Abstract
The purpose of this field report is to demonstrate some effective strategies to teach English communication to the intermediate- to advanced-level university students. The report is based on my English communication class (at Rikkyo University in Japan) which is designed to develop the students’ discussion skills necessary for academic purposes. The strategies center on input and output activities. The former activities use reading and listening materials so that the students will deepen their knowledge and understanding of selected topics. The latter activities train the students in the areas of group discussion and research presentations on the basis of the materials they have learned through their input activities.

Keywords: teaching communication, input and output exercises, intermediate/advanced learners
Introduction

This paper presents some effective strategies for teaching English communication skills to intermediate- and advanced-level students at a Japanese University. It is a field report based on my English communication class at Rikkyo University in Tokyo.

Central to the strategies concerned are what can be called “input and output activities.” The former activities use reading and listening materials so that the students will deepen their knowledge and understanding of selected topics. The latter activities train the students in the areas of group discussion and research presentations on the basis of the materials they have learned through their input activities.

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, it will explicate the background of the English communication class I have been teaching. Second, the paper will explain my teaching methods. The third section elaborates some tips to motivate students when implementing the strategies under study. The paper concludes with some future prospects.

1. Background

Let us start with outlining my English communication class. The purpose of this class is to develop students’ discussion/communication skills necessary for academic purposes. The maximum number of students in class is 10, ranging from 2nd to 4th year students. This small class allows the students to have more opportunities to communicate with each other. There is no designated textbook for the course. Instead, the instructor provides materials specifically prepared for the class. For example, carefully selected reading and listening materials are given to the students for their input exercises. The topics that the students discuss include Language Learning, Education, Globalization, Design & Technologies, Human rights, Gender, and Communication.

The students in class vary considerably, both in terms of English proficiency and in terms of disciplinary backgrounds. As for varying levels of student proficiency in English, Figure 1 presents a typical class. The vertical line shows 9 students’ self-reported TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores. From Student A to Student E, they have similar scores, around 600 points. However, from Student F to Student I, they have higher scores, around 800 points—a 200-point difference between the two groups, which is a significant gap. As a result, when a reading assignment was given, students in the latter, 800-point group read much faster than the former 600-point group. To fill the gap, extra work for these advanced students was provided.

![Students’ English Proficiency](image)

Figure 1: Students’ English Proficiency
My class is also characterized by the diversity of disciplines pursued by students. Figure 2 shows one typical situation. In this case, the students were majoring in Community Development, Social Work, Psychology, Tourism, and Intercultural Communication—five disciplines, indicated in the figure in alphabets. Such diversity provides benefits to the entire class, because the students can exchange their ideas among themselves from various academic backgrounds.

Figure 2: Students’ majors

3. Teaching Methods

3.1 An Overview

Now that I have outlined the class environment, let us turn our attention to the teaching methods that I employ. The following list shows a standard set of activities in my communication class, starting with warming-up exercises. As was noted earlier, input and output activities constitute the core of the list. The input activities take the form of reading or listening. They are followed by output activities: the students discuss, as well as make presentations on, what they have read or what they have listened to. In addition, the students may present results of their independent research projects. Finally, they receive feedback from their peers and the instructor.

| 1. Warming-up exercises |
| 2. Input Activities |
| ① Reading or ② Listening |
| 3. Output Activities |
| ① Discussions or ② Presentations |
| 2. Feedback |

Why are these activities put together in this manner? What is the logic behind them? The set of my teaching methods explicates above constitutes a system, which is presented in the diagram below. These methods constitute a virtuous cycle. First, competent learners (intermediate or advanced learners) start with warming-up exercises. Then, they get involved in the input activities (reading and listening), followed by the output activities (discussion and presentation). Finally, they receive constructive feedback from peers and the instructor (evaluation). After completing this set of exercises, the student should have become more competent learners, better prepared for
the next set of exercises. As they keep going through these cycles, then, the students can continuously improve communication skills.

**Virtuous Cycle**

Figure 3: Virtuous Cycle

Let us now take a closer look at each element of the virtuous cycle.

### 3.2 Warming-up exercises

The warming-up exercises have three types: speed speaking, impromptu speeches, and discussion exercises. In speed speaking, the students have to speak as fast as they can. Two methods are used. In one method, the students are instructed to complete their messages within a specified time frame while focusing on fluency and correct pronunciation. The second method involves no time limitation. In such a case, the students are reminded to pay a special attention to the logical structure of their phrases. In impromptu speeches, the students take turns becoming an MC every week. This idea is originally borrowed from Toastmasters International’s table topic session, with some modifications for the language training purposes. An MC is responsible for the whole impromptu speech session, and he/she is to ask 4 or 5 questions to the audience.

Example:  
Q1. What is your ideal family like? Please describe.  
Q2. If you were to die tomorrow, who would you want to stay with for the rest of your life?

The student who is appointed by the MC should stand up and answer the question on the spot by making an impromptu speech. For the first time, students looked nervous as they had no preparation time. However, after they got used to it, they managed to organize their thought while speaking.
The last type of warm-up exercises takes the form of discussions. The following is an example of one of these exercises. In this particular exercise, students need to answer the question by agreeing or disagreeing the statement given.

Ex. Do you agree that ____?
   we should ban texting while walking.
   we should ban capital punishment.

3.3 Input Activities

3.3.1 Reading

After the warming-up exercises, the students begin the input activities. One of the activities is reading. The students read English newspaper articles and/or academic research papers—the instructor provides these. The reading materials come with comprehension questions designed to check the students’ understanding as well as with discussion questions for the students to exchange their ideas among themselves. The students read the reading materials and answer these questions.

The following are example materials concerning education issues. A vocabulary list is provided for students to learn words/terms they may find difficult.

Ex. Education
   “Transactional Analysis Theory: The Basics” (Solomon, 2003)
   “Fear of Studying Abroad” (“Fear of,” 2010)

Let us briefly look at the following newspaper article entitled “Why Can’t Japanese Kids Get into Harvard?” (Dujarric & Honjo, 2009) as an example. The authors argue that the Japanese insularity in the global community is due to Japan’s underrepresentation in the Ivy League institutions in the United States. This reading material has questions attached for comprehension and discussion.

(Example: Article)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JAPAN TIMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPINION</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMMENTARY / WORLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why can’t Japanese kids get into Harvard?</td>
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<tr>
<td>BY ROBERT DUJARRIC AND YUKI ALLYSON HONJO</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEB 5, 2009</td>
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</tbody>
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Makoto Kobayashi, Toshihide Masakawa, Osamu Shimomura and Japan-born U.S. citizen Yoichiro Nambu won the 2008 Nobel Prize for their work in physics and chemistry. At first glance, Japan’s place as a global knowledge center is secure, but these individuals are the exception, rather than the rule. Indeed, Shimomura’s research was conducted at U.S. institutions and largely funded by U.S. grants for basic research. For a country such as Japan, internationalization must start with education. Japan is an island nation, conversing in a language spoken nowhere else on our planet, with
few immigrants and foreigners. Japanese universities have thus far failed to attract the best students from abroad, the only option is a foreign education. Therefore, to internationalize themselves, the Japanese must seek a foreign education. Internationalization must include the elite since they are the ones who will have the most influence on Japan’s future.

There are about 6.4 million college-age Japanese, compared to only 3.2 million for South Korea. Japan is also much richer, with per capita GDP more than twice Korea’s. Yet, there are 39 Koreans studying at Harvard College, compared with only five Japanese (excluding immigrants). Overall, Harvard University has nearly three times as many Koreans as Japanese.

Why are so few Japanese matriculating at Harvard College, or other U.S. Ivy League schools?

As Harvard graduates with an international background living in Japan, we have thought about this question for years. What we have discovered reveals the failure to internationalize: Japanese high school education, in our view, makes it almost impossible, even for extremely bright students with a superb work ethic, to be competitive in an Ivy League admissions process.

English is badly taught in Japan; therefore, even the best high school seniors are almost always well below the level necessary to survive in a U.S. college. Schools do not foster discussion and a debate in a give-and-take atmosphere. Consequently, Japanese high school graduates appear inarticulate to Americans. Unlike the best U.S. high schools (from which most Ivy League students come), Japanese schools do not require their students to write long essays that demand both research and analytical skills. Consequently, Japanese students are also weak when it comes to written expression.

Finally, Japanese high schools lack the flexibility of their best American counterparts, making it difficult for a student with exceptional gifts to stand out from the crowd. Students are not encouraged to pursue their extracurricular passions — be it writing, sciences, business or art. In an extremely competitive applicant pool, Japanese students, even with excellent test scores, fail to distinguish themselves. Moreover, Japanese high school students are not rewarded for pursuing an American education. In Korea, the establishment knows that the top American universities are better than Korean ones. Therefore, young Koreans returning to their country with prestigious U.S. bachelor’s degrees get the recognition they deserve.

In Japan, they will be welcomed with open arms by foreign-owned companies (a very small segment of the labor market) but generally not by Japanese institutions. Japanese employers fear that these overseas-educated returnees will resist assimilation into the rigid and communitarian atmosphere of Japanese institutions. Moreover, the graduates of leading Japanese universities who run Japanese businesses know that by choosing an American school these young men and women are telling Japanese-educated executives “your (Japanese) alma mater isn’t as good as our (American) one.” Therefore, it is unfortunately logical for many Japanese students to avoid applying to colleges overseas.

Japan’s underrepresentation in Ivy League institutions is indicative of Japan’s growing insularity. As the rest of Asia is increasingly engaging the world in the exchange of ideas, Japan remains isolated. Unless the educational, political, and business establishment realizes that Japan must remedy this failure, “Japan passing” will relegate Japan to irrelevancy in the 21st century.
Why can’t Japanese Kids Get into Harvard?

Q1. This article states that “Japan’s underrepresentation in Ivy League institutions is indicative of Japan’s growing insularity.” Do you feel that Japan is becoming more insular? If so, please give some examples.

Yes, I feel that Japan is becoming more insular because the number of Japanese students learning at prestigious foreign universities is decreasing year by year. For example, the number of Japanese kids entering Harvard University was only 2 two years ago. Ph.D. candidates enrolling in the Ivy League are also becoming scarce according to the Japanese alumni.

Q2. Do you agree with the author’s opinions as to why Japanese students are not accepted by some American universities?

Yes, I agree with the author’s opinions. Japanese high school students do not meet the standard of the entrance of the Ivy League. We must improve the quality of English education by incorporating writing and discussion/debate classes in high school. Also, Japanese high school students should be encouraged to apply for universities overseas. The society should accept returnees with degrees from renowned foreign universities more actively.

Q3. Do you feel that it is an advantage or a disadvantage for one’s career in Japan to have graduated from an American university?

At present, it can be a disadvantage because as is indicated in the article, the seniors graduated from Japanese universities fear that returnees might criticize them for not being educated in prestigious foreign universities.

3.3.2 Listening

The other type of input activities is listening. The students listen to online listening materials such as TED presentations, university lectures, and CBS news reports. One example of the TED presentation, “The World’s English Mania” (Walker, 2009), lasts for about 4 minutes and is appropriate for the intermediate learners as the presenter speaks clearly and slowly. As is the case for the reading exercises, the instructor gives handouts in which students can answer comprehension questions and discussion questions. Additionally, there are fill-in-blanks questions for listening exercises. The following example is the transcript of the TED presentation mentioned above.

(Example)

TED TALK: The world's English mania
http://blog.ted.com/2009/05/26/the_worlds_engl/
By Jay Walker:
1:15 Let's talk about manias. Let's start with Beatle mania: hysterical teenagers, crying, screaming, pandemonium. Sports mania deafening crowds, all for one idea -- get the ball in the net. Okay, religious mania: there's rapture, there's weeping.
there's visions. Manias can be good. Manias can be alarming. Or manias can be deadly.

1:01 The world has a new mania. A mania for learning English. Listen as Chinese students practice their English by screaming it.

1:11 Teacher: ... change my life!
1:13 Students: I will change my life.
1:15T: I don't want to let my parents down.
1:18S: I don't want to let my parents down.
1:22T: I don't ever want to let my country down.
1:25S: I don't ever want to let my country down.
1:29T: Most importantly ... S: Most importantly ...
1:32T: I don't want to let myself down.
1:35S: I don't want to let myself down.

1:38 Jay Walker: How many people are trying to learn English worldwide? Two billion of them.

1:47JW: In Latin America, in India, in Southeast Asia, and most of all in China. If you are a Chinese student, you start learning English in the third grade, by law. That's why this year China will become the world's largest English-speaking country.

(Laughter) Why English? In a single word: Opportunity. Opportunity for a better life, a job, to be able to pay for school, or put better food on the table. Imagine a student taking a giant test for three full days. Her score on this one test literally determines her future. She studies 12 hours a day for three years to prepare. 25 percent of her grade is based on English. It's called the Gaokao, and 80 million high school Chinese students have already taken this grueling test. The intensity to learn English is almost unimaginable, unless you witness it.

2:53 Teacher: Perfect! Students: Perfect!
2:55T: Perfect! S: Perfect!
2:58T: I want to speak perfect English.
3:00S: I want to speak perfect English.
3:03T: I want to speak -- S: I want to speak --
3:05T: perfect English. S: perfect English.
3:07T: I want to change my life!
3:11S: I want to change my life!
3:14JW: So is English mania good or bad? Is English a tsunami, washing away other languages? Not likely. English is the world's second language. Your native language is your life. But with English you can become part of a wider conversation: a global conversation about global problems, like climate change or poverty, or hunger or disease. The world has other universal languages. Mathematics is the language of science. Music is the language of emotions. And now English is becoming the language of problem-solving. Not because America is pushing it, but because the world is pulling it. So, English mania is a turning point. Like the harnessing of electricity in our cities or the fall of the Berlin Wall, English represents hope for a better future -- a future where the world has a common language to solve its common problems.

4:20 Thank you very much. (Applause)
http://blog.ted.com/2009/05/26/the_worlds_engl/

<Comprehension Questions>
Q1. What kinds of manias does he mention as examples? What kinds of examples (actions) does he give for each mania?
   1.
   2.
   3.
   4.

Q2. How many people are trying to learn English worldwide?

Q3. In what grade do Chinese students start learning English, by law?

Q4. Why do Chinese students learn English so earnestly?
   Ex. Fill in the blanks with numbers or words.
   A student taking a giant test for ____________ full days.
   Her score on this one test literally determines her ________________. 
   She studies _______________ hours a day for _______________ years to prepare.
   _______________ % of her grade is based on _______________. It’s called the Gaokao, and _______________ million high school Chinese students have already taken this _______________ test.

Q5. What is the speaker’s opinion about English mania?

Q6. What was his last remark about English mania?

<Discussion Questions>
Q1. How do you feel about the English learning mania in China?

Q2. Is English mania good or bad for you? Why?

Q3. Please give three reasons why you are learning English. Explain in detail.
   1
   2
   3

3.4 Output Activities

3.4.1 Discussions

After completing comprehension questions and discussion questions in the reading or listening exercise, the students start discussions in pairs or groups. Take, for example, the article entitled “Why Can’t Japanese Kids Get into Harvard?” mentioned earlier. This article includes rather subjective opinions of the authors. By expressing their
opinions either by agreeing or by disagreeing with the authors’ perspective, the students can easily initiate discussions among themselves.

As my experience shows, this is one effective method to simulate and develop students’ critical thinking. Furthermore, it is a good idea to always designate someone to play the role of facilitator (students can take turns every week) to lead the group discussion. He/she is also responsible for organizing and summarizing the ideas and opinions debated so that the discussants can always stay focused.

3.4.2 Presentations

Each student must make the following set of presentations: (a) he or she performs the role of a discussion facilitator at least once a semester; and (b) he or she must report the results of their independent research three times a semester. All together, then, a student is to make at least four presentations in class. As for (a), a student designated as the facilitator of a group discussion presents an oral summary of what has been debated in front of the entire class. As for (b), each student gets assigned three small-scale research projects based on the planned discussion topics. These projects are intended to deepen their knowledge and explore new ideas and information about the topic, beyond the assigned reading requirements. When reporting on these projects, students can choose either a group presentation approach or an individual presentation approach.

The following steps describe a typical project process:

1 Students conduct research outside the classroom (more likely in the university Library system);

2 They read newspaper articles, journals, research articles and monographs, and/or online sources on a designated topic;

3 They write summaries and opinions about the studied reading materials; and

4 They present their written reports in front of the entire class, followed by a Q&A session.

This process helps the students to become independent learners.

4. Some Tips to Motivate Students

Let me suggest a few tips to motivate students in the context that I have explicated thus far. When implementing the package of teaching methods, the following these elements should be embedded as much as possible:

1. Motivate students by intellectually stimulating them. Tell your students that they are already good learners, and give a task that they feel challenging.

2. Encourage students to become independent learners. Give them the kinds of assignments that require research and preparation outside class, whenever possible. Praise them and have them learn more because they deserve it.
3. Give students a leadership task. Let them take the initiatives to lead group discussions and projects. This can develop their communication and leadership skills.

5. Conclusion: Future Prospects

In the future, I intend to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching strategy in a systematic manner. For example, I plan to collect data to see the transition of the students’ performance levels. This would involve data collection at the beginning of the course, in the mid-term exam, and in the final exam.

I am also planning to encourage my students to conduct a formal debate (e.g. National Speech & Debate Association, n.d.), which should help them to polish their speaking skills and critical thinking. The debate format requires the most challenging communication skill due to a series of complicated and highly skilled tasks. To do well, the students will have to research on a debate topic in advance, to cite sources, to make an affirmative/negative statement, to give rebuttal, to ask questions and answers, and finally to give a closing statement. Therefore, by learning to debate well, the students can become more competent learners.
References


