

# Teaching English Conversation in Japan: Teaching How to Learn

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There is a tendency among teachers to narrowly focus on their specific subject area at the expense of the broader picture. Learning is a complex process and various skills and strategies must be taught and developed to be successful. One area that is easily overlooked by teachers of English conversation is the need to help students be aware of the learning process as it relates to language acquisition. First-time teachers and experienced teachers alike, need to keep this in mind as they face the arduous task of teaching language fluency in the short time allotted them. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that, after years of schooling, each student has already acquired the proper learning skills. Students may seem apathetic, dejected, belligerent, and even unable to learn, but these attitudes are the result of being confused and frustrated. The root of the problem is not necessarily with methods or students' attitudes, but with the fact that too much is taken for granted; many times students simply don't know what they are supposed to do and when they do, they don't know how to go about doing it.

## Teaching Language Learning

English teaching in Japan has traditionally emphasized methodology and materials. This assumes that if the language is taught in the "correct" way or in an easily assimilated form using the latest materials and techniques, learning will necessarily take place. Another approach has been to place emphasis on motivation of the students and then assume that once a strong desire to learn the target language has been instilled, the students will naturally succeed. However, many times the motivation exists and the teacher has good command of the various techniques, but the students simply do not know how to go about learning the language. This is due to the fact that learning a language is often outside their experiences; first, because learning one's native language was simply a natural part of growing up and second, because normally the study of English takes place only with the goal of passing entrance exams and hence the "paper test phenomenon" of concentrating on grammar. Therefore, English conversation teachers in Japan should first focus on helping the students become better language learners. Students will have to be taught the skills necessary for successful language acquisition from the outset and these skills should constantly be cultivated and developed. Essentially, students need to be taught how to learn the language.

## Learning Through Use

To begin with, students of English conversation must understand the fundamental difference between learning **about** the language and learning to **use** it for verbal communication. The common analogy of learning to drive a car or play a musical instrument is useful in demonstrating this point. We can learn all about the parts of a car or instrument, how they are made and what their functions are as they relate to the whole, but it does not necessarily follow that with this knowledge we will be able to get behind the steering wheel of a car or pick up an instrument for the first time and drive or play well. The only way to become a good driver is to practice driving. The only way to be able to play an instrument well is to practice playing it. Likewise, the only way to become a good English speaker is to practice speaking English.

## Communication is the Goal

Another important point to make is that English is not just a set of rules. It is not black and white, right or wrong, as mathematics is with its equations and symbols which must calculate up the same every time. The initial goal then, is not accuracy of use (though this might come later), but is to communicate. The focus and measure should be on the ability to get one's ideas across, not on how correctly something was said or how many grammatical mistakes were made. The difference between the two, accuracy of

communication and accuracy of use, needs to be stressed and clearly understood by the students for them to get off to a good start. Although accuracy of use will aid ability to communicate, it should not be a prerequisite for communication in the initial stages and certainly should not be allowed to hinder the communication process. It is important to be realistic. Students are not going to be able to say all that is on their minds or even accurately express themselves from the start. Students will have to at first be satisfied with getting the general idea across, and they should be prepared for and even resigned to being misunderstood at times. Helping students to deal with misunderstandings is an important part of increasing their confidence. A basic rule is to not dwell on simple mistakes in grammar or usage. If these do not obstruct meaning, then they are not important. Only if a student's desire is to speak like a native speaker or even achieve a better "flawless" kind of English does it play a role, but this should be secondary and through the necessity of natural development it will come at a later stage.

## **Communication is Creative**

Stemming directly from the previous point is the need to stress that learning a language is imaginative, creative and even artistic. Since getting the idea across is the foremost objective, things can be said and done in countless ways. This is especially so if standard "rules" play a secondary role allowing each way to be colored by the speaker's personality and distinctive character. Using the target language, then, is to create something new and unique and is not simply a copy of redundant patterns. This is not to say that patterns should not be taught, but it is important to understand that they are not "set in stone." Patterns serve as a fundamental starting point from which the students should move on. Students should be encouraged to "play" with the fluid language.

## **Language is Flexible**

The previous point again leads directly into the next. That is, because each speaker is continually adding their idiosyncrasies as they use the language to express their unique ideas and views, or simply to say things, the language is continually in a state of flux. As a living language it is constantly changing, however minutely, and students should be encouraged to experiment with it. This enables them to get a feel for the "boundaries" that mark the limits of the ways they can use the language and still be understood. Since the language is flexible, the students should, as much as possible, adapt the language to fit their changing needs.

## **Language Learning is Active**

As demonstrated by the points above, learning English conversation cannot be passive. The teacher cannot teach the language to the students any easier than the teacher can make or force the student to learn the language. However, the teacher can **help** the students in their learning of the language. Because using the language is most important for communication, it must be actively sought out by the learner. The students need to be aggressive, putting in as much effort as they expect to get out of it. This means that students need to actively participate in the classroom by asking questions and joining in discussions and other communicative tasks or exercises. To go back to the analogy, we cannot learn how to drive a car or play an instrument by simply watching how it is done. It is only by actual "hands on" experience and practice that allows us to master, or at least gain some control over, the device.

## **Language Learning is Interactive**

Communication is the main purpose of learning a language. This is true whether one is speaking, listening, reading or writing the language. Some forms are more one-way than others, but imparting a thought so that another can understand is the primary objective. In conversation the process is more obviously two-way or multiple-way requiring the restatement of ideas, responses, requesting clarification and more information, etc. Students need to understand that they must become fully involved in the communication process with others (in this case, students) in English to gain competence in it, even if it is foreign and confusing to them. Interaction, and thus communication, in the target language is essential to their progress.

## **Concentrate on Individual Interests**

Since part of learning a language means taking that language and internalizing it, making it your own, it is important that the learners choose topics that are relevant to them. The students will find learning more enjoyable and, as a result, easier if they focus on the things that relate to their personal experiences and interests. Rote memorization is often ineffective as students cannot relate to the phrases and dialogs that have been spoon-fed them from a textbook. To make it real for themselves, students should work toward making a connection with the points to be learned in the text to their own personal experiences thus making it easier to recall. The

magician Harry Lorayne, a "memory genius", has perfected this idea in his memory method. He is able to learn long lists quickly and accurately by making up a short "story" incorporating some experience already fixed in his mind to each name or concept so that those concepts can be readily recalled by bringing to mind the personal experience they are attached to. Over time, once the new information is fixed in one's mind, it is no longer necessary to make the connection to the experience speeding recovery time.

## **Work at Your Individual Level**

Students should be encouraged to work at their own level. When doing an exercise that requires much talking and exchanging of ideas, it is most important that the students focus on the doing of the exercise, that is using the language, rather than on the completion of the task which is only a by-product of the effort. If they find the task too demanding or difficult, they should not hesitate to work at a level they feel comfortable with and not be concerned with the completion of the task. In this case, doing a task well (i.e. staying on task in English and not revealing information in forms other than those designated by the exercise) is more important than its completion.

## **Be Patient With Ambiguities**

Students should be cautioned against worrying over every unknown word or phrase, or to get caught up in an overzealous attempt to pin down every expression with a dictionary meaning. Many things are restated when speaking and with a certain amount of guessing, the gist of the conversation can be understood despite the unknown. Guessing is an important skill that needs to be developed and used often. It is a useful and essential part of comprehending what is being said, particularly in the early stages of conversational development. Guessing should be encouraged with the purpose of moving the students away from relying too heavily on their dictionaries and translating every meaning into their native tongue. Many times, translation has the effect of changing the meaning as much as an inaccurate guess. Various guessing games and pre-listening tasks can be used to develop this concept.

## **Review and Continual Exposure is Required**

The more the student is exposed to the target language, the faster and easier it will be to assimilate the language. Like in all learning, the more time spent, the better the progress made. With language learning especially, it is important that the time spent be done on a daily, or near-daily, basis as short sessions daily are much more effective than cramming all at once. Since most formal classes meet only one or two times a week, the students must make the effort to practice and study on their own. Listening to tapes, reading, studying vocabulary, writing in a diary and verbalizing actions or processes as one performs them are some ways to make meaningful use of individual study time.

## **Learning is Accumulative**

It naturally follows from the previous point that the constant effort is what is important, more so than instant (and too often quickly forgotten) results. The students (as well as the teacher) should not be discouraged from a seeming lack of progress. Language learning on the road to fluency is a long process that cannot be hurried. Keeping a positive attitude and a steady schedule is more important than any immediate results. Students should learn from their mistakes by identifying the weaknesses and correcting them. Although progress often cannot be "seen" or tested, students need to be assured that constant effort provides the necessary foundation which makes it possible to move on to the next stage, and then, only in hindsight is progress noticed. There is no quick way to learn a language by skipping stages. Some methods may work better for some people allowing them to progress faster, but it is not possible to skip from beginner to fluency without passing through the stages in-between.

## **Practice Listening**

Students need to understand the idea that to be a good speaker, it is also necessary to be a good listener. Students should practice active listening by really tuning in to what is being said and reading facial features and gestures, rising and falling intonations, speed and inflections, etc., all of which clue the listener in on the idea which is being communicated. Careful listening also helps improve pronunciation and reveals how conversational language expresses meaning. Listening to "real life" situations (as identified in the next section) is an excellent way to expose the students to the different ways things can be said which will serve the students in their attempts to express themselves.

# Use the "Real World"

Whenever possible, use props and literature from the "real world". Students naturally find these real world contacts much more interesting and stimulating than edited and controlled "student world" exposure. The use of newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, movies, radio, TV, etc. are easy ways to bring the real world into the classroom to increase interest. They also provide a chance to expose the student to the cultural aspects of the language which further help the language take on "character" and make it more real.

## Enjoy the Process

Throughout this difficult first stage, it is important to keep a sense of humor. Many problems and difficulties will arise in the course of study, but the students (as well as the teacher) should not be discouraged. It is important to persevere and tackle the difficulties without losing one's sense of enjoyment in the process. Similiar to suggestions often given when attempting a difficult task, such as keeping to a diet or a daily exercise routine, the learners should reward themselves for their successes, no matter how small, and should not be too hard on their failures.

## Conclusion

The better the language students comprehend the learning process and are aware of the key factors which will aid their foreign language studies, the more likely they will succeed. How this knowledge is imparted and the necessary skills developed is up to the creativity of the teacher and the type of class or student being taught. In some cases, reviewing the process in the student's native language may be the best way. In other situations, short exercises and activities developed to make a specific point may work better. Regardless of the method used, the students will be better equipped to enjoy and succeed in their language learning.

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