

Title:

Problems in teaching English to Japanese students revealed by using a tally sheet and a short ethnographic-style commentary

Name: Fumie Takakubo

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1. Introduction

On the 20th of December 1999, I had an opportunity to observe a class at a private language school where I also teach English. During the class, I actually sat behind the students in the classroom and took notes on class activities, classroom events and the atmosphere with the permission of the teacher. I was not able to video-tape the class. As shown below, I employed two observation techniques to describe the class in this report, which are a tally sheet and a short ethnographic-style commentary. The aims of this study is: (1) To describe types of question the teacher used, modification techniques of them and L2 production generated from learners. (2) To describe feedback and intervention the teacher provided and to clarify a policy of the teacher in providing them. (3) To estimate the teaching approach of the teacher and make suggestions to improve her teaching. Based on the observations, some possible applications of class observation techniques to further researches were suggested, and difficulties in teaching English to middle school students in a private language school in Japan were also mentioned in this report.

2. Background

2.1 Class background

The class is a basic level, sixty-minute general English class for non-native speakers of English. It is held once in a week in Monday evening from 6pm to 7pm at a private language school in Matsuyama, Japan.

2.2 Students

The class consists of five first-grade Japanese students of middle school. They are 3 girls and 2 boys. None of them goes to the same middle school. They have been studying English together since April, 1999. In general, the girls seem to be more enthusiastic than the boys.

2.3 Teacher

A female Japanese teacher with 5 years teaching experience. She has been in charge of this class for approximately 4 months. She spent about 3 hours on planning and preparing the class. Of the 3 hours, she spent around 1 hour on making flash cards for the drill-type exercise for making past-form verbs from present-form verbs.

2.4 Lesson plan

The lesson aims were as follows:

- 1) So far, the students have learned the present tense and the present progressive form. The teacher introduces them past-tense sentences in the simple S+V+O form today.
- 2) The teacher explains a grammatical point in making past-tense sentences, that is verbs should be in the past form.
- 3) The teacher explains grammar points related to how to make verbs in the past form from those in the present form. Regular verbs and one type of irre

gular verb (the A-A-A type) are focused on today.

4) The students practice forming past-form verbs from those in the present form. The teacher uses flash cards for this purpose.

3. Observation technique

I employed two observation techniques to describe the class in this report, which are a tally sheet and a short ethnographic-style commentary. The reasons why I employed these approaches are as follows:

1) The combination of a tally sheet and a short ethnographic-style commentary can complement each other, and provide both quantitative and qualitative information.

2) The seating chart observation schedule system was not expected to be very useful because there were only 5 students in the class and the teacher gave them almost the equal opportunities to speak in the class.

3) Using the foreign language interaction system for recording would have ended up generating piles of information on the class which would go beyond the scope of this paper.

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4. Results

4.1 Class observation records

4.1.1 Tally sheet

In order to provide as objective an overview of classroom events as possible, I had decided the items to be focused on prior to the observation of the class in conjunction with the teacher whose classroom was being investigated.

A tally sheet presented by Nunan (1989) was used as a basis for the discussion, and according to the teacher's lesson plan, the item of "T asks a referential question" was removed from the list because these questions were expected to be few and instead of that, the items "T asks students to talk about themselves" and "T asks to rethink answer" were added. The item "T asks a display question" was subdivided into two, which are (a) questions to find out differences in English sentences or words and (b) questions to compare L2 and L1, because the latter is one of teaching methods based on the second language acquisition theory (Ellis, 1985) and the former is rather direct in this sense. The item "L answers a question" was also subdivided into (a) not in drill and (b) in drill, because the answers in the drill were all past-tense verbs and not sentences, and I intended to make clear how much drill work was done by the students. The results are shown on page 13 (see Appendix 1).

4.1.2 Short ethnographic style commentary

See Appendix 2 on page 14.

4.2 Questioning

(a)

1) What type of question does the teacher use?

The types of questions the teacher used in this class was listed on the tally sheet (see page 13). One of the characteristics of them would be that the

teacher asked very few referential questions. This is probably because the class was basically designed in order to increase students' grammar knowledge, put that into practice and enrich students'

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vocabulary. This also explains the fact that the items "T explains a grammatical point", "T explains meanings of a vocabulary item" and "T answers a question in drill" had more tallies than the items "T explains a functional point", "T explains points relating to content of the lesson" and "T gives instructions/directions" had (see Appendix 1).

In the light of roles of each question, the questions she used in this class can be categorized as follows. This also provides the answer to one of the questions in (a), "How much/what sort(s) of L2 production do questions generate from the learners?".

1. Questions relating to the students themselves, plays and/or games such as "Did you go to the Christmas party?" or "Have you ever blown soap bubbles?" etc. catch students' attention to her talks and excite their interests in English especially at the opening of the class, which enables a smooth introduction to learning to some extent.

2. Display questions such as "How do you say when you --- ?" basically guide the students in learning and also improve their speaking ability and enrich their vocabulary.

3. Open-ended referential ones, such as "What did you do yesterday?" improve their speaking ability and enrich their vocabulary.

4. Questions to let the students find out differences among sentences or words, such as "Can you see any differences between this sentence and that sentence? What are they? How are they different?" give them some clues to find out structures of sentences and grammatical modification of words. This process will give them an opportunity to remember what they have learned before and compare and consider carefully about the differences. It would provide an effective learning process.

5. Questions to remind the students of some grammar points in their first language and/or make the students become aware of common or different grammar points between their first language and the second language, and help them in understanding and remembering the grammar in L2.

6. Questions in drills by using flash cards, such as "What is the past form of this verb?", build up their vocabulary and help internalize their grammar knowledge.

7. Questions on meanings of words build up students' vocabulary.

2) Is there a preponderance of any particular type(s)?

As we can see from the Tally sheet (see Appendix 1), the item "L answers a question in drill" obtained the largest tally (18). This result shows that questions in drills

by using flash cards, such as "What is the past form of this verb?", were used most

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frequently. This was followed by questions asking meanings of words (10 occurrences). This is probably because the class was basically designed in order to increase students' grammar knowledge, put that into practice and enrich students' vocabulary.

3) What modification techniques does she employ when questions are not understood?

When questions are not understood, firstly she repeats them at a lower speaking rate. I also do the same because pupils often do not catch them due to

their poor listening ability. If the student still does not understand them, she changes the questions into the easier questions with similar meanings when possible. For example, when the student has difficulties in understanding the question "What did you do yesterday?", she gives alternative questions, such as "Did you watch TV yesterday?" and "I think you studied English yesterday. Am I right?" Thus, she also gives students clues to understand her questions by giving them some examples.

4) How much/what sort(s) of L2 production do questions generate from the learners?

The answers have already been described on pages 4 and 5 in the section of "1) What type of question does the teacher use?".

4.3 Feedback

(b)

1) What type of feedback does the teacher provide? When and how does she provide it?

The teacher was very friendly and dedicated. She was well-prepared and even made very attractive flash cards with attractive drawings for a grammatical drill. She was patient in working with students of lesser ability, and gave a chance to speak to students equally in the class.

Some types of feedback the teacher provides are listed on the tally sheet on page 13. They are "T praises", "T criticizes" and "T asks to rethink answer". As we can see on the tally sheet, the item "T praises" has the greatest number in tallies among the items for feedback. Most of the time, she gets appropriate answers from the students and praises students immediately after she hears the answers. When the students give her wrong

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answers or they do not know the answers, she repeats the question and asks them to rethink their answers. After the class, she told me that she did not want the students to give up trying to solve the question too soon, and I to tally agree with her on this point. She does not criticize students at all.

This is probably a safe way in teaching because sometimes criticism can put students off, and may offend some students.

The other types of feedback I observed in the class were as follows. When the students speak, the teacher listens to them enthusiastically and helps them in speaking when the students have difficulties. When the students ask her some questions, she answers to them in a very friendly way.

2) Are there times when learners have problems/make errors but the teacher does not intervene? If so, what are the apparent reasons for non-intervention? Discuss this with the teacher does she have a policy in when and how to provide (or not provide) feedback?

The students were relatively active and very quick on the uptake of understanding. Therefore, they did not make grammatical mistakes often. But I noticed that they had problems in pronunciation, especially when they pronounced verbs in the past form. However, the teacher did not intervene and did not correct them. After the lesson, I asked her the reason and she answered, "My aims for today's lesson were firstly to introduce them to the idea that we use past forms of verbs when we describe the past, and secondly to enable them to form past forms of regular verbs and one type of irregular verbs. This is more than enough for a 60-minute class for the first-year students of th

e middle school. I do not want to cram a lot of knowledge into their heads.

Also, if I correct their pronunciation all the time, they might develop a fear of being corrected, feel they are being criticized, and eventually they might lose their interest in speaking English."

I agree with her on the point that teachers should not provide too much information to students at a time. This could cause confusion to pupils. Nevertheless, there are still problems remaining in relation to the priority of grammar over pronunciation in teaching English as L2.

The other situations where she did not intervene were as follows. Some students spoke Japanese even when she asked them to answer in English. One was probably shy and did not respond when she addressed questions generally. In the latter case, the teacher could have tried asking him individual questions.

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After the class, I also asked her about what she thought about these phenomenon and she answered to me, "I do not want to force them to speak English. I fear that they might lose interest in English if I push them too much."

5. Discussion

5.1 Class observation

The advantage in using a tally sheet is that it allows us to express results numerically. Ellis (1988) surveyed quantitative studies of the role of practice in language learning. His results suggest that quantitative studies could be useful to find correlations between factors in practice and students' achievement in English learning. Tally sheets can be a powerful tool for this type of study, when items are carefully designed. For this purpose, researchers should carry out appropriate assessment tests too. Also, in order to discover more effective teaching methods, it might be interesting to compare the results I have shown in this paper with results of the same teaching method applied to other groups of students, or with results of a different teaching method applied to students with the same background as the students I observed, by using tally sheets. In this study, I was given just one opportunity to observe the class and the tally sheet only showed that the class was grammar-oriented and teacher-initiated.

To study educational effects for each student, we need to use the seating chart observation schedule system (Day, 1990). This system was not employed in this report and I mentioned the students' attitudes and responses in the short ethnographic style commentary. However, I recorded individual rates of giving correct answers in the drill by using a very simple SCORE system. The results were: student A=1/3 (He was asked to answer 3 times. Of the 3 times, he had a correct answer once. His answer was not right and/or he did not know the answer 2 times), student B=3/4, student C=4/4, student D=3/4, student E=4/4. Further studies on correlation between students' ability in forming past-tense verbs in drill-type exercise and oral proficiency, such as speaking with past-tense verbs, can be designed.

The short ethnographic style commentary provides us qualitative data and gives us useful cases to study teacher-student interactions. For instance, we can see the girl student was struggling to produce past-tense sentences in this report. Thus, although the question the

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teacher gave her was a display one, she gave her a chance to consider the answer and was trying to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) by teaching grammar inductively.

Thornbury (1996) described "bottom-up" markers, and the results of analyzing my short ethnographic commentary according to these markers are as follows:

(1) Referential questions: The teacher asked many display questions and few referential ones. In addition, the majority of open questions were answered by a strong student.

(2) Content feedback: Because referential questions were few, her main feedback on content involved responding to the content of what learners were saying, with hearty but ritualized responses, such as "very good!", "yes!" and "right!".

(3) Wait time: She gave the students enough time to formulate an answer.

(4) Student-initiated talk: These are important in the sense that students can be motivated and pay attention to what teacher says. There were two occasions where the students initiated talk at the introduction part of the observed class. However, the teacher initiated talk including explanations of the grammar points and the drill during the rest of the time.

These results together with the observations stated in "Results", indicate that the class observed was not communicative. I would suggest the following innovations to make this class more communicative.

(1) The teacher can ask more referential questions. For instance, when the student talked about what she did yesterday, the teacher's next question could have been "Why did you do that?", "What did you feel about that?" and/or "How did you do that?".

(2) At least the teacher can give student a chance to ask questions on what she talks about, which may increase student-initiated talk in the class.

Thinking about my own teaching to middle school students, I found myself struggling with the same problems as she had. The main reason is that there are so many contents in English to teach for entrance examinations for high schools, and we have so little time to deal with them. However, we have to make the best of our time.

5.2 Teaching

As I described in "Results" and the above, the class was teacher-initiated and grammar-oriented, with some aspects of the communicative approach at the introductory part of the class. In this section, I would like to refer to teaching materials and using L1 as a way of teaching L2.

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5.2.1 Teaching materials

The teacher did not use a textbook in this class, and instead of that, she controlled students' attention by using a white board and explained grammar points intelligibly. I think it is rather clever not to use Japanese grammar books for English because they are often too detailed and hard to understand. As Swan (1985a, b) mentioned, if teachers aim at students' acquisition of English in reality, speaking practice of simple sentences using past-tense verbs in everyday English can be tried instead of drill-type exercise of verbs in the latter half of the class. In such case, the teacher can use copies of some short dialogs on general topics suitable for middle school students from textbooks (O'Neil, 1982).

5.2.2 L1 as a way of teaching L2

Brown (1994b) pointed out that it is rather illogical to compare the L1 acquisition of a child with the L2 acquisition of an adult, including a young adolescent. The most obvious difference, in the case of adult L2 learning, is

the tremendous cognitive and affective contrast between adults and children.

However, many Japanese teachers emphasize using only English in teaching students at any ages, which means the idealistic way is more like first language learning, initiating the process of L1 learning. This reminds me of the Direct Method described by Richards and Rodgers (1986). This method could have been employed for the class I observed because the school was a private language school and the size of the class was small.

As I already mentioned, the teacher did not put much stress on teaching pronunciation. Pronunciation has been pointed out as the most serious problem in English among Japanese people. The method she employed in this class is the grammar-oriented teaching method, which could result in worsening our pronunciation problems. She could have introduced verbs to the students in the past form phonetically and then taught the grammar.

Having said that, the reality is that because of the recent economic recession in Japan, private language schools have been becoming like cram schools to survive, and many middle school students come to private language schools to prepare for entrance examinations. Therefore, numerous grammar points, idioms, words etc. have to be

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taught in private language schools in a relatively short time. To meet these students' demands, contents related to forms of language such as grammar are introduced to students through their knowledge in L1. Learning processes such as clarifying differences between L1 and L2 and finding common factors in L1 and L2 may help in learning L2 in terms of the cognitive consideration described by Brown (1994b).

5.3 Feedback

When the items on the list of good language teaching characteristics presented by Brown (1994a) were applied to the performance of the teacher, she had all characteristics except No 10 in pedagogical skills, which is "Monitors lessons as they unfolded and makes effective mid-lesson alterations" and No. 13, "Stimulates interaction, cooperation, and team work in the classroom".

Regarding characteristic No. 10, one of the students did not seem to be enthusiastic but was rather restless all the time and looked a bit bored in the drill. The teacher appeared not to have given much attention to him. Some times I am obliged to behave in this way mainly due to being pressed for time. As for No. 13, only the teacher-student interaction was observed. Student-initiated talks can be seen more often if cooperation and team work are stimulated in the classroom.

These results suggest that the teacher was generally a good teacher. On the other hand, I would suggest that there may be a limitation with respect to her feedback. That is she probably fears correcting students' mistakes because she is afraid of hurting students' feelings too much.

Students at this age still can be harsh critics of one another's actions and words and may thus provide a necessary and sufficient degree of pressure to learn the second language. It might be true that some students do not like to be corrected in their pronunciation all the time, and even hate speaking English in the class because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of people. Aiga (1990) notes that many Japanese students lack confidence in their English speaking abilities, and because of that they do not attempt to speak. However, my policy is that language is an excellent way of accomplish

ing communication and speaking plays an important role in communication. It would be the

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best to correct students' pronunciation as early as possible in the learning process, before they believe their wrong pronunciations are correct. I also believe that the only way to remove students' fear of making mistakes in speaking is to give them opportunities to speak English as much as possible and let them gain self-confidence. However, we have to bear in mind that teachers should be very careful not to hurt students' feelings in such cases. Also, we have to satisfy students' demand for entrance examinations, which are still heavily grammar and vocabulary oriented. Many Japanese teachers of English for middle school students have been seeking ways to cope with these rather challenging aims.

6. Conclusion

The combination of a tally sheet and a short ethnographic-style commentary complemented each other and results of the class observation were shown objectively by using them. The results indicated that the class I observed was teacher-initiated and grammar-oriented with some aspects of the communicative approach at the introductory part of the class. The teacher's feedback in the class was hearty but rather ritualized responses, and she seemed to fear correcting students' mistakes. To make the class more communicative, the teacher can ask more referential questions and give students an opportunity to speak in the class as many as possible.

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Appendix 1

Tally sheet

Tallies Total

1. Teacher (T) asks students to talk about themselves /// 3

2. T asks a display question
a) to find out differences;
what are they?/how different?

b) to compare L2 and L1
///

/

3

1

3. T explains a grammatical point //// 5

4. T explains meanings of a vocabulary item //// //// 10

5. T explains a functional point / 1

6. T explains points relating to content (theme/topic) of the lesson
/ 1

7. T gives instructions/directions / 1

8. T praises ////

////
/// 13
9. T criticizes 0
10. T asks to rethink answer /// 3
11. Learner (L) asks a question /// 3
12. L answers a question
a) not in drill

b) in drill ////
/

////
////
////
/// 6

18

13. L talks to other L // 2
14. Period of silence or confusion 0

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Appendix 2

Short ethnographic style commentary

(Note: Japanese was spoken by both the teacher and the students unless otherwise stated)

BEGIN

6:00pm

The teacher comes in the room with a smile saying "Hollow! How are you? It is very cold today, isn't it? The last lesson in 1999!" in English, and sets up the desk area. She seems quite relaxed. The students are sitting down in a half circle rather quietly. When the teacher comes in, they say "Hollow!" in English. They seem relaxed too. She looks over the classroom and silently fills in the attendance sheet, and notices one boy has not come yet. She asks the other students if they know whether he will come to the class this evening. One of them answers he will. Then she says, "OK. Let's wait for him for just a few more minutes." The students agree. While they talk are talking, he arrives and joins the class. She says to this boy, "Hollow! How are you?" in English, and he says "I was in the toilet." Everyone giggles.

6:05

The teacher starts talking in English about the Christmas party for adult students held by this language school a day ago. She talks about the attendance, the food and the drinks in the party, and especially about the attractions. For example, she says, "I went to the Christmas party last night. We played funny games and saw an wonderful show. One of the American teachers of this school blew soap bubbles into many interesting shapes. His performance was excellent. I enjoyed it very much." She uses easy English words and sentences, and puts the stress on the past form of verbs by repeating them. Sometimes she explains words in Japanese. Students seem to be very interest

ed in her talk and ask her some questions about the entertainment. She answers them in English.

6:13

Two girls are talking to each other in Japanese about past-tense verbs which the teacher uses in her talk but they do not understand. She joins their conversation, and explains the words. One of the students say, "I think I have heard them before."

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6:15

The teacher asks one of the female students in English, who seems to be the best student in this class, to tell the class what she did yesterday. The student says in English, "I play a computer game.". The teacher says, "That's nice. I like a computer game too. But, how do you say when you play a computer game today?". The student answers in English "I play a computer game today.". The teacher asks again, "Is it the same as the one describing about what you did yesterday?". The student goes, "Muuuu...". Other students are in silence, but they seem to be thinking too.

6:20

She reminds students of the sentences and the verbs she used in talking about the Christmas party at the beginning of the class. She also reminds them when we describe events in the past we use the past tense in Japanese sentences. She gives some examples. All students nod. She says, "It is the same in English. We use the past tense in English when we talk about the past," and writes some example sentences in the present, the present progressive (which she taught them in the last few classes) and the past forms, such as "I enjoy the Christmas party./I am enjoying the Christmas party./I enjoyed the Christmas party yesterday." The students write them down in their notebooks.

6:30

She points out the same verb written on the board both in the present and the past forms and says in English "Please look at these words very carefully.

Are there any differences?" Two students answer immediately in Japanese, "The one in the past form has "ed" at the end of the word!". She praises them and says "that's how to make past-form verbs."

6:35

She starts explaining grammatical points on how to make past-form verbs: regular verbs and one type of irregular verbs (cf. cut-cut-cut). She writes the points on the board and gives examples, and writes them down on the board.

The students write them down in their notebooks. For each example word, she asks the past form of that verb to students individually. When they get them right, she praises them. When they do not know the answer or make errors, she explains the grammar again, asks them to rethink the answer and gives them the opportunity to answer again. Each student answers around 3 times on average in this drill.

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6:45

She shows students flash cards (15 cards in total). One card has one verb, and the present form is written one side and the past form of the same verb is written on the other side. These verbs are also written on the board as examples. She shows the students the present form first and questions generally the past form of the same verb. Three students answer together in high spirits, but the rest are quiet. She does not say anything to these two students. After she hears their answer, she turns over the card and shows the

students the correct answer. She asks the meanings of words too. The students answer them in Japanese. When they give her the right answers, she praises them saying, "Well done!" or "Very good!" etc. in English. When she hears wrong answers, she goes "Can you say that again?" in English. She basically repeats this question until they give her the correct answer, which means she actually does not say "that's wrong!". Sometimes students pronounce the words wrongly, but she does not correct their pronunciation.

6:55

She erases verbs written on the board, and repeats the same drill using the same flash cards. This time, she asks the students to form past-tense verbs one by one. One of the students does not seem to be enthusiastic but is rather restless all the time looks a bit bored, but the teacher appears not to give much attention to him. At this stage, the students give her correct answers, verbs in the past form, almost all the time.

7:00

The teacher says in English with a big smile, "OK. All of you did very well! . Have a merry Christmas and a happy new year! I'll see you next year! Good-night!". The students say in English, "Thank you teacher! Good-night!" and rush to go home. She cleans up the desk and leaves the room. She records what she teaches in this class today on the school file.