



## Making Second Language Students Movie Stars: Activating Alternatives to Intensive Grammar

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# Making Second Language Students Movie Stars: Activating Alternatives to Intensive Grammar

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign (FL) or second language (SL or L 2) in Japan is frozen in time despite the Japanese Ministry of Education's frequent mission statements, and, in particular, their specific 2003 Action Plan. The latter's aim was "to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'". This directive was backed up by a major increase in budgeting. However, the funding seems to have been used wastefully and ineffectively. One major specification was for Japanese high school teachers of English to attain a TOEFL score of over 550. This has not happened yet, and is unlikely to any time soon. Equivalent scores in English proficiency exams are hard to pinpoint exactly, but this is around 800 points on TOEIC or Pre-grade 1 on the *Eiken* (or STEP, Japan's only Ministry of Education/MEXT approved domestic English examination). STEP 1 and TOEIC 900 plus (990 points being the maximum) are the closest to native fluency.

A mere 50% of high school teachers achieve the state's asking (*Japan Times*, May 2015). Even fewer pre-high school teachers do. This is an obstacle to the late and limited introduction of English teaching at elementary schools as it lacks adequate specialist teaching power. Not surprisingly, then, students themselves are also failing to acquire English proficiency, especially in terms of active communication skills (*Japan Times*, March 2015). Passive intensive grammar translation (or IG) persists as the main method at most levels of English teaching in Japan. Intensive grammar is top-down in essence, making learners inactive vessels to be filled by rules. Japanese students receive years of high school English grammar which they seldom put to use. Passive knowledge needs unlocking dynamically to motivate meaningful inter-learner sharing.

We present firstly an overview of the problem with the predominant second language teaching approach in Japan (**2. Japan's TEFL World According to Intensive Grammar**). Passive grammar teaching contrasts radically with global standards (**3. How Early Learning Second Language Learning Works**). The final sections explain an alternative approach with various

samples as a counter balance to the IG approach, as the latter limits communicative reality by insisting that only approved answers are correct. It is argued that recording students' personal-photo-based interactive free-style presentations can lead to more real-life acquisition. Students can succeed at speaking as the stars in their own short English movies (Wood, 2015).

## 2. Japan's TEFL World According to Intensive Grammar

After Latin became a dead language in England centuries ago, the Roman alphabet was recycled in an effort to unify English's erratic orthographical standards. From the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, Latin was a model for devising linguistic rules. Grammar translation was emphasized (Howatt and Smith, 2014). As countries were far less connected than they are now, English retained a strong geographical core and nuclear identity. At the same time, trade and imperialism extended its range and usage globally.

From the nineteenth century, spoken TEFL gained priority in many countries. Communicative language teaching (CLT) attracted considerable interest. Starting half a century ago, CLT aimed for more real-life communication. Now, billions of users and would-be users are just clicks away from each other on easily accessible global-information highways, changing the scale of communication completely. Though the word "English" as a subject name is often misunderstood as geographical, there is no single central authority, or any individual entity, such as British or American English. (This is also true of literature, although many Japanese academics may disagree adamantly.) English means an entire world trying to communicate with itself. Text-bound IG presumes it can encapsulate the wealth of English linguistic and grammatical multiplicities into one neat and comprehensible formula. However, they develop, divide and diversify too rapidly. IG erroneously implies that one form is superior to another. Tertiary education must resist such myths promulgated by commercial text tunnel-vision.

Jostling definitions of grammar also put intensive grammar's validity in doubt. There are frequent, random swings back and forth in the pecking order; from form to purpose; from syntax to morphology; from semantics to phonology; and, from discourse to the single sentence. Many of the snowballing studies worldwide about teaching language assume that English and grammar are synonymous and equally teachable. Even if English were both, only the greatest multilingual minds could attempt the task of teaching them on this basis. Grammar approaches imply a vast knowledge of all of the world's mother tongues or "L1s". Such prodigies would have to talk in tongues to scale the world's modern-day Towers of Babel, and in any case, they would surely secure better paid positions for much less effort elsewhere. The truth is, however, that English teachers struggle to cope with even two languages, and some with just one.

Most problematic of all in Japan is the emphasis on passive reading over active speaking. The traditional approach makes the prospect of the government's 2003 goals for students to be successful communicators increasingly remote with each grammar class that is ground out. The entire thinking behind the system needs overhauling completely. Teaching in Japan has long used the grammar-teaching ideas of a century or more ago, like the outdated "eight parts of speech" (Onions, 1904) even evident in recent textbooks. Texts that are explained in more contemporary grammatical terminology are also of moot use to most students as few are sufficiently conversant with abstract linguistic terminology.

Communicative language teaching alternatives have challenged the traditional "grammar-as-god" syndrome during recent decades. Yet, grammar's "textifiability" embalms and embeds it as a popular perennial with school authorities aiming to constrain classes. The result is to limit language in the form of intensive grammar over more extensive approaches. This demotes fundamental oral communication skills to lesser ranks or mere afterthoughts. Research indicates that intermediate learners can improve grammar and reading skills through extensive listening just as much as through explicit instruction (e.g. Verspoor and Winitz, 1997).

Grammar translation is still the softest option for both new and senior instructors alike. Grammar seduces teachers into thinking they are the cosmic centers of a one-way universe. They imagine students absorbing in awe the scripted monologues they repeat year in, year out, like the Words of Gods carved into stone. However, their empty sounds just fall on sleepy ears. In the traditional approach, language is misguidedly divided into isolated linguistic units, taught sequentially by explaining grammatical rules, and by immediately correcting subsequent errors. This methodology is based on the superstition that grammar taught linearly transmutes magically into definitive knowledge then functional mastery if drilled enough; like lead to gold. Study after study acquiesces automatically to the belief in grammar teaching's birth right to be at acquisition's epicenter, as often as not in the context of intensive grammar translation reading.

Superstition maintains a special status in Japan. College and high school candidates traditionally pay and pray for Lady Luck to raise their results. One of the biggest centers for this is a few coins' throw away from where this study was made. Students buy written fortunes at shrines in the hope of getting to the school of their dreams. No matter how culturally quaint this seems, such counterfeit customs suggest an education system similarly subject to phony folklore. Isn't it possible then that many teaching practices themselves also default to blinkered beliefs?

In contrast to intensive grammar, Krashen (1994) and Long (1996) argued that meaning is more important. Though profound interaction between explicit and implicit knowledge remains unproven, grammar prophets and proponents promptly pass over other promising possibilities as passing fads. Both these polar opposites (all grammar or as little as possible) represent the

bookends of a contradictory continuum within which countless grammatical theories compete for footholds in the language teaching belief system. Nearly all of them accept grammar's divine right to rule. Even notable examples, like attending to linguistic forms without teaching grammar head on (Ellis, 2001) still pay homage to the God of Grammar. Second language teaching's playing deck stays stacked in intensive grammar's favor because of the global commercial network of vested publishing and testing interests supporting it, especially in Japan. Teachers risk being passive IG book sellers instead of active communication coaches.

So, despite the decades of CLT research contesting grammar's monopoly, most classroom practices in Japan ultimately revert to age-old tradition. Communicative Language Teaching is still not well understood, accepted or practiced. This is especially so in a culture where textbooks command center stage as the controversial objects of much governmental and ministerial control. Unsurprisingly, spontaneous interaction, communication's building block, rarely if ever features in standard language syllabi. These seem dedicated to exam training, even after students have run the gutting gauntlet of Japan's notorious "entrance exam hell".

Of course, this is not to suggest that grammar teachers are in any way inferior educators. They are every bit as dedicated as anyone else, and many of them much harder workers. However, their excessive dependency on intensive grammar and reading (IG and IR), excluding other potentially more effective options, simply stultifies students' hopes of communicating. The passive intensive grammar approach is revered by those in authority as the safest haven in an educational ethos bound to and by tradition. Narrowly intensive approaches usually get both the first and final words in language-teaching, whatever a class's official name may claim. Using the word "Communication" in a syllabus title rarely actually entails or guarantees any.

At this writer's college, for example, the main school-wide English course for the majority of students is rigidly tied to grammar and testing. More than a dozen teachers (including several native English speakers) must use the same textbook (Shibagaki, 2013). Japanese English grammar teachers replaced a contemporary communicative curriculum on the grounds that it was too soon to be taught. All the grammar-dominated years up to college were somehow not enough to allow students a chance to attempt to communicate. Sadly, the excuse for the same old grammar solution is just as often as not the cause of the problem's persistence.

Though the text that freshmen must buy for their sixteen-session semester is called *Grammar to Communication* in Japanese the title's window-dressing final word is still grammar. Ten classes are for direct test preparation, regular tests and test feedback. The contents feature unnatural constructions and contorted translations, drilled intensively in any time remaining. One example is a marathon sentence with multiple clauses. Even when translated correctly (only one student in my class came close) makes little sense because of unexplained opaque Japanese

cultural features. Baseball's domination in Japan and its largely chauvinistic domain, like business and politics, are never clarified. The Japanese version is as forced as the English:

It goes without saying that, every male student who is attending a senior high school, and who is playing for a senior high school baseball club, is dreaming of playing at the boys' annual national Japanese senior high school baseball tournament, which is taking place at the event called *Koshien*.

(Shibagaki, 2013)

The hundreds of takers are false beginners after seven years of dry high-school grammar, devoid of interest or interaction. Their study's core was constant mind-numbing testing, followed by grammar entrance exams with questions that would perplex even native speakers. These consist of mostly L 2 to L 1 translation of long and contorted hybrid sentences, disconnected from reality. Students' already negative and regressive perceptions of L 2 learning in high school are simply reinforced by having to suffer more grammar and more testing. The sad reality is reflected in the declining interest in such IG programs nationwide mandated by the ministry of education, which contrast sharply with the huge enrolments for classes featuring photos. The former suffer shrinking enrollments, while the latter regularly get many times the average number of takers.

Teaching in Japan is a microcosm of a top-down society. Academic staff members are expected to obey administrations without question. Negotiation is no part of society's status quo. The textbooks to which teaching surrenders stipulate one correct answer per question. Communicative reality takes a back seat as there are at least as many ways of saying something as there are users (both native and non-native) of a language. Grammatical subservience acts as an unstoppable barrage of immovable barriers to communication. Students stay gob-smacked.

People have conversed well enough without grammar since communication commenced. In the so-called TEFL "debate" whether grammar should even be used or not is non-negotiable. All sides are addicted to grammar as their indisputable authority. Excluding it would be heresy. However, there is neither any single definitive or exhaustive version of global English grammar, let alone any scientific proof of its exclusive claim to enabling communication.

Any attempts to produce a global English grammar could not keep up with all the changes and expansions, the varieties and peculiarities popping up like new mushrooms every morning. This is especially the case for social media and spoken English as opposed to the staid and more limited lexicons of grammar translation. The greater frequency and ungraspable proliferation of the former threaten the latter's relevance to real communication. In relevant and timely amounts, occasional grammar pointers may help, but not when they become a litany to IG divinity. Grammar and writing are distant seconds in real-time, but still rule the L 2 classroom.

Judging by their failure to achieve the Japanese education department's goals for students' (and teachers') English communication proficiency, the official programs are fatally flawed. Consistently low scores on international communication tests suggest that top-down teaching doesn't yield worthwhile results. As long as grammar is god, acquisition will be beyond reach. Language teaching's lopsidedness is due to the fallacy of grammar's importance. It is a resource, but only one of many. Its dominance stops other aspects of acquisition from fulfilling their roles. Until this is fully acknowledged, any real progress in language-teaching will remain impossible. To rectify this top-heavy approach, we should first look for guidance to the very origins of SL acquisition, namely pre-school and kindergarten practice in successful learning environments.

### 3. How Early Learning Second Language Learning Works

Even in full-time learning environments where English is an official first language, three to four early school years' study are required for speakers whose L1 is not English to acquire a vocabulary like their English-speaking peers (TESOL, 2006). Over seven years of early school English study is needed for them to achieve communicative proficiency. However, this can take well over eight years if post-adolescence occurs before acquisition is complete because of the attendant social, physical and emotional changes.

In Japan, a modicum of English has only recently begun to be introduced toward the end of elementary school, just prior to adolescence. It comes as no surprise then that this new generation is struggling to acquire the Japanese education ministry mandated high-school English proficiency target. Only 20% of the first intake of students in the new program got STEP 3 (TOEIC 300 points) by the end of junior high (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2016). The senior high school target of STEP 2 (or TOEIC 550) on graduation is achieved by only half of the 2% of the population that take it, which includes company workers often required to take it many times to get promotion (TOEIC Data & Analysis, 2015).

As many adults with unlimited opportunity and resources fail the education ministry's basic high-school goals, Japan's long-term state programs themselves must also have flunked. To achieve the levels demanded requires full-time programs with qualified and experienced native-speaking teachers. As this is not the case, the woeful results so far are only to be expected. There are too few internationally qualified native-speaking teachers, and no comprehensive programs to teach their Japanese peers. Among the world's richest countries, Japan's education spending has remained the lowest of all for years as a percentage of its gross domestic product (Japan Times, 2015). In a declining economy, even more school spending cutbacks are likely.

The following developmental stages for L2 learners overlap:

- the beginning stage, where the L 1 (or the learners' first language) only is used;
- the non-verbal period, where learners listen and build their English, often with no production (they may gesture to communicate and rehearse phrases quietly to themselves);
- the emerging stage, where they may use unoriginal one- or two-word responses to questions (these are simple formulaic expressions, but vital to social interaction with others);
- the developing stage, where memorized sentences become spontaneous talk, but not mastery.

Learners often make long-term pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar errors. Each stage can last from many months up to several years. Going back and forth between stages is natural and normal. Transfer errors from the first language, like pronunciation mistakes, are frequent. Even young children often have an accent. Developmental errors make up the majority of mistakes and are common to all learners of second languages. As they have little vocabulary, early learners sometimes overuse general verbs like "do". Errors, though, are not only normal, but vital for progress.

Language aptitude is an individual learning skill, which cannot be increased. However, the earlier the age at which acquisition begins, the better the results. Especially for pronunciation and grammar fundamentals, starting from six years old is optimum. Starting later helps vocabulary growth and skills development more instead. There is no age within childhood that is too early to start learning an L 2, if it is in a full-time English learning environment taught by ESL professionals. Not surprisingly, starting late in a depleted environment with teachers not trained according to the appropriate international TESOL standards (as in Japan) can create student disillusion, and delay or deny their achievement and acquisition.

One persistent prejudice in Japan has been for the L 1 to be taught perfectly before attempting a second. Clearly, this panders to those not wanting the L 2 taught for whatever reason to prolong L 1 studies by being over-demanding, a kind of reverse linguistic imperialism. When children develop two languages at the same time, both languages can build on each other with potentially better results than in the case of monolingual study alone (Nicol, 2001).

For example, mental executive control (which is active in cognitive flexibility and updating the brain's working memory) is more developed in users of two or more languages (Mechelli, 2004; Miyake, 2000). The implicit widespread belief of most Japanese teachers' pedagogical policy favors the mother-tongue monolingual approach. Embarking on English as late as possible, and stressing intensive grammar, are the final nails in the L 2 coffin. By defying language's real nature (communicative interaction) students' acquisition is compromised.

Both internal and external community engagement in learning and overall development is crucial (Vygotsky, 1978) but largely absent from Japanese policy aims. Children develop skills and knowledge within their physical and language communities, both in and out of class. This means



that teachers need to learn who their students are and how to meet their needs. Experiences reflecting and supporting such communities (which may also include virtual communities like social media even for young learners) can have a profound impact on learning. The role that EFL teachers adopt can and should stimulate experience and accelerate learning.

Exchanging knowledge, information and experience via the creation of a living language community makes acquisition powerful by making the situation valid and real. This can involve ordinary everyday teaching practices. The most important thing is to communicate openness via something as simple as a greeting or a casual conversation. Community-friendly newsletters with class photos and step-by-step activities are one example. Currently in Japan, however, such materials are more often used for promotional showcasing by school administrative officials in an attempt to attract enough students from a declining population of younger people. This risks the opposite effect by compromising potential language communities in classes and schools. Sincerity is vital for real development as it helps build an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

Play is vital to socio-cognitive language development from two and a half through five, but there is no reason to confine this to the youngest learners only. Play can motivate any age. The relationship between language development and play is two-way: language allows learners to adopt roles as well as to negotiate the rules and goals of play. Dramatic or pretend play stimulates the development of language. Play fuels development through imagination and symbolic functions. Unfortunately for Japan, passive intensive grammar is an antonym for play.

Symbolic functions promote the ability to understand that objects, actions, words and people can represent something else. They are the foundation for conceptual thinking and literacy and are at the heart of language learning. For students of any age, play is a safe space to try out new words. Even if they do not know the exact word for something, they feel less embarrassed when using a different name for it in play. Thus, a pencil can be a microphone or a baton, and a video recorder can be a movie studio! Teachers and students can try to describe their own and each other's actions, like composing stage directions in a play, then add questions.

Focusing on function-based language models in real-life contexts can be more productive than explaining abstract IG rules in the L1. L2 learners often fail to benefit from explicit grammar instruction in their first language. Teachers who try to dissect grammar can become totally lost in the face of the countless exceptions that are often inexplicable, or help little even when they can be explained. Exceptions are the rule in language, and they are continually increasing as language develops instinctively according to its users, not to scientific rules. English is based more than any other language on boundless varieties and exceptions.

Therefore, more than anything else, we should encourage unregulated and spontaneous interaction in the L2 between the learners themselves. This means developing activities that

encourage real inter-learner dialogue rather than just requiring them to be passive listeners to imperfect grammatical conjecturing in their own language. Only when learners make fatal communication errors should anything be recast, and even then, not in grammatical terms.

They should always be guided or at least encouraged to seek more detail from one another. They need to feel secure and successful even when they are beginners. That is not going to happen by throwing every minor mistake they make back into their faces. It would be unacceptable to native speakers who make grammatical mistakes every conversation they have. For fledgling speakers of a new language, it is even more important to let them make mistakes that are essential to developing proficiency without the recrimination of grammar policing!

Activities must be flexible and open-ended so learners feel competent but still develop. Reducing all the activity to a right-or-wrong only grammar exercise is anathema to acquisition. All learners come with a variety of culturally learned styles of interaction, even in such a homogeneous nation as Japan. Some will be outgoing. Others will be quiet listeners. Therefore, language-rich activities matching differences need providing, interspersed with frequent breaks. For learners at the beginning and emerging stages in particular, regular down time is vital to begin absorbing and permuting what they hear, as so much of it will be new to them. Therefore, having age-appropriate and motivating back-up activities can help enhance developmental areas, cognitive, spatial, motor, linguistic, social, and so on. This makes learning a two-way street.

While by no means exclusive to English education in Japan, many classes professing to teach language are mere sounding boards for the teacher's ego, the textbook, or both. Active, meaningful participation is invariably excised from the contents of the class. Students are reduced to passive roles that produce few results. Frequently redundant "activities" include:

- repeating what the teacher says without understanding or reading the textbook aloud verbatim;
- memorizing phrases or patterns that have little real-life application or are quickly forgotten;
- solving grammatical problems with no basis in reality merely for exam regurgitation;
- filling in blank spaces with numbers or letters with no communicative relevance; and,
- L 2 to L 1 translation of unnatural language only for the teacher's convenience and self-image.

Most courses last a short and sporadic twenty two hours, over four or five months, including breaks of several weeks. This is not conducive to any class, least of all for L 2 study. They serve next to no acquisitive or communicative purpose. The goal is usually reduced to remembering impractical and non-transferrable items taught on a linear basis, thus mistaking acquisition as one-dimensional. Such courses sidestep the very essence of language learning. Meaningful interaction between two or more participants in a target language forms the cellular development of all communication by creating the necessary atmosphere and opportunity.

The tendency for most language teaching is towards intensive reading, writing and grammar, or intensive listening, but still over-stressing accuracy and grammar (IG) at the expense of holistic and global fluency via extensive approaches. The inertia that the former style creates often literally paralyzes the more important extensive abilities. As these are the most important for achieving communication, most teaching fails. Struggling for whole classes to comprehend a tiny piece of the linguistic jigsaw puzzle of communication may result in the temporary mastery of that single piece. However, the puzzle is enormous and ever-changing.

Extensive approaches are essential building blocks of elementary fluency. Without these crucial components, genuine acquisition becomes impossible. We forsake fluency by over-explaining specks of language instead of looking beyond them to the vast communication forest in which they acquire meaning. This is not the same as the huge language concordances made possible by computer analysis, primarily based on literature, and potentially passive. Extensive skills cannot be found in the myopic analysis of the minutiae blocking basic fluency.

#### **4. An Alternative Approach**

To bring students to the center of events, and thus make interaction the core of the class, students' own photos, when employed dynamically, have a unique impact (Wood, 2015). Originally, this method was tested with older and more advanced spoken communication classes. Depending on class size, two or more students brought photos of their choosing. These were enlarged for optimum visibility. The other students were pre-taught basic vocabulary items by the teacher, who described the picture's main contents. This is also a skill pertinent to TOEIC.

In addition, basic control questions were presented each session until students could use them fluently. Their role was to continue asking questions in turn to one student with a photo to elicit as much basic information as possible to develop a good knowledge in English about the photo. After asking the other students, the final round was to choose one of the photos to get more varied information using as many different kinds of question as possible. In an average size class of up to thirty students this generates from five hundred to a thousand spontaneous interactions in a ninety minute class. Over fifteen classes, this technique immerses students in many thousands of interchanges as they speed up, far more than any text ever could.

Basing the technique's development on the strongly positive response of successive spoken communication classes, using personal photos was adapted to written communication, and also for use with every ability level. The parameters needed changing, but the amount of interaction was still greater than any text could achieve. For writing, students wrote a short background description on printed copies of their photos to pass around. Others then wrote as many questions

as they could. Each time they read previous students' questions to ensure all content in the classes was unique. Students rewrite their original description in more detail with the help of their peers' questions. They write several versions of their description by expanding and explaining the context, using multifaceted perspectives. They aim to make it understandable to English users anywhere. Follow-up activities include, with one unique point from each photo essay on one page, copied and distributed, trying to match the key phrases with photo essays.

Comprehension questioning is synonymous with intensive reading and writing (IR/IW) and constitutes by far the most common approach in TEFL, as is clear from the majority of mainline publications. However, it is not the key to fluency, which requires more extensive approaches like ER, EW and so on. Overwhelmingly intensive study affords little or no understanding, enjoyment or development, thus defying a major purpose of communication (Macalister, 2016). It often involves overly repetitive study. Study without valid purpose or meaning rarely takes root in students' minds. Rather, it is something they subconsciously avoid as their interest and attention decline or just disappear. The purpose of communication is and always has been enjoyment, a factor rarely if ever acknowledged in too many language classes. What we enjoy we remember, especially if we have a personal stake in the content and execution of a class. If we don't involve students, our endeavors may be wasted.

The Japanese foreign language IG-style classes can lower students' chances in international communication exams like TOEIC. While that test includes token intensive grammar questions in the earlier sections, the ability to associate words at speed (a skill best acquired by using ER/EL) is vital to achieving even average scores. This holds for both listening and reading, indicating a fundamental mismatch with Japanese IR/IL. Many students do not answer important EL/ER questions at all mainly as they lack experience of the skills required.

For Japanese educational authorities, the stated solution remains the same – blame the teachers, who in turn blame their students. The end result is more grammar, followed by more tests, with even poorer outcomes. Having prepared hundreds of students for TOEIC with significant success by adopting an EL/ER approach (Wood, 2015) its validity is indicated. One possible cause of the problem may be the difference in the disparate scales of Japanese and English use. The latter has many times more users and varieties than the former. While there are many countries with similar numbers to Japan, few rival its rigid attitude to language, causing linguistic isolation for learners. Approaching English through a Japanese language mindset thus proves problematic in combination with an overly passive intensive grammar approach.

## 5.1 Integrating the Method and Recent Samples and Analysis

The original method for speaking and writing has been detailed (Wood 2015). Due to its positive effects, it was extended in all directions. Final year seminar students, from low to high ability, gained significant communicative confidence helping many to secure employment in careers requiring high level English communication ability. The method has also been successfully extended to younger students, both in the most and least able groups, for spoken and written communication. To integrate both spoken and written approaches, in students' most recent classes up to 2016, instead of separating the skills, they were combined as follows:

- Students write a few sentences to describe the most basic details of their chosen photo.
- Descriptions are circulated and other students write questions to find out more information.
- Students receive their comments and prioritize which they most want to answer.
- Students revise their original description to present to the rest of the class.
- The other students think of new questions to ask in turn at speed.
- The teacher records the interchanges with minimum intervention to promote independence.
- Students are assigned to transcribe them and correct any mistakes that they think they made.

To compare effects, below are some short case studies from previous spoken conversation classes, and then from the integrated classes.

## 5.2 Case Study One: 2014-2015

*Sample 1* A picture of Speaker A making a meal with fellow students. (62 words/60 seconds)

Speaker A: *In the picture what were you doing?*

Speaker B: *After we studied in language school after we studied...we practiced to make pizza... or make coffee and sweet. And after language school café...after make food, we ate them. And in my host family's home there's a coffee machine. So my host father taught me how to make coffee.*

*Sample 2* A picture of Speaker A having a meal with friends. (75 words/60 seconds)

Speaker A's Presentation: *We had a New Year's party and we ate hot pot.*

Speaker B Q 1: *Who are they?*

A 1: *They are junior high school friends.*

Q 2: *How often do you see them?*

A 2: *About three times a year.*

Q 3: *Who is your best friend?*

A 3: *She is. She is Yoko. She works in ... a cram school.*

Q 4: *Have you ever been somewhere with her?*

A 4: *Anywhere. Anywhere...*

Q 5: *In Japan?*

A 5: *In Japan.*

Q 6: *How many friends?*

A 6: *And we have Korean friends so we are going to Korea.*

Speaker B is the same in both. The second sample lasted the same time but had six times the number of exchanges. After factoring in the time it takes to switch from one speaker to the next, this indicates a significant increase in the total amount of content interaction. Other notable differences included the reduction of hesitations and mistakes in the later sample.

The integrated preparation time in the second sample seemed to increase speakers' assurance, although it was still all spontaneous, with each question developing from the previous. This made the question and answer flow almost the same as natural native speech. *Sample 2* is also more conversational in the sense that there was a lot of mutual support and co-operation between the speakers. *Sample 1* was an awkward monologue with minimal confirmation about whether the answerer really knew what the questioner wanted to know most. While the vocabulary is if anything simpler in the second sample, this seemed appropriate to achieving more communication. For example, when Speaker A was unsure of how to answer where she had been in detail, Speaker B jumped in and guided her to a successful reply.

In terms of overall interaction, therefore, *Sample 2* displays increased maturity and range. Of more importance than this analysis were the speaker's own impressions of her performance. She stated that she felt her earlier conversation lacked confidence, and that she gained more confidence as a result of the integrated approach.

### 5.3 Case Study Two: 2015-2016

*Sample 1* Harry Potter's Castle

216 seconds/233 words = 65 words per minute;

29 utterances = 7 words per utterance;

16 questions = 6 words per question

Speaker A Question 1 a: *When did you go there?*

Speaker B Answer 1 a: *I went there in February.*

Q 1 b: *Who with?*

A 1 b: *I went there with my friends.*

Q 1 c: *How many?*

A 1 c: *Three people.*

Q 2 a: *How long were you waiting to ride this attraction?*

A 2 a: *Maybe it took 15 minutes, but I don't have time to get on.*

Q 2 b: *Have you been to any other theme park?*

A 2 b: *Mitsui Greenland and Space World.*

Q 2 c: *Which is your favorite?*

A 2 c: *I like Space World because there are many jet coasters there. How about you?*

Q 2 d: *I like Disneyland because I like Disney movies and characters, so I like Disneyland.*

Q 3 a: *If you entered Hogwarts, which dormitory do you want to enter?*

A 3 a: *Gryffindor.*

Q 3 b: *Why?*

A 3 b: *Because there are many good characters there. How about you?*

Q 3 c: *I want to enter Gryffindor as I like Hermione so I want to get on well with her.*

Q 4 a: *You said you watched movies in English, so please tell me your favorite movie.*

A 4 a: *Harry Potter is the best maybe.*

Q 4 b: *Anything else?*

A 4 b: *I like Johnny Depp so I really like Pirates of the Caribbean. How about you?*

Q 4 c: *My favorite movie is Holiday. Do you know it?*

A 4 c: *I don't know it so tell me about it.*

Q 4 d: *It's home exchange in England and America.*

Q 5 a: *Do you want to go abroad?*

A 5 a: *Yes.*

Q 5 b: *Where do you want to go?*

A 5 b: *I want to go to England.*

Q 5 c: *Why?*

A 5 c: *Because it's Harry Potter's place and I like tea so I want to drink afternoon tea.*

*Sample 2* A picture of the same Speaker B with her friends.

100 seconds/115 words = 70 words per minute;

24 utterances = 6 words per utterance;

10 questions = 5 words per question

Speaker B Presentation: *They are my friends and me. I took this picture in the city center on March 31<sup>st</sup>. And now she's in the Philippines studying abroad. So, I went to go there next time to study abroad. That's all.*

Speaker A Question 1 a: *What's your best memory with them?*

Answer 1 a: *Everything.*

Q 1 b: *For example?*

A 1 b: *We really like eating meat, so we ate a lot of meat.*

Q 2 a: *Where is it?*

A 2 a: *It is in a shopping mall. Have you been there?*

Q 2 b: *No, never.*

A 2 b: *You should go.*

Q 3 a: *How long is she abroad for?*

A 3 a: *About one year.*

Q 3 b: *Will you visit her?*

A 3 b: *Yes.*

Q 3 c: *When?*

A 3 c: *Some time.*

Q 4 a: *Have you ever gone abroad?*

A 4 a: *Yes I've been to New Zealand and Los Angeles.*

Q 4 b: *How was it?*

A 4 b: *Very nice.*

Q 5 a: *Do you keep in touch with her?*

A 5 a: *Yes, we keep in contact with LINE.*

Q 6: *What do you want to do in the Philippines?*

A 6: *I want to see the beautiful sea.*

The effectiveness of the approach is reinforced by data from the subsequent second meeting. Evaluating the students' progress in terms of fluency alone, their interaction speed increased substantially from one utterance in every four seconds to more than one in every three seconds in just one week. The following exchange lasted 40 seconds and included sixteen utterances. As with all the classes, the contents were completely spontaneous and unscripted. The participants are the same as above with a different student presenting.



*Sample Three*

Screen-shot of the speaker and a friend experiencing internship as part of job training.

(Photo used with permission)



39 seconds/71 words = 105 words per minute;

16 utterances = 6.6 words per utterance;

7 questions = 6 words per question

Speaker B Presentation: *Last summer I went for school internship at a hot spring in Kumamoto. I stayed there for three days. This picture is when I experienced works of Japanese style hotel.*

Speaker A Question 1: *What's your dream?*

Answer 1: *My dream is to be a journalist.*

Q 2: *How did you go there?*

A 2: *I went there by bus.*

Q 3: *How often do you go to a hot spring?*

A 3: *Now and then.*

Q 4: *Why do you want to be a journalist?*

A 4: *I like writing.*

Q 5: *Did you enjoy?*

A 5: *Yes, I did*

Q 6 a: *Do you like hot springs?*

A 6 a: *Pardon?*

Q 6 b: *Do you like hot springs?*

A 6 b: *Yes, I do.*

Q 7: *Do you like Kumamoto?*

A 7: *Yes, I do.*

By *Session 4* (the most recent available at the time of writing) the same speakers reached speeds of 125 words a minute in a single interchange of 55 seconds, 114 words and 25 utterances, maintaining both accuracy and complexity. This is equivalent to native speaker level.

## 5.4 Case Study Comments

The later samples show high-speed extensive language interaction because there are over ten speakers in every integrated class, compared to only two in the spoken communication class *Sample 1* s. Integrated classes require longer and more complex preparation. The first half of the ninety minute class is for writing a short explanation about one's photo.

These were then circulated so that other students could both familiarize themselves with the photos and write questions to elicit more information. In the remaining forty minutes or so, each student presents their photo using the additional questions. This takes about a minute each according to how long each speaker takes. So each student then has a rapid spoken interaction to promote fluency.

In *Sample 2* from 2015-2016 above, there were 20 exchanges, one every six seconds, compared to one every seven and half seconds in *Sample 1*, indicating greater fluency. As there are more than five times the number of speakers and therefore number and range of topics, it is clear that the integrated approach is even more extensive than the spoken or written communication approaches individually.

As about half of the students have taken the former courses in the preceding years, their evolving proficiency and confidence from the overall approach is clearly demonstrated. Compared to the first case study the year before, the later study overall is more compact, complex and fluent suggesting that the longer the approach is adopted, the better the result.

As the second sample of **Case Study Two** was their first class of 2016 after a break of several months, it portends well for the approach. The subsequent class (*Sample 3*) gives a clear indication of the potential. In terms of sheer fluency (speed of interaction) it rivals native speech, and contains no communication breakdowns. The time of the previous presentations and the bell for the end of class kept it to under a minute. *Session 4* confirmed the acceleration above.

## 6. Conclusion

TOEIC is a major proficiency measure, helpful for employment and communication. English

degrees in Japan are no guarantee of communicative ability, so TOEIC is a keen rival. The results from hundreds of TOEIC candidates from this writer's classes over five years show major improvement on the higher level later sections because of the ER/EL approach adopted. The average score of all such takers is now the highest on record since testing began two decades ago. The results of the sample students, for example, rose by up to a remarkable 200 points, confirming the upward trend from recent years' TOEIC scores reported by Wood (2015). Associating words through synonyms and relating words lexically at speed (skills that increase as a result of the extensive method employed) are not possible by a predominantly IG approach.

Extensive reading and listening are higher skills than the more mechanical IG practices prevalent in Japanese classrooms. The latter may help to some limited degree but only with questions in the earlier lower level sections. When over-taught at the expense of global comprehension, the results both in international language proficiency tests and in real-life communication fail. Shifting the balance from intensive to more extensive approaches is decades overdue, especially at the level of tertiary education. This is clearly indicted by students who had classes using their photos as they achieved unprecedented gains in their TOEIC scores.

Confining class content to intensive grammar sidesteps communication. Methods that prove effective in authentic classroom situations transcend abstract theory. The few teachers who score over 900 on TOEIC teach themselves to communicate without intensive grammar. Like native speakers, their English has many grammatical mistakes. But those mistakes simply don't matter because the individuals in question have powerful intrinsic motivation and all the communicative confidence that they need without ever getting tongue-tied over worrying about hair-splitting rules. Their focus is on human interaction, so their achievement is more assured.

Japanese college grammar teachers can communicate with English native-speakers. Their obsession with teaching intensively in their own L1 is the result of societal obsession. They spend too much time on constricting correctness and too little on extensive communication which surfs over mistakes without getting caught up or drowned inside them. Too few grammar teachers allow any class time to converse with students in English. Educational conservatism imprisons their classes in passive-intensive monologs. Until full engagement begins, and such teachers themselves start to teach spoken communication actively and positively, no matter how imperfectly, the prospects of student acquisition increasing significantly will remain from low to zero because of all their wasted talent and potential. Appearance trumps actuality in Japan. "Active Learning" is a buzz phrase for change. Sadly, effective change is yet to take root as it requires serious commitment to interaction. Teacher talk is still at the center of language teaching no matter what texts or syllabi say. There is no substitute for motivating students to use English positively when it comes to acquisition. This means finding courage to break completely

with passive intensive approaches. This is still too much for most teachers who remain frozen in their ways. Students sense this, so their passivity to English is sustained. Many of them just give up on English altogether, believing that studying it only means more grammar and testing. This contrasts sharply with all those who have found the photo approach motivating, and became confident communicators as a result.

Elementary school English starts too close to adolescence. It is coercively staffed in the main with Japanese and a few non-English major foreign graduates lacking TESOL training, the former often without enough English ability, the latter without language-teaching aptitude, part of a penny-pinching program designed to divert ministerial monies elsewhere. The problem is thus ironically highlighted by the waste of capable teachers of grammar in higher education. The latter's efforts would yield better results if redirected to teaching communication instead. Until the government ensures TESOL programs up to international standards for elementary school teachers with English ability to start teaching young learners from Day One, the outlook for a Japan that can communicate in English in time for the Tokyo Olympics looks bleak. Currently, the government is more intent on using the budget on automatic translation and recorded announcements instead of investing in person power. As the 2020 Olympics budget overruns due to mismanagement, and the economy declines, the prospects become more remote.

The integrated approach to using students' own photos to interact with each other is based on a proven formula. Its essence is that it cannot be contained or constrained by being prescribed. Instead, it generates genuine and spontaneous interaction at all stages. Students respond well to the cycle of study that it involves. It offers a good structure involving the preparation of a new photo every week, a first draft of a presentation, written questions to stimulate clearer explanation, real-life conversation and "movies" for students to study at their own pace in order to reflect on the way that they use English. It evolves naturally from the written and spoken communication that many of the takers have experienced in earlier classes. It motivates meaningful interactive production. As in previous classes, students' anonymous evaluations for 2015-2016 classes showed the photo method still top in rankings for over 50 classes and a thousand students. Unlike most other courses, there were numerous comments all of a positive nature, for example: "My ability to communicate in English increased. I learned to speak in and listen to real English. This was the only opportunity I had in 4 years at college," and: "This was the first time for me to write about myself and learn about others in English."

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