The Japanese University EFL Classroom and the Real World

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A few years ago one of my students asked me how he might go about improving his English speaking ability. My reply was that he should first work on his listening ability. Astonished, he asked what listening had to do with his desire to be a more capable speaker. When I pressed him on whether he cued his spoken English to what someone else had just said in a conversation or discussion, he answered that he always carefully rehearsed what he wanted to say beforehand so that he could say exactly what he meant. Was it necessary, he wondered, to listen so intently to what someone else had just said in order to speak better?

This exchange may exemplify the way many Japanese EFL students approach their study of English. Despite any number of innovative approaches to teaching English, a great many EFL learners (perhaps teachers too) still perceive language study as either (1) a sponge process whereby they learn simply by being told about the language and how it works, (2) an apprentice process whereby they watch teachers set up and perform English language tasks, and by so doing try to do the same, or (3) a combination of these two methods.[1]

In the real world of inteaction, speaking is not divorced from listening : each skill crucially depends on the other. The real world is filled with imperfection and risks, and although there are certain rules and routines for speaking and listening, being told how to speak and/or watching someone else do your speaking and listening for you, will not lead to real-world (foreign) language competency and confidence-building.

The real world is much more than an informa-tion gathering arena or a task-practice laboratory. Real-world language learning requires a commit-ment on the part of teachers and students alike to share their knowledge and value systems, to relate to each other as real people, and to affect each other in positive ways ; in so doing, they together learn to be more complete, more clear, and more perfect in an unclear and imperfect (real) world. Survival in the real world of communication entails learning to cope with adversity and eveyday interactions. Auer-bach and Burgess (1985) show how language over-simplification and less than realistic views of EFL/ESL text situations mislead learners rather than help them cope with everyday interactions. While more communicative approaches to language teach-ing have emerged in recent years that focus on notions and functions as opposed to structures and words, the dialogues still tend to be excuses for teaching discrete point language items whether they be structural, situational, or semantic. Authen-tic real world discourse, argue Auerbach and Bur-gess, can be very different from what EFL/ESL text writers invent and imagine. Too little attention is given to analyzing why people speak as they do in certain settings.

As EFL teachers interested in preparing stu-dents for real-world English language survival, we should know how the language actually functions, especially for us in our own communication. We should also be interested in establishing bodies of data from situations we AND our students deem valuable and highly representative of real-world interaction (including what goes on in the EFL classroom). We need, in the words of Cathcart (1989), "a more realistic overview of what units of

1 Auerbach. E. R., & Burgess, D. (1985) The hidden curriculum of survival ESL. TESOL *Quarterly,* 19, 474–96.

language are necessary for the attainment of the communicative competence our students aspire to."[2] This is the key. We can suggest and even cajole our students into aspiring to a particular form or level of communicative FL competence, but it is THEIR choice as to the form and level they actually aim for/at. Rather than prescribe tasks and/or situations for learning, why not select situations and tasks of interest based on teacher–student needs to communicate about themselves and their place in the real–world. Then, identify language items students need to be exposed to or practice, and let the native–like speaker (i. e. teacher) behavior in the situation guide syllabus construction. This approach requires a great amount of listening comprehension that will focus on both topic and speaker–intention identification, as well as extensive practice in giving native–like attending responses.[3]

It can be argued that for beginning EFL university students especially, authentic discourse is too difficult with its twists and turns, its false starts, hesitations, incompleteness and incomprehensibility at times. The argument is that EFL learners will not have (had) sufficient opportunities to hear such real–world models. To counter this argument I would suggest that EEL students (especially beginners) quickly learn to undestand native speaker/nonnative speaker interaction that illustrates strategies for coping with imperfect and incomplete communication. To the extent they (students) are prepared and willing to adjust their communicative behavior and/or accept imperfection and unclarity in their communication efforts is their choice.

Prodromou (1992) contends that previous approaches to ELT (English language teaching), whether EFL or ESL, have been trivial in the sense that all or most models were meant for the native–speaking audience, and as a result, "cross–cultural content was never given explicit prioity."[4] He goes on to offer four hypotheses about the importance of ELT content and the types of content we as EFL/ESL teachers should promote. The four hypotheses involve (1) cultural background (i. e. the culture or cultures in which the language is used as a main medium of communication), (2) cultural foreground (i. e. the submerging of local culture into the culture of the FL), (3) cross–cultural understanding and multi–cultural diversity, and (4) English language teaching as education. After asking 300 Greek students of English five questions related to these hypotheses (I refer you directly to Prodromou's 1992 article), Prodromou concludes that even at beginner levels students are receptive to interesting content with a rich cultural input. He further states that ELT should concern itself with more global and multi–cultural issues asserting that, "in teaching any language we are imparting information and therefore power ; in teaching English we can impart to learners not only the present perfect, but also the power of knowing and caring more about the world they live in. English is at the centre of international and global culture. It is a cultural activity ; it is important activity."[5]

Education is based on the use of language, especially so in the EFL single–language group classroom where there is a clash between native language and target (English) language use and performance.[6] In the real world of communication people affect and are affected by what others say and do. The real world surely concerns itself with the dissemination and reception of facts and information, but this is not its exclusive function or activity. The classroom, like the real world, is a place where people come together to share meaning and information, interact (and thus affect) one another, and (learn to) establish and accomplish intentions based on mutually compatible needs and wishes. The EFL university classroom (any classroom for that matter) functions as a social event. As an EFL instructor concerned with cultural background, cultural foreground and both cross–cultural and multi–cultural learning possibilities, and who is cognizant of the educational value of language learning, I would now like to offer a possible blueprint for syllabus design in the EFL classroom that parallels real–world communicative be-

2　Cathcart, Ruth Larimer. (1989) Authentic discourse and the survival English curriculum. TESOL *Quarterly*, 23, 105–27.

3　ibid

4　Prodromou, L. (1992) What culture? Which culture? ELT *Journal*, 46, 39–50.

5　ibid

6　Lemke, J. L. (1989) *Using Language in the Classroom*. Oxford University Press.

havior WITHOUT seriously compromising the status of the classroom as a special place of learning.

In the real world of communication people misunderstand one another and often tune out to what others say. People are obliged to repeat or rephrase what they communicate (say or write) in order to be better understood. There are times when others do not appreciate or approve of what we say, and on such occasions indication is given of disapproval or lack of appreciation in more or less polite manner. No matter how much we try to be perfect in our communication with others, things often go awry and out of control. Any number of comprehension problems can and do surface when meaning and intent is negotiated through language. Even the most basic learner of English should be made aware of this reality : it is both unreal and unnatural to try to be perfect and complete everytime you communicate. If this is not clearly conveyed by us to students, then they will have a much more difficult time being real-world communicators.

In order to learn to speak in another language you have got to have numerous opportunities for listening and speaking, but you also need encouragement to become more confident and comfortable engaging others in verbal interaction. In the real world there are a variety of settings in which people come together and listen and talk to one another : informal unrehearsed conversation, more formal prepared discussion, informal or more formal presentations (i. e. lectures), debates and argumentative talk, story-telling, and so forth. Preparing students to listen and talk more purposefully and effectively (not perfectly) to each other and to you as teacer requires (1) a sufficient variety of real-world authentic and engaging input on which they can base their listening and speaking, and (2) a continual orientation to the primary importance of self-responsibility for purposeful and sensitive listening and speaking. In any verbal communication setting, it is hard work to attend to what others say and to attempt some form or response in a meaningful and assured manner. Offering students a diverse curriculum of authentic speech, most importantiy your speech with them, in a variety of well-motivated listening-speaking situations will help break down

the often formulaic approach they take to language study, where they try to fit the proper words into the right places. Such a classroom curricula approach will give students a base that can allow them to confidently begin functioning with English as a self-referential system.

Students must be prepared to approach learning (specifically listening and speaking) in ways that can radically differ from how they were taught in high school or junior high school. The EFL instructor primarlly concerned with developing the whole language learner, and who believes that language learning is education negotiated among people, should tell students at the very outset of the course how he or she feels about communicating. This should be done in a dialogue fashion whenever and wherever possible, in order to check student's understanding and interest. In the course of explicating course goals and grading procedures why not do the following, for example ; (1) tell students and demonstrate how different listening is depending on the listener's background knowledge and/or personal investment in the message(s), (2) demonstrate how much more difficult and (in certain situations) unreal it is to listen to something "cold" (i.e. with no prior preparation), (3) demonstrate how listening and speaking varies depending on the nature of interaction (i.e. "small-talk" or social lubrication chat vs. more goal directed conversation-discussion, and (4) firmly but with a sense of humor and much understanding communicate to students the greater difficulty they will have in learning English as a multi-cultural and educational tool IF they insist on always or usually carrying over their native (Japanese) behavior when using English ; they are, after all, two different though not completely dissimilar self-referential systems.

How does one actually convey this all to students in the process of teaching the FL ? In an earlier paper I stated that it was critically important to conduct all major communication, including class management, in the target language. I further argued that language should not be treated as an object but rather as "a discovery process to enlarge personal communication awareness and sensitivity so as to encourage people to open up to each other."[7] Stevick (1982) speaks directly to this issue of "tea-

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7   Brady, A. (1987) Weaknesses of text or teacher motivated language leanrning. *Heian Jogakuin Eigaku Journal*. Vol. 20

cher" and "real–world ordinary person" masks. He argues that in most classroom situations the teacher mask is suitable, but that if the teacher wishes to link the classroom with the real world, then he or she must recognize the appropriate times when that mask can and indeed should be dropped, so as to give the student "an exhilarating sense of adequacy within the real world."[8] I would go beyond what Stevick advocates by saying that it is crucially important the EFL teacher present himself or herself as a real person first who is also capable and willing to teach, and that he or she clearly and regularly show how real (i.e. incomplete, imperfect, disinterested at times) he or she really is. In the course of, for example, saying hello or making an important announcement (i.e. homework assignment or grading procedure), the teacher can and should encourage students to be actively responsive and responsible. He or she should make students accountable for what they hear or choose not to listen to. The teacher should have students repeat or paraphrase what yu he or another has just said in class. As Slawson argues, "present our selves, our language, and our culture more as they really are, and less in the over–structured, sanitized way we think they should be."[9] If a student tunes out to some input, and you feel it is important for his/her sake to listen (in a motivated, real–world manner), hold the student accountable for the failure to attend but do so in a non–judgemental and encouraging manner. Make the student realize how personally important it is for him or her to attend if he or she is seriously concerned in hearing more and communicating more effectively.

The EFL instructor most certainly can not afford to ever neglect his or her teacher responsibilities. Students at university who are studying EFL have a number of language listening problems that earlier study may have fossilized (i.e. students continue to hear English stress–timed speech as they do Japanese syllable–timed speech), and it is necessary that the teacher address these early on in any EFL communication course. Students need to recognize

that "fast" speech may be difficult because it is not strung together and heard in the same way that Japanese is. Early on in the course the teacher has got to clearly show (in his/her own speech as well of course) how sounds do not always correspond to their orthographic equivalents (i.e. orthograhic "o" is often pronounced "a"). Students have to see how sounds change in a stream of speech, how they get blurred, slurred, or even swallowed. Even for so–called more advanced EFL learners, this instruction is often taken out of real–world context and treated as an object ; teach it in the course of trying to communicate with students for some reason and you will see how real–world and engaging this instruction can be. The real world of English language communication differs from what students think it should be, and from what Japanese communication experience can teach them. Failure to point this out at the outset of the course can cripple later efforts at developing listening and speaking in the FL.

Students who wish to improve their real–world listening and speaking need also to recognize the value and limit of routines and ritualized speech.[10] They also need to recognize different types of utterances (i.e. statements, direct or indirect questions, statements functioning as questions, exclamatory remarks, asides and connecting comments[11] to name a few). In addition, they need to see the importance of repetition and paraphrase, not only in order to learn language, but also to use it mole effectively. I do not advise a concerted comparative study of the native and target language, but I would, for example, strongly encourage the EFL university teacher to point out (in the act of communicating not just lecturing), how much more important and common it is for people to interrupt in English than it is in Japanese. Furthermore, I would strongly advise that students early on learn the necessity of more and clearer verbalization (specificity if you will) in English than is evident or even required in Japanese. This in no way obliges students to alter their way(s) of being and behaving. But it is detrimental

8　Stevick, Earl. (1982) *Teaching and Learning Languages*. Cambridge University Press.
9　Slawson, Catherine D. (1990) Not what you say but how you say it. TESOL *Newsletter*. April, 1990.
10　I refer here to predictable openers, rejoinders, and responses such as A : How are you?, B : I'm fine, thank you.
11　by connecting I mean the ability to use what the other says and say something that relates directly such as , A : I'm studying medicine. B : Oh, really? My father's a doctor.

for them to continue trying to hear and use English in the same ways that they hear and use Japanese. It is their choice as to how they want to listen and speak, but as an EFL instructor interested in cross–cultural awareness, and language as education or as an educational tool, you are obliged to show them the value of adapting and adjusting. Surely those of us who are not Japanese would not wish to (always) listen and speak in Japanese as we do in our own native language whether English or not.

At the outset of and EFL course the most important goal is for teacher and students to get to know one another, if you belive, as I do, that the classroom exists in the real world and gives people the opportunity to explore the world around them (in the EFL classroom chiefly through the medium of speech). Certain performance techniques can help this acculturation process take shape. As teachers it is our responsibility to demonstrate some real world techniques and impart them to our students for personal use (if they so choose). We can demonstrate clearly how to misunderstand and improve understanding through repetition, paraphrase, or simplification. We can demonstrate how to vary response using both ritualized and personally innovative speech. We can teach students how people connect with each other in speech by actually doing so with our students, AND requiring them to do so (if they choose) in their communication with each other. We can, for example, actually show out intentions and feeligs through our use of language, and encourage students to do likewise when they feel confident and (not too) comfortable. We can also together tackle more challenging interactive conversation that centers around our study of content and texts, where (even simple) discussion or story–telling can evolve from everyday conversation.

The common EFL classoom that I am aware of (and I admit I do not know what goes on in every EFL class at university level in Japan) may focus on teacher and students getting to know each other for one or two classes. Afterwards, there begins the process of learning the foreign language : listening strategies, speaking skills, reading and writing tasks. I would much prefer to see this learning linked with their continued process of opening up

to me and to each other. In the real world of EFL in Japan, we are not always at liberty to connect or integrate skills' learning (i.e. reading, writing, listening tactic and strategies, speaking) with more real–world concerns of relating (ourselves) to others unless we rely on texts to guide or influence our teaching and, by extension, student's learning.[12] We can, however, choose texts that lend themselves to such integration. Such texts will focus on people and the EFL situation in Japan. Such texts will allow students to learn about the world in Japan and outside Japan through English that is engaging and lively, and which critically presents language learning as cross–cultural and multi–cultural. We can choose texts that use the FL to educate our students to take more responsibility for the way they communicate with and relate to other people.

If, for example, we are obliged to choose a conversation text, we should make sure that the conversations on tape are real for us and our students (i.e. that we reasonably expect to have similar conversations). If we are obliged to choose a listening–focused text, we should choose one that presents students with real world (including in–class) listening tasks that they can relate to. Rather than having students listen to airport announcements in London or New York, for example, prepare them to hear such announcements (in English) at Kansai International Airport or Narita for the purpose of helping someone else find his/her flight.

The university EFL instructor has a very difficult though rewarding job : it is his/her responsibility to show the importance of tuning into other's speech, and at the same time, how difficult it is to do so unless there is a special effort to attend. Aside from teaching/showing that listening depends on linguistic (i.e. syntactic, semantic) competence, the EFL instructor must clearly show in his/her communication how listening crucially involves personal commitment. Getting it right does not mean avoiding difficulties in attending and responding to messages. The EFL instructor interested in linking the language classroom to more real–world communicative behavior, should use himself/herself as a prime source of input. The classroom then becomes a forum where one–way informational flow is not

12 Brady, Alan. (1987)   Weaknesses of teacher motivated language learning. *Heian Jogakuin Eigaku Journal.*

the primary pedagogical objective. Students early on (especially in their first lessons) must learn how to employ checking and confirming mechanisms that will assist them in getting more input to use later as output (i.e. speaking practice).

Students can be oriented in how to listen and what to listen for whatever the listening activity or task. Each activity should focus on a particular type of input, and a particular set of tactics or strategies. For example, when listening to a conversation, students will prepare by asking themselves (prior to listening), (1) where the conversation takes place and between whom, (2) how well the speakers know each other and why they are talking to one another, (3) and what the conversation involves in terms of content and intention(s). Listening to different types of conversation requires that students and teaches listen in different ways and employ different listening behavior: one may be expected to respond verbally, or a simple non–verbal acknowledgement may suffice.

Real–world listening can not be approached in the same manner at all times. Just as listening to an announcement requires different strategies and responses fromm listening to a lecture (i.e. being able to follow the order of ideas), listening to conversation can not be the same at all times. Conversation can evolve into more goal–directed and more demanding interaction where disagreement and argument is necessary; furthermore, conversation can evolve into discussion that goes beyond greetings, small talk, and shared feelings. Conversation can also involve story–telling, where one person dominates and the other(s) listen and show attention and interest. If the EFL classroom does not distinguish between these types of input and interaction, then it is not real–world.

It is rare that people listen in the real world without benefit of verbal cues. Listening in class to "live" input (i.e. speech that is not taped) is real world in that there is immediate visual assistance that helps students recognize and comprehend content and intent. Let's say that you want your students to talk about themselves in a non speech–like fashion using body language and relying less on memorization than on intution as to what to say.

Using yourself first as model, and then a taped excerpt from, for example, the IN AMERICA series[13] can greatly assist students in getting away from mechanical, unreal self–introductions.

Empowering people to make decisions on their own is real world too. Allowing students to take more personal responsibility for choosing materials, choosing reasons to listen, asking comprehension and other questions (i.e. to get more information, or to analyze what kind of interaction is going on) is real world. Students should not expect that questions will be composed by others, or that they have to understand some input in the same way(s) you do. After they have been given a general but incomplete overview of the visual or audio segment, have them (1) guess the particulars, and (2) compose their own questions based on what THEY want to further understand. After listening/viewing one time or one additional time (to confirm answers to their questions), have them respond to the video or audio in any way they feel natural with some guidance from you. For example, they may only want to say how they feel about watching or listening (make sure they are not too vague or general in expressing their feelings!). On the other hand, students might actually want to be able to understand a particular stretch of speech or a few unknown but catchy words or expressions. Lead them to be inquisitive on their own. This is real world.

Listening to and telling storing stories is another real–world activity, especially if there is opportunity for students to interact with the story–teller. Listening not only to how the speaker organizes narrative line, but also how the listener(s) attend to the story and confirms understanding (i.e. by interrupting, rephrasing, asking questions) presents students with a real–world communication challenge beyond recalling what happened, where it happened, and to whom. Telling a story does not mean a listener must remain quiet. On the contrary, there is real–world opportunity for interaction and learning, especially when speaker–listener can exchange roles later on.

When choosing texts to use in the real–world EFL university classroom, it is important that you and students share a frame of reference for commu-

13　IN AMERICA. Developed by Anne R. Dow and Accociates. Project Director, Anne R. Dow, Harvard University. Produced by Reeves Corporate Services for International Horizons. 1985

nication behavior, be it listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Any text or tape that helps students understand your speech and respond more actively to what you say and how you say it is material you can choose and use with confidence. Any material that will help students hear/see input on which they can naturally and realistically base their own speaking, listening, writing, or reading will be material you will want to employ in the EFL classroom. But above all take a real world interest in students as people with communication needs, strengths and weaknesses alike. Have reasons to talk to your students, and show them reasons they may have to talk to you and each other beyond traditional class management tasks. I only wish I had been more cognizant of this common sense approach years ago. Although I correctly told my student that listening and speaking are closely linked, I'm not so sure I showed it very clearly in my teaching. I took it for granted that students understood or were interested in what I had to say. I took it for granted that they wanted to undesrstand a conversation or lecture in the way I would want to were I a student. It is never easy for us as EFL instructors to drop our "teacher mask" in situations where we are perceived as knowledge sources. The effort is in trying to teach and be real world at the same time.

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