

Teachers Retreat June 2008
Introduction to Active Communication

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Students' enthusiasm and participation

Classes this year seem to be a bit of a mixed bag in terms of students' enthusiasm and active use of English for communication. Jean Pierre and Susan were very positive about their students' confidence and willingness to use English; Nishi and Saeko have quieter students who use Japanese more. This may be due to the specific mix of students (1st/2nd year balance, etc) in different classes. 1st year students, in particular, seem to be coming in with more confidence to use English and some have already also done extensive reading with graded readers at high school.

In some classes students tend to switch into Japanese sometimes, especially at the end of a task to confirm their understanding. Mike thought this might be because students are used to understanding the meaning of English texts in Japanese in their reading-translation classes and don't have much experience of trying to understand in English. Encouraging students to shadow when they listen – i.e. follow and think about what they hear in English rather than translate into Japanese when listening – might help students break the habit.

An important point here seems to be that it is still early days in the course and there is plenty of time for students to gradually develop more active, confidence and fluent use of English.

1st/2nd year balance

The main Listening and Speaking courses (Introduction to Active Communication, Basic Research and Discussion, and Improving Research and Discussion) are all for 1st and 2nd year students. The proportion of 1st and 2nd year students in classes varies a lot and depends on the luck of the draw at enrolment. Students may end up in IAC for two years running because they are placed by TOEIC scores and only move up to a higher class in their second year if their TOEIC score goes up enough. (They may even move down from IAC to BRD if their TOEIC scores falls in the second year). Students can also choose classes with the same teacher for two years running (for better or worse).

Getting started with the paper ball game

Most members of the group felt that students enjoy the paper ball game and it really helps them make conversation with their peers without any hesitation. However, some of the members of the group felt otherwise. Nishi did this activity in her class and although the students enjoyed the game, initially they were quite nervous and hesitant. She thinks they are unsure of how to build a conversation and what kinds of questions they should ask. However, now they enjoy this free conversation time very much.

Talking about graded readers in class

We are using a variety of ways for students to talk about the readers in class. Some teachers spend most of each class on this. Other approaches include doing 20 minutes in each class or spending alternate classes on talking about readers and listening practice. Nishi has students talk about their book five times in a class with different partners, some other teachers two or three times for about twenty minutes each. Susan has been working on the strategy of asking

follow-up questions, and JP suggested a possible approach would be for students to question each other to find out about their partner's reading. Students retelling what they heard about a book to a different student, or summarizing what they have heard back to the speaker are other possibilities.

Some teachers want to limit time talking about books in class to allow for other activities such as listening and note-taking practice (using tapes) or explaining hobbies and interests. Mike pointed out that the goals of the course in the first semester are just the development of more active, comfortable, fluent communication in English, with the reading and talking about books as the main activity for this. There's no requirement to do activities other than the reading and talking about reading in the first semester. There are also possibilities to integrate other activities, such as students listening and taking notes of their partner's book explanation, into work on the graded readers.

Note-taking

Everybody is getting students to make notes on their reading to help them talk about their books. Everybody except Mike asks students to do the note taking as homework and this gave Mike the confidence to get his students to do this too! Some teachers have helped students with note-taking (e.g. showed them examples from the website) at the outset; others plan to do more work with students on developing note taking from here on. We thought a session on specific ways to teach note taking would be useful at a future retreat.

Time for some writing in class (e.g. note taking, or a written reflection on the reading at the end of class, which Mary Jo has students do) may be useful as a space for quiet reflection (Mike) or as no-distraction time (JP)

Pair work

Everybody is getting students to work in pairs in the class, and having students change partners a lot, and this is working well. A problem with changing partners is the layout of the rooms with the rectangular tables (see Re-arranging rooms below) .

Graded Reader Levels

Saeko asked for more level 1 books in the libraries. Mike explained this was the first year to have level 1 books and only a limited number had been available due to limits on funding for readers from the faculty, but we might be able to get more level 1 books for next year.

Mike is the only teacher structuring students' reading by level. He puts out level 1 and 2 books only for the first four weeks, removing level 1 and introducing level 3 from week 5. Students start reading at a comfortable level (hopefully), and read 4 books at that level before moving up a level from week 5. Mary Jo was of the opinion that if students need to check the meaning of three or more words per page then it's an indicator that the level is too high for them. Everybody felt the same. She also suggested that students should be given reading time in class to check if they like the book and that writing reflections on their reading can help students (and the teacher?) see when they are ready to move up. JP lets student interest in the content of books guide their choices and doesn't mention levels.

Mike said that he gives students a self study plan and review sheet to fill in the days and time when students can find time to read the book(s). After the week they should review to see if they could follow the plan or not and think of what can they do for improvement.

Moving into simple research in the 2nd Semester

We talked briefly at the end about ideas for getting into simple research work in the 2nd semester when students are only required to read four books. Mike described how he uses the People and Issues research resources in the second semester. In a first project cycle of five weeks students research one of two people (Martin Luther King and Ang San Syu Ki this year). They read and take notes at home, in the first week on readings from Mike and in the next two weeks on ‘additional sources of information’ on the webpage for their person. In class they share their research in pairs with other students who are researching the same person, once or twice, and then explain key points to a students researching the other person in a ‘mini-presentation’. Over the three weeks of research, each student focuses on specific aspects of the persons’ life and the issues affecting them. As well as developing note-taking and the ability to explain research, in week 4 students practice explaining difficult vocabulary in English and organizing their research, and give a poster presentation to two or three other students in week 5 of the project cycle.

In a second project cycle of 5 weeks students go through the same processes, researching a person of their choice from the People and Issues resources.

Re-arranging rooms

Mike suggested one relatively quick and painless way to set tables up for pair work and make lots of spaces for students to move around in (see jpg on next page).

Comment from Nishi

Discussion about graded readers was very helpful for me since I think in my class too students are not very much into reading. Since Level 1 books are quite few, so sometimes students do not have an option other than read Level 2 books and hence it’s not reading for pleasure for them. I also feel that reading 8 Graded Readers was a bit too much especially for the first semester since sometimes the class might take more than expected time to settle and catch the pace.

BOARD

