Teaching Hacks for English Speaking Classes at Japanese Universities

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研究ノート

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1. Introduction

Foreign language classes – including but not limited to English – are usually compulsory for 1st-year students at university in Japan. In this short paper, I will address two of the issues I have faced in teaching 1st-year English Speaking classes at the same Japanese university, first as a part-time teacher (from 2009) and presently as a full-time teacher (since 2018). The first issue is a lack of active participation from students. As students are assigned to these classes as opposed to choosing them, there are often issues involving unresponsive students who perhaps suffer from a lack of motivation. The second issue which this paper will address is how to incorporate pronunciation practice into Speaking classes. This paper is based on a presentation given by the author at a conference organized by the Yamagata chapter of JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching) in September, 2024.

2. About the author's classes

At the author's university, which is a small, private university located in the Tohoku area of Japan, the students who choose English as a foreign language take a placement test, the results of which determine which class they are placed in. The students are placed in one of 8 classes, from level 1 (the lowest) to level 8 (the highest). Since 2018, I have taught the top 2 levels of students (levels 7 and 8) for one Speaking class ("EAP III") in the Spring semester and one Speaking class ("EAP V") in the Autumn semester. The number of students in each class is usually around 20. Both EAP III and EAP V

courses are taught using the same textbook, Encounters on Campus (Critchley, 2018). The aims of the classes are to get students speaking a lot with a lot of different partners, adapting the textbook vocabulary to their own situations and improving their pronunciation. The textbook, which is aimed at Japanese university students and contains instructions in Japanese to go with the English content, was chosen because it is fairly simple, it has role plays which the students can write and practice, and the subject matter involves talking to foreign students and teachers at university. The author's university offers significant subsidies for students who go to study abroad and the study abroad programs are available to all students regardless of grade or course, so it was felt that the textbook's content fits with the university's aims of encouraging students to study English overseas, as well as helping the students to acquire practical language skills including conversations with native English speakers.

3. Common issues for teachers of Speaking Classes

3.1 Lack of active participation / unresponsive students

The Speaking classes I teach are compulsory, so, even for the students in the highest-level class, it doesn't mean that they necessarily wanted to be in that class or even that they enjoy speaking in English. Most of the students are positive, but certainly not all. In order to get the best out of the students, there are of course a number of things which are important, such as creating interesting classes, giving a lot of opportunities for students to express themselves and finding the right balance between the different strands of speaking, listening, reading and writing in each class. Using a textbook in class which has sections for dialog, vocabulary, writing exercises and role plays, makes it fairly easy to find this balance; to make classes more interesting I also like to include a number of conversation activities, one of which I will introduce later. There is one thing, however, which I have found to be extremely useful for class management and facilitating active participation, and that is arranging seating plans.

3.1.1 The importance of seating plans

Seating plans are rarely discussed at conferences and are often taken for granted. Unlike at junior high school or high school, where students are assigned seats by the teacher, at the university level students are usually left to decide themselves where they want to sit. As such, a typical class of around 20 students at the start of the first lesson of a course, may look something like Figure 1. Figure 1 shows the actual seating arrangements for a class of 21 students in the first lesson of a Speaking course in April 2024. The first-year students usually don't know each other well at the start of the course, so sit on their own or, sometimes, in groups of two or three. However, for speaking practice in class, a partner is essential, so I move students to sit in pairs, but I also move them so that they are arranged in groups of four. This makes it easy for students to have conversations with the person in front or behind them as well as next to them, and of course it also makes it easy to work in groups. Hence, from lesson 2, I put students into a seating plan similar to Figure 2 which shows the same class as Figure 1, but rearranged into groups of 4, or in one case, 5. Usually, half way through the course I reassign the seats so that students do not have the same partner or group for the entirety of the course.

This kind of seating plan also facilitates an essential part of my classes, which is ad lib role plays. In Encounters on Campus (Critchley, 2018), students are required to write their own role plays based on the theme of each unit. After writing them and getting feedback from their partner and also from me (I require them to submit their written role plays on Google Forms which I check and correct), the students practice the role plays they have written by reading them with their partner. After that, the students find a new partner and have an ad lib role play without – as much as possible – reading from their textbooks. The benefit of the seating plan in Figure 2 is that the students in the aisle seats can rotate easily to form a new pair with those sitting in the centre seats or by the wall. After 3 or 4 rotations I usually ask the students to switch seats with the partner at that time; the students then change roles and the ones who are now in the aisle seats rotate in the opposite direction so that they will form pairs with different students. If there is an odd number of students, I can join in the activity as well. I have found that this activity is popular with students and, importantly, no student is left on their own. "Find a partner"

Figure 1

EAP III Level 8 Lesson 1 seating plan (April 2024)

40.	39.	38. M	37.	36. M	35. M	34. F	33.
32. M	31. M	30. M	29. M	28. M	27.	26.	25. F
24.	23. M	22.	21. F	20. F	19.	18. F	17. F
16.	15. M	14.	13. F	12. F	11.	10.	9. M
8.	7.	6. F	5.	4.	3. F	2.	1.

Teacher

Note: M = Male; F = Female

Figure 2

EAP III Level 8 Lesson 2 seating plan (April 2024)

40.	39.	38. F	37. F	36. M	35. M	34.	33.
32.	31.	30. M	29. M	28. F	27. F	26. F	25. F
24.	23.	22. F	21. F	20. M	19. M	18. M	17. M
16.	15.	14. M	13. M	12. F	11. F	10.	9. M
8.	7.	6.	5.	4.	3.	2.	1.

Teacher

Note: M = Male; F = Female

activities in which students need to walk around the class and approach one or more students to have a conversation can be very challenging for students who are shy and can lead to students not being able to find a partner quickly, or students only talking to their friends or members of the same sex. The use of the seating plan described above eliminates these problems and makes the lessons both more efficient and, arguably, enjoyable for all.

3.1.2 Conversation games

Lessons based around a textbook usually follow a standard pattern. In order to provide extra stimulus for students, it is beneficial to supplement the textbook activities with other communicative activities. One particularly enjoyable and effective game for English learners in Japan is "So Says Japan" (Tanuki Games). In this card game – of which there are three main versions at time of writing: Food, Family & Friends, and Weird & Wacky – students take turns reading survey questions, which were asked to young people in Japan, and the 5 survey answers on each card. The other students must guess which was the most common, or least common, response (the reader of the card can choose which to ask). After the answer has been revealed, the student with the card asks the same question to each student in turn, for conversation practice. The steps – as explained to the students - are as follows:

1. "The question is ~" (the first student in each group – Student A – reads the question on the card)
2. "The answers are ~" (Student A reads the 5 answers on the card)
3. "The top answer is ~ with _%" (Student A reads the top – or bottom – answer on the card, and the percentage of people who gave that answer)
4. "What is the bottom answer?" (Student A asks which is the bottom – or top – answer)
5. Check the answers (Student A checks what the other students think is the right answer and then reveals the correct answer)
6. "What do you think?" (Student A asks the other students in turn to give their own answer to the question)

When these 6 steps have been completed, the second student in the group takes a new card and the game continues. The steps above are a simplified version of the official rules which come with the game, which also includes a foldable sheet for keeping the score. In my classes, I leave it up to the students to decide if they want to keep score or not, as the main aim is not to win the game, but to enjoy the conversation.

3.2 How to incorporate pronunciation practice into a textbook-based lesson

Pronunciation practice is regarded by many researchers as an essential component of Speaking classes (Kissling, 2018; Celce-Murcia et al, 2010), and, as previous research has shown, is something which students want to practice in class (Koike, 2014; Fec, 2019). While some textbooks include activities for practicing pronunciation, others, such as Encounters on Campus, do not, except for the recommendation to "shadow" the conversation – "repeat what you hear as you listen" – for each unit's dialog. There are a number of simple ways to practice pronunciation - both segmental and suprasegmental – in class.

The first is to practice the English vowel and consonant phonemes. The students can be given a list of phonemes with their International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols, such as the one in Appendix A for practice in class with the teacher. Games involving cards with the IPA symbols can then be used for familiarization and pronunciation practice. Such games can include *karuta* where students have to choose the correct card spoken by the teacher. One popular game in my class is for each group to try to make as many English words as possible from a set of vowel and consonant phoneme cards. The challenge for students is not just to use the cards to make valid English words, but to be able to pronounce them correctly as well. For example, students might make the following words:

| /b/ | /iː/ | /tʃ/ | = "beach" |

| /ʃ/ | / ɪ / | /p/ | = "ship" |

The second is to practice syllables. Explicit teaching of syllables to Japanese learners of English can help them to better understand and produce English speech (He & Fec, 2023). Many of the students I teach have a poor understanding of what a syllable is, due to the phonological differences between Japanese and English and the lack of explanation of syllables at school, so explanation of what a syllable is, and practice helps them to understand the sound structure of English words and the importance of nuclear stress. One example of a way to practice this is to get students to write *haiku* – poems consisting of 5-, 7-, and 5-syllable lines – in English. As a first step, I give students the first and last lines of a *haiku* and ask them to write the middle line. For example,

The best school lunch food. X X X X X X. I want to eat it.

Students can then be asked to write their own full haiku in English and check the syllable count in the poems written by other students.

The textbook itself can be used to practice both phonemes and syllables. One way to check understanding of phonemes and word stress is to ask students to listen to the textbook dialog and underline certain vowel phonemes in their textbook as they hear them. For example, for Unit 1, students are asked to underline words where the main stressed vowel sound is /æ/ (such as "thanks", "international" and "classes") and contrast them with the vowel sounds in words containing the letter "a" but which have different stressed vowel sounds (such as "ahead", seminar" and "awesome"). Students are also asked to identify the number of syllables and the main stressed vowel sound in words in the vocabulary sections.

4. Conclusion

In this short paper, I have summarized some of the methods I have used in my Speaking classes to make them more efficient, effective and entertaining for students. A colleague once complained to me that in his class "the boys only talk to the boys and the

girls only talk to the girls"; this is something which does not happen in my classes thanks to the use of seating plans and seat rotation. The seat rotation, when used with activities such as short role plays, allows students to interact with a lot of other students without the pressure of being watched or the stress of having to approach students by themselves to make a conversation. In Speaking classes, students should also have the opportunity to practice pronunciation in order to help them make their speech more intelligible to others. There are many ways to practice pronunciation, some of which have been highlighted in this paper, and the author believes that pronunciation can and should be taught in speaking classes, whether they are based around a textbook or not.

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Appendix A   IPA phonetic symbols (発音記号)

Consonants

/p/ - Peter Parker

/b/ - Big, bad Bob

/t/ - Tall Tim teaches tennis.

/d/ - Dear Dad

/k/ - Keep cake cool.

/g/ - Get good grades.

/f/ - Four fat fish

/v/ - Viv loves violins.

/θ/ - Through thick and thin.

/ð/ - They gather feathers.

/s/ - See Sam smile.

/z/ - Zed's zoo

/ʃ/ - She shaves sheep.

/ʒ/ - Measure Asia.

/tʃ/ - Cheap as chips

/dʒ/ - Judge John

_____

/m/ - Meet Mum on Monday.

/n/ - No need, Ben.

/l/ - Live and learn.

/l/ - Tell Bill.

/r/ - Run, rabbit run!

/h/ - Help Helen.

/ŋ/ - King Kong

/j/ - Use your yacht, Yui.

/w/ - What? Why? Where? When?

Vowels

Short vowels

/æ/	c<u>a</u>mpus, f<u>a</u>ncy, *<u>a</u>sk (GA), *p<u>a</u>th (GA)
/e/	<u>e</u>gg, g<u>e</u>t, w<u>e</u>nt, <u>a</u>ny, sw<u>ea</u>t
/ɪ/	<u>i</u>nk, f<u>i</u>sh, w<u>o</u>men
/ɒ/	*d<u>o</u>g (GB), *<u>o</u>ctopus (GB), *s<u>o</u>ccer (GB)
/ʌ/	c<u>u</u>p, l<u>u</u>nch, d<u>o</u>ne, M<u>o</u>nday
/ʊ/ or /u/	p<u>u</u>t, b<u>oo</u>k, w<u>o</u>man

Long vowels

/ɑː/	<u>a</u>rm, c<u>al</u>m, *<u>a</u>sk (GB), *p<u>a</u>th (GB), *d<u>o</u>g (GA), *<u>o</u>ctopus (GA)
/iː/	<u>ea</u>t, <u>e</u>ven, s<u>ee</u>m
/ɜː/	b<u>i</u>rd, w<u>o</u>rm, p<u>u</u>rple
/ɔː/	<u>all</u>, <u>or</u>, r<u>aw</u>, p<u>our</u>, r<u>oar</u>
/uː/	f<u>oo</u>d, j<u>ui</u>ce, ch<u>ew</u>, r<u>u</u>le

Dipthongs

/aɪ/	<u>i</u>ce, <u>i</u>dea, st<u>y</u>le
/eɪ/	<u>ai</u>m, ch<u>a</u>nge, w<u>eigh</u>
/au/	<u>ou</u>t, h<u>ow</u>, h<u>our</u>
/ɔɪ/	<u>oi</u>l, c<u>oi</u>n, b<u>oy</u>
/ou/ or /əʊ/	<u>o</u>nly, b<u>oa</u>t, <u>o</u>ld
/ɪə/	*<u>ear</u>, *w<u>eir</u>d, *car<u>eer</u> (all GB; GA is /ɪr/)
/eə/	*<u>air</u>, *ch<u>ai</u>r, *w<u>ear</u> (all GB; GA is /er/)

The Schwa

/ə/	<u>a</u>long, <u>u</u>pon, <u>A</u>merica, sugar, dinn<u>er</u>

Key: GA = General American. GB = General British

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