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Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication -Part One

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David John WOOD

1. Introduction

In Japan, university spoken English communication courses are almost always based on textbooks or some equivalent. However, text-free spoken communication teaching via situational needs analyses can also identify contextualized topics for an entire course. As suggested previously (Wood 2012) despite MEXT' s tentative initiatives (the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) to establish higher communicative TEFL standards (or Teaching English as a Foreign Language) starting from late elementary school, students' development still seems seriously limited. The *Yutori Kyouiku* approach of recent decades (which has reduced the length and range of subjects in an attempt to counter a breakdown in discipline caused by too much cramming for exams from elementary school up) is at most only partly to blame for this shortfall and decline in educational standards.

A contributory factor in the delayed achievement of the MEXT English communication competence goal is the kind of blanket approach frequent in commercial texts, which falter in the face of students' individualized expressive needs. Both mainline texts (infused with remote cultural features, plus inflexible language and staid techniques) and their grammar-translation driven domestic alternatives, fail to motivate students. The latter are still overwhelmed with university entrance exam preparation and pressure at high school, despite the greater choice that they now have as a result of the declining number of candidates for the increasingly excessive number of available places at universities and colleges. Once having begun their time in tertiary education, undergraduate students become more concerned with doing part-time work and employment search related activities, which can even start from their first year of higher education, than with their day to day studies. The vicious cycle is only enhanced by a system that often rushes teacher training. Before students can even graduate in the subjects that they need to master before attempting to pass them on to others, they may have to

master the much more difficult fundamentals of teaching.

Developing curricula through student co-operation which are customized and contextualized to meet students' immediate needs may offer greater promise than conventional texts can. The issue is whether or not a text-free (t-f) approach can be comprehensive enough for both individual students and their class contexts, and sufficiently customizable for the specific needs of the group. With teachers designing their own lessons, they can take more responsibility for the aims of their courses and better practice the techniques needed to achieve them by investing quality time in lesson design and enlisting more student cooperation, both fundamental duties of any professional teacher. Building courses from the ground floor up as it were, lesson by lesson, creates more opportunities to profile student' s strengths and weaknesses in a context that is more relevant to them than those most textbooks offer instead. By taking into account a class's immediate circumstances, the MEXT-mandated communication initiative may become more manageable than it currently appears to be.

In this consideration, one specific text-free TEFL example will be presented. While much interest in the use of still images (the central concern of this paper) has been generated in recent years (e.g., Goldstein 2008, Keddie 2009, and so on) a close reading of such studies reveals at least one major conceptual flaw. Both these mainline writers reduce their scope to images essentially generated or selected by text book writers, denying students the chance of significant interaction from the most crucial initial stage of a course, the very outset. In their combined 400 pages of teaching suggestions, students are specifically required to provide their own pictures in only a handful of cases, and there is neither enough focus nor exposition in any of the hundreds of suggestions to sustain meaning or motivation beyond one or two isolated lessons. Thus too little attention is paid either to course continuity, development or, most importantly, the specific contexts of our teaching situations which only the individual instructors could ever hope to know or understand.

Below is a rationale based on a situational analysis for using students' photographs, and a detailed phase by phase discussion about using travel photos as a possible approach to developing their spoken communicative skills. Even if this specific example does not correlate directly with every possible teaching situation, the overall approach may suggest a viable alternative as one way to develop spoken English communication.

2. Some Background Factors

Nearly all Japanese people enjoy travelling domestically if not internationally, and Japanese students of English love to travel and to talk about it in particular. High school trips both

in Japan and overseas are traditionally one of the highlights of students' lives, while home stay and special international course trips abroad are also frequent. Some of the strongest reasons for students to study English at university in the first place include travelling and staying abroad for periods from a few weeks up to a year, as well as studying about travel for employment. In the most developed foreign language curricula in other countries, there is a compulsory year' s study abroad, but Japan lags far behind in that respect. Furthermore, even Japanese students who cannot afford it or who are not so interested in going or studying abroad are often eager to travel around Japan.

At my university, our students can pursue a program of several subjects about travel such as Global Tourism, Travel Administration, Tourist Culture, Hotel and Airline English and International Tourism. Several spoken communication courses are also based on text books partly or entirely featuring travel-related themes. School programs have given students the opportunity to apply to travel to as many as ten different locations abroad, most of which have English as their first or second language, and an expanding exchange program with a major American university is currently in its third year of operation, bringing students from the United States on to our campus and sending our own students to the New York area. In addition, many students travel, study and work overseas independently in a variety of different destinations in the hope of becoming fluent speakers of English. After graduating, many students aim for jobs connected with the subjects they study, including as tour guides, flight attendants, airline ground staff and travel industry administrators, as well as in foreign trade.

3. The Psychology of Travel

Travelling anywhere is an opportunity to experience new things. The ways in which we listen, speak, think and so on are stimulated as a result. Our normal mindset is challenged if not suspended, and the opportunities for new learning experiences can expand. Whether we travel alone or with others, we meet people and can make new friends. The potential enthusiasm arising from the encounters that we have can make our experiences there unforgettable, and both the urge and ability to relate them to those we know on our return intensify. We can become more receptive both to new ideas and languages.

Moreover, travel helps us both to see ourselves in a new light, and to re-evaluate many things that we previously thought to be unchangeable. Even a negative experience can be turned around through sharing, and may teach us how to better approach both future expeditions and the situations that we return to. Sharing experiences with those who have

travelled to different places can be both cathartic and productive. This can be just as true for the teacher as it is for his or her students.

4. Still Images

Still images are as much a part of TEFL in Japan as anywhere else, with Japan' s main MEXT-sponsored domestic English proficiency exam, called *Eiken* or STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) for short, featuring picture pairs as the central part of its oral test. However, still images by themselves do not guarantee a good result. For example, the STEP drawings can be ambiguous, and the methodology surrounding them is dubious as the prescribed answers are rigid and fail to produce significant communicative interaction.

Still images in TEFL are as old as TEFL itself, yet their potential has often been similarly capped by the propensity of the attendant approach to be prescribed and limited to one-way communication in much the same way as above. The images nearly always used and the pedagogy surrounding them are too often stilted, impersonal and demotivating, and they tend to achieve a limited, undirected and unmemorable communicative effect at best. Most of the ideas in Goldstein and Keddie for example reduce the use of still images to one-off gimmicky stand-by classes with no or insufficient consideration of their potential for being fleshed out into a maturing and fully growing course. Furthermore, jumping into the deep end, so to speak, and using moving pictures like movies may overwhelm teacher and student alike without the requisite expertise and application, unless the aim is to actually avoid teaching altogether. Until a teacher has been able to fully apply himself or herself to the true potential of still imagery, it is better to limit one' s efforts to the latter, and in order to bring students back into the classroom motivationally, a more open-ended and personalized approach that can be extended and sustained is called for.

5. Why Travel English Photos?

Japanese students in general tend to be shy about speaking in English, and are not used to talking face-to-face spontaneously. Their contact with English speakers at high school is often limited or non-existent. On the other hand, Japanese people like photos as much as, if not more than any other nationality may do. Confidence and interest can arise naturally when we are experts about a topic that nobody else knows as much about, and photos that create personal interest, especially students' own treasured travel pictures, boost confidence by stimulating communication. Whether the destinations shown are domestic or international, such photos

can become great talking points, and it is possible to plan a complete course around them. The English practiced, exchanged and acquired thereby can be enjoyably and profitably employed in many situations throughout students' lives.

Using an enlarged copy of each student' s travel picture (e.g. from a smart phone) as a stimulus for English communication both protects students' property and stimulates spontaneous exchange. Photos may not always be necessary, but they can create extra confidence and enable shy students to overcome their fears in the classroom environment. Photos can give just enough information to suggest productive lines of questioning. They are easy to utilize and help stimulate the language students need to express themselves. In a class of thirty students with three or four chosen to present, their photos can be passed around so that half the class sees one set and the remaining students see the other. Then they can be passed around again to allow the holders to concentrate and ask questions. From the opposite side, another student can ask a question about another photo, and the class continues in this way till everyone has asked something. To invigorate interest, the photos are later swapped so that those who saw the first set of photos will now see set two, and thus a fresh round of potentially more detailed questioning can begin.

6. Course Design and Basic Considerations

The overall course design for a sixteen week conversation course of ninety minutes per week can include various options depending on the makeup of the particular class. Students taking the course are in their third of four years as undergraduates so have considerable travel experience. The course is suitable for both high and low performing classes of up to thirty students, and both classes can be expected to demonstrate equally significant levels of improvement in their English communication skills if entry and exit levels are compared. The initial sessions create confidence in the program, offering an enticing example of text-free face-to-face communication. If the desks are easily moved, they can be arranged for students to sit in a circle to facilitate eye contact. Alternatively, only chairs need rearranging. Where neither is possible, students move into an approximate circle within the limits of a particular room, or just change rooms altogether if that is a viable option.

7. Control Language

Control language can be pre-taught so all students can function comfortably and take responsibility for the degree of difficulty of the input that they receive from others of varying

abilities. This should be made visible via the board or handouts but long term reliance can distract from eye-contact communication, so students should be weaned off this, and the teacher can instead prompt verbally as necessary. Control language may be self-evident, but is still needed to create and sustain an atmosphere of trust. The exact language is up to individual instructors, ranging from specific to basic to cater for all students. Examples are: "Pardon, please say that again" "Please speak more loudly" "Please speak more slowly" "Can you spell that please?" "Sorry, how do you say that in Japanese?" etc. Students should be made to feel mutually confident enough to have no qualms about repeating such questions as often as is necessary for their own level.

8. Groupings and Warm Up

As for student groupings, these can be customized to the particular activity phase which is occurring. To begin with, initial sessions can be conducted as whole class ice-breaking sessions using extensive self-introductory questions. This is so that students who do not know each other very well can get used to each other both in terms of their different personalities and speaking styles. Those who already know each other can both find out more, as well as begin to express in English what they previously knew only in Japanese.

Give students enough preparation time to think of several basic questions to find out something about everyone in the class, such as "Where are you from?" "How many people are there in your family?" "What do you do in your free time?" and "What part-time job do you do?" Each student must ask one unique question, and all the others take it in turn to answer the same question. Various treatments of the answers are possible, such as comparing, contrasting, reviewing them in a subsequent class in the form of confirmation questions ("You work in a convenience store, right?") or an either/or recall test led by the questionees ("Is my favorite hobby listening to music or watching movies?")

Additionally many related topics suggest themselves, such as: asking for and giving directions around the campus, around school, one' s home and the city center; talking about the areas students live in and the area around the campus (which in my case is a domestic and international tourist site with a major shrine and museum a short walk from the university); or, talking about commuting to school, transport in general, free time activities and part-time work, as some students may act as guides and many save to travel. Other possibilities can include discussions about the advantages of travel and study abroad.

9. The Second Stage

The second stage is to introduce the main theme of the course, travel. As the kind of travel is not limited to foreign trips, and can be from students' own high school days, this topic has every chance of being a powerful and popular common denominator. Especially in the case of domestic travel, the opportunity to master how to express one' s own culture in English is a major factor in giving this aspect of the students' lives such priority. Questioning will change from extensive to intensive with just two or three students answering as many questions prepared at the end of the previous class or for homework as the others can think up. As this is a challenging experience, the more confident students should be the first to answer. This can be based for example on their experience abroad, and most classes have students who have been overseas for longer periods, or for limited periods on numerous occasions. Where foreign exchange students visit (in my case from State University New York) these students can also be scheduled to begin, and including the instructor as one of the first to be questioned is another viable option. As questionees must bring a photo from their travel to make an enlarged copy from, advance notice, preparation and co-operation are required, all of which have a positive educational value.

10. Question Guidelines

It is necessary to establish question rules or at least guidelines. While feeding students lists of questions may achieve a limited level of communication, the responsibility for question making is better delegated to the students themselves. This not only encourages independence and natural question making in more communicative contexts, but may reveal both their true concerns and needs. Questioners should prepare a variety of questions in order not to repeat other students' questions. Questionees should avoid simply answering "Yes" or "No" but learn instead to give more information ("Yes, for example . . .") or alternative ideas on related matters "No, but . . ." The exchanges should be substantial, meaningful and memorable. This arises from the continued experience of asking questions rather than being teachable in advance. Roles can be reversible: "How about you?" The answers should be respected, but monitored to avoid ambiguity or miscommunication, stressing fluency but with just enough accuracy to ensure meaning without stifling interaction. Answers can be noted down for review.

11. Format Development

Starting with the simplest format in the early sessions of the course, a variety of styles can be gradually phased in, while constantly reviewing the initial styles to ensure students' grasp of all the target communication is being constantly reviewed, reinforced and developed. The priority items should be introduced early so that they become almost automatic facets of students' communicative repertoire, and these should also be the main content of the exit test interview. More than random one-off questions, students' sense of what constitutes a natural and sufficiently conclusive exchange needs to be elaborated and made a fluent part of their linguistic framework. There may be limitless verbal formulae to achieve the same goal, but the overall emphasis must be on the frequency of the approaches used to increase the potential level of their international comprehensibility in as many contexts as possible.

12. Language Differences and Quizzes

Major differences in English usage from one part of the world to the next can be pointed out, but more importantly is to aim for a global standard, not as an absolute, but as the most likely to be functional in the greatest number of situations. In Japan, for example, the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) has become the de facto standard of international English communication, and has indeed moved away albeit slightly from its originally more American style. It is preferable to its domestic equivalent the STEP which has a less international perspective. The small STEP spoken section, for example, preceding the actual oral test with picture pairs, is more of a face-saving cosmetic than a rigorous interview. Standards of grading are too varied and there are vast inconsistencies among interviewers, who are mainly Japanese and not uniformly fluent.

It is also possible to integrate TOEIC style elements into the class. One of its central domains is travel related. In the listening half of TOEIC, especially in Section Two: Questions and Responses, and Section Three: Conversations, there are endless examples of relevant dialogues ranging from two to several exchanges. Beginning with Section Two, question types can be taught and practiced communicatively. Pairs prepare a number of quiz items each which they read to the others who are then given time to reflect on them by comparing answers and justifying their choices where they differ from each other. At the next level, short conversations can be treated in a more advanced way for students to continue to develop their listening and ability to self-analyze.

13. Conclusion

While every school language program may be unique, the analytical processes necessary to determine suitable course program contents for them may be universal, and one particular topic that suits my own school' s situation, namely travel, seems to hold potential for others as an integral concept in learning an after all foreign language. The potential of travel English' s suitability as a subject for many situations has been indicated to a reasonable enough degree above to warrant further extended consideration, while the significance of the psychology of travel has also been identified.

Students' own travel photos have also been demonstrated as being powerful but non-intrusive, stimulating the communicative process and class's face-to-face conversation, especially as photos likely include the faces of the questionees. The specifics of course design, and such practical considerations as control language, groupings and appropriate warm up activities have been illustrated. From the second stage, through question guidelines, format development and issues like language differences and productive quiz-giving, the course described has been successfully tested and utilized with both advanced and less able classes.

Not only in the form of high scoring exit test results, but also via students' confidential and frank evaluations of the course and their general response to class enrolment, it is clear that such an approach holds great promise (see Wood 2012 for comment examples, plus school-wide evaluations and student enrolments for all six single optional semester Year Three conversation classes, the two in which travel photos were used scoring higher overall and being better subscribed than the same alternating classes from first to second semesters taught by other instructors during the school year 2011 to 2012).

While EFL conversation texts whether in print or digital format may have a limited role to play, it should not be the dominating or exclusive kind that is currently prevalent, at least in Japan (all of the Years One to Three conversation classes except this writer' s were text-based or perceived as being so, with a cyber-text being used in some cases mainly for memorization and recitation according to student feedback) although text books can help new teachers' development.

While the content of mainline textbooks and the approach of domestic alternatives may be limited, aspects of their structure, organization and content offer some pointers for teachers. Students too can benefit from texts in terms of their personally customized use of them, as distinct from the original purport, and from instructors' interpretations of their purposes. However, over-reliance on textbooks can become an excuse for avoiding more meaningful and productive approaches. Students use texts differently from the ways intended for them by

writers and teachers (40% of students used textbooks for reading, 20% for filling blanks, and 10% test preparation/review, Wood 2012). For classes taught repetitively with texts, there is much more limited potential to help students achieve some measure of communicative ability. Resorting to one-patterned lessons in the form of prescribed conversations often with tenuous relevance to students, for example, both deters student enrolment and may frustrate what they want and need, a fact which is strongly indicated in student feedback, and something which cannot be ignored without both limiting progress and denying one' s status as a paid professional accountable to education' s primary stockholders, the students themselves.

In student feedback (Wood 2012) there was much higher scoring in a t-f approach for communicating what students "want to say, in real language, about real culture and using useful vocabulary" than in the t-b norm. Students see texts as a supplementary resource and not as a means to achieving communicative ability. Conversely, the t-f approach returns learning ownership to students themselves. Relevance, localization and context personalization are effective for learning. Normal texts are unable to allow for all these aspects due to their stereotyping. High level students may feel more confident with a t-f approach, being better able to formulate their own objectives, but the less able also displayed significantly higher comfort levels and progress than with texts alone.

Most impressive for this teacher was to see how much the less able students were so highly motivated in developing their paralinguistic comprehension via greater mastery of facial expression, body language and vocal tone, as well as mouth-shaping in both expressing their intent and in decoding each other' s and the teacher' s use thereof. For instance, when I had to talk to them late in the course with a cold and wearing a mask, students' eyes still strained to see my mouth movements to assist with their aural assimilation. Conversely, overuse of textbooks can make both teachers and students lazy, monotonous and even unable to recognize their own needs, consequently negating adjustment potential and creativity.

Negotiating content (keeping in mind curricular requirements) and including media that match students' preferred style of interaction can bring back more responsibility for learning to the students. As indicated in my research, student perception and evaluation of a t-f approach positively correlated with students' motivation and perceived language proficiency improvement, facilitating a level-specific approach and real-time adjustments that text-bound inflexibility could not pretend to cope with.

Text-free teaching is organic, emanating from students' actuality, both in terms of relevant content and ability. Pinpointing students' proficiency levels across all the skill areas in a timely fashion and remediating weaknesses becomes an ongoing part of t-f courses. In a t-b class, even if it were possible to ascertain such vital information within the rigid framework of the

approach, it is unlikely that this could be achieved in time to do anything effective about it. A t-b approach might be relevant for students taking a course of only one semester, but for those intending to continue for longer, the prospects are too limited. At the very least, t-f course segments must form an essential component of any ongoing university English conversational program or students will not have the chance to develop their communicative ability, and the MEXT mandate for Japanese to acquire such will continue to be denied.

In a situation where English majors may receive only as little as 90 hours of spoken English instruction in the 22 years up until the time they graduate, effective use of time can become critical. Not surprisingly, university graduation trips abroad are one popular supplement. As one freshman student told me spontaneously while I was writing this paper: "My English classes consist mainly of reading, writing and listening lessons so I really want the chance to experience an English environment, surrounded by English speakers and enthusiastic students who want to learn as eagerly as I do." That student has yet to take my Year Three conversation class, so I hope she will benefit from the enthusiasm of her peers as they talk freely in English.

While travel photos are only one possible avenue of exploration and application, they have proven to be highly relevant and motivating. To extend the range of this study, it is hoped that other areas of photographic genre can be explored. As an initial stimulation for students, pictures from their journeys at home or abroad are an excellent starting point. In subsequent considerations, a variety of topis will be studied to suggest ways of building on this experience for students, and of expanding the methodology to be employed so that students can develop their linguistic repertoire to the full extent of their individual potentials.

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