

# Challenges in teaching English conversation

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## Abstract

This paper describes strategies I have developed for handling some of the challenges in teaching English conversation in Japan; specifically, I discuss possible ways to handle (1) shyness, (2) large class size, (3) fluency, (4) pronunciation, and (5) hearing. In talking about pronunciation and hearing, I focus on the importance of Japanese speakers of English learning good English rhythm. In addition, in this paper I describe some of the classes that seemed to have been well-received and successful approaches to teaching practical English. I briefly mention the mutual exchange program between the Department of International Cultural Studies at Gifu City Women's College and Black Hills State University, Spearfish, South Dakota, U.S.A. The focus of the English classes is on having the students enjoy speaking English, whether we are preparing for the exchange programs, or learning about U.S. cultural events, such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Christmas

Keywords: ESL, teaching strategies, pronunciation, hearing, shyness, fluency, large classrooms, class content, exchange programs

## Introduction

Based on my experience of teaching English conversation at a women's junior college in Japan for the past five years, I have found five big challenges that have confronted me. In the first part of this paper, I suggest some strategies for meeting these challenges. In the second part of the paper, I describe some of the classes that have seemed to be well-received and successful approaches to teaching practical English.

## Part I. Strategies for meeting five challenges in teaching English conversation.

1. **Shyness:** Japanese students tend to be rather shy and hesitate to speak up in class, even if the teacher asks questions. However, I have found it helpful for each student during class to wear large name tags. I use 5x7 index cards (Campus Card 5B, size B6, 182x128mm) with two wholes in the top, through which we string colored yarn, and the students wear these name tags during class. This way, the teacher is able to call on a student by her name. For the first classes, the students are surprised and take a long time to respond, but soon they become used to this approach and speak up fairly quickly. Another strategy used in helping students overcome shyness and speak up is to have everyone sitting in a circle; this way we can all see each other, and it

creates a feeling of a conversational community.

2. **Large Class Size:** Conversation classes in Japan can be fairly large. At our college, the upper range is about 35 students. Thus, it is rather difficult to really carry on conversations. The strategy to meet this challenge involves in addition to using name tags and sitting in a circle is to divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 students. Each group is assigned to prepare a report; the topics vary—seasonal topics (e.g., Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc.), Japanese culture and sightseeing topics (e.g., Japanese Sumo, History of Nara, Prime Minister Koizumi, etc.). Students present their report to the class as a group, using a powerpoint presentation or overhead projector. In order to make sure the other students in the class are really trying to listen, after the report each student in the class must ask a question to the group that presented the report, and then the members of the group ask questions about their report to the students. The answers to these questions are written on paper by the students and then graded.
3. **Fluency:** To help students improve their fluency, I ask them to talk about something that is interesting to them, for instance, such as what they did over the summer vacation. Usually, the talks are short—3 to 7 minutes—and I ask them not to read, but to talk to us, using notes if necessary. Using the overhead projector to show photos or

pamphlets makes it easier for them to talk without memorizing a speech or reading from a paper. In order to make sure that the other students are paying attention, I ask each student in the class to ask a question to the student who just gave a talk. Also, the student who gives the presentation must then ask three questions to the students in the class. This also helps make sure the students are listening. The answers are written on paper and then turned in to the teacher to be graded. This exercise also is good for helping the students' listening skills.

Another hint for improving fluency that I give students is the following. A big problem with most Japanese speakers of English (as well as most speakers of a second language) is that they try to translate from Japanese (or, their native language) to English (to the second language). And, of course, since their Japanese is very good and sophisticated, it becomes a very difficult task to find this same sophisticated way of expressing themselves in English. However, the trick is to translate the Japanese first into very simple Japanese, as if they were talking to a 5 year old child. Then, after the Japanese has become simplified, it is much easier to translate the child-like Japanese phrases into English words that most students are familiar with.

#### 4. Pronunciation

There are many challenges that Japanese speakers face in the area of pronunciation. Usually, pronunciation drills focus on correct pronunciation of consonants (i.e., /r/ vs. /l/, /v/ vs. /b/, /th/, etc.) or vowels (/æ/ as in "cat", etc); however, it is my opinion that the biggest source of Japanese speakers' inability to effectively communicate with speakers of English is "rhythm".

Rhythm is very important. If rhythm is wrong, then it is extremely difficult to understand what is being said. For instance, a classic example is the three-syllable English word, "McDonalds" (mac\_DO\_nalds) where the middle syllable is the prominent one. Japanese speakers usually produce this word with six syllables (ma.ku.do.na.ru.do), where the third from the last syllable has a pitch accent. This way of pronouncing "McDonalds" is totally incomprehensible to native speakers of English (unless they have lived in Japan for awhile or have some knowledge of Japanese). English speakers need to hear three beats (i.e., three syllables) with the middle beat

("DO") more prominent than the others. If a Japanese speaker produces this word with six beats (i.e., six syllables) with the third from last beat ("na") higher in pitch than the others, then the rhythm is all wrong, and the organizational framework in the English speaker's brain cannot grasp what is being said. A similar situation of non-comprehension occurs, of course, with a Japanese speaker for whom "McDonalds" has six beats who hears an English speaker say this word with only three beats.

The source of difficulty is what I call "rhythmical mismatch". One source of mismatch occurs because English rhythmical units and Japanese rhythmical units are different. The rhythmic units for English are "syllables"—for instance, the word "syllable" has three syllables or beats. The rhythmic units for Japanese are "mora"—the word "mora" has two mora or beats. However, the Japanese word "hon" has one syllable, but two mora. A Japanese speaker tends to produce "hon" with two beats; an English speaker, will produce this word with only one beat.

Another difficulty is that the structure of the Japanese language only allows one consonant at the beginning of the syllable, and no consonants (except for the syllabic N or geminate consonant Q) at the end of the syllable. However, English allows many consonants both at the beginning and ending of the syllable, so that for instance, the word "strength" is one syllable. However, in Japanese, because of the sound structure rules of the language, it becomes the six mora-word "su.to.re.n.ku.su".

And a third major source of rhythmical mismatch is that syllables in English come in different sizes—big, little and "littler" (reduced). For each English word, there is one BIG syllable, which is spoken with more prominence. In Japanese, words, all mora are essentially the same size; many words have pitch accents, but this usually does not change the "bigness" (duration) of the syllable.

One illustration of the difference in rhythm between Japanese and English can be seen in "the frog song". The melody is the same for Japanese and English, but the rhythm is different. The Japanese words are "kaeru no uta ga/ kikoete kuru yo/ gero gero gero gero/ gero gero gero gero/ kuwa kuwa kuwa". Each mora gets a beat of the same duration. The English words are "HEAR the lively SONG/ of the FROG in yonder POND/ CRICK, crick, CRICKety crick/ BRR-um" where the words in capital

letters are bigger (have longer duration). Dividing the class into two groups where one group sings in Japanese and the other in English makes an interesting point about the differences in the rhythm of the two languages. It is also quite pretty to hear and a fun exercise to do.

Another important point about English rhythm is this: Students must learn that it is very important to open and close the jaw for each syllable when speaking English. One way to help Japanese speakers of English learn about syllables is to show that each syllable involves one jaw opening-closing movement. This is different from how Japanese mora are produced, where it is not necessary to open the jaw for each mora.

Moreover, in English, for small syllables, the jaw opens just a little, but for BIG syllables, the jaw opens quite a bit. So, English rhythm involves “body movement” in terms of jaw-opening!

Also, English has a “rhythmical structure”. In a spoken utterance, there are groupings of words which are called phrases (bunsetsu) and also, groupings of phrases within a single utterance. There is one big syllable for each word, one yet-bigger syllable for each phrase, and one biggest syllable for each utterance (sentence). I illustrate this with the sentence: “We decided to drive across the country.”

1. Each word has one big syllable (indicated in capital letters)—

deCided, aCROSS, COUNtry, DRIVE

2. Each phrase as one yet-bigger syllable (indicated in capital letters, large font size)—

We deCided to DRIVE/ aCROSS the COUNtry//

3. Each sentence has one BIGGEST syllable (indicated in capital letters, larger font size)—

We deCided to DRIVE/aCROSS the COUNtry//

Students are reminded to open their jaw for each syllable: a little bit for little syllables, more for big syllables, and most for the biggest syllables. It also helps for students to clap hands in time with the biggest syllable in each phrase. This way students notice that English rhythm is indeed rhythmical—the biggest syllable in each phrase occurs at about equal intervals, and if we are really having fun, we can move our feet in rhythm with our hand-clapping and jaw opening! The students learn that English rhythm really is a body-rhythm—a type of jaw-dancing!

## 5. Hearing

Hearing is extremely important also, and very difficult for most Japanese learners of English. The reason I believe has to do also with not understanding English rhythm. After we do the rhythm-speaking exercises, I ask my students to then listen for the BIG words in each utterance, because they are the important ones. I tell them not to worry if they don’t hear the small words because they are usually not important. I tell them that they can usually guess the meaning of the sentence just by listening to the big words.

We then practice this by me talking to them at a normal speed, and then asking them to tell me what I said.

An additional hearing practice is this: I read a short passage to the students. Each student each has a written version of the passage. As they listen to me read each utterance, they indicate the phrases in that utterance by marking a slash (/) at the end of a phrase, and a double slash (//) at the end of the utterance. Then I ask them to underline the big word in each phrase, according to how they hear me read the utterance.

To reinforce the hearing practice, we then do the rhythm exercise as described above—clapping our hands, stamping our feet, and opening our jaws in rhythm to each big word in each phrase. At first, we have a slow rhythm, but gradually, we work up to normal or even fast speed. It becomes quite fun, involving lots of laughter, but also helps the students improve their English speaking and hearing skills.

## Part II. Description of Class Activities

At the Department of International Cultural Studies at Gifu City Women’s College, I have developed curricula for teaching English conversation. My goal is to have students want to speak English, because it is fun and it is useful. My belief is that if students are having fun when speaking, they will try harder to communicate using English.

Some sample curricula are the following:

English Conversation I: prepare for summer exchange program to the U.S.

English Conversation II: parties!!

English Conversation III: prepare for exchange students from the U.S.

### 1. English Conversation I

### Challenges in teaching English conversation

In this class, we prepare for the summer exchange program to the U.S, specifically, a three-week stay at Black Hills State University, South Dakota. The class contents include doing practice homestay conversations, which the students memorize and act out with a partner in front of the class, as well as practicing scenarios for going through U.S. Immigration when they first enter the United States.

We also practice English listening and speaking skills by watching the video, "Dances with Wolves" starring Kevin Costner, which is set in South Dakota, and the final scene is in the Black Hills. The content of the movie, which is about the history of the native American Indians and the white settlers, provides good materials for discussions in English. As an added bonus, those students who participate in the exchange program at Black Hills State University get to meet Kevin Costner's parents, who live in the Black Hills, and one year, we actually met Kevin Costner!!



## **2. English Conversation II**

In this class, we party--Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas! Preparation involves breaking up into small groups to research about origins and customs around the world concerning Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and then making reports to the class. For the Halloween party, we make jack o'lanterns (each group brings a pumpkin, and we carve it in class), the groups wear costumes and do a small skit, and then of course, we eat. Usually an English speaking guest attends the party, and everything is done in English. Students must pay 1 yen each time they speak Japanese! The money goes to UNICEF.

For Thanksgiving, we prepare pumpkin pies (from the jack o-lanterns) and we eat them at the party: for Christmas, we sing Christmas songs, exchange gifts, and eat Christmas cookies, always speaking only English, and paying one yen if they forget and speak Japanese.

## **2. English Conversation III**

In this class, we prepare for exchange students from Black Hills State University (2 week stay at our college). Students research about Japanese culture, make English text-books and powerpoint presentations, plan field trips (Kyoto, Nara, Shirakawago), and one year, they made a web page about Japanese culture: [www.gifu-cwc.ac.jp/gakka/kokusai/Japanese culture/index.html](http://www.gifu-cwc.ac.jp/gakka/kokusai/Japanese%20culture/index.html)



## **III. Some Final Words**

I am speaking from the viewpoint of a teacher of English conversation at a Junior Girls' College, but many of these ideas can be used for adults, in high school, and also perhaps for younger learners of English. The most important thing for a teacher of English conversation is to help students feel that speaking English is FUN! It is not important to speak

perfectly without mistakes, but it is important to TRY, and to laugh and to play!! That is how children learn a language--it is FUN!! If Japanese students can have fun playing with English, and not be afraid to make mistakes, I think their ability to speak English will improve.

Of course, the absolutely best way to learn a foreign language is to spend time in that country!! So, I heartily recommend learning-abroad programs, at any age!! It is important to remember to just have fun speaking and hearing and playing with English!! This is the best way for Japanese learners of English to meet the challenges of speaking English.

NOTE:

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