% attendance and the “A” control” has since I can simply site “it’s a Chuo rule.”

I’d like to explore more links to classes and am interested in the idea of the “mini learning diaries to link various aspects of self-study out of class work together. *JP*