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## Opinion and Perspective

# Encouraging First-Year University Students to Embrace an Active Learning Environment

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This paper explores the challenges that many first-year students face when joining English classes at universities in Japan. English classes at Japanese high schools tend to take a teacher-centric approach, with very little opportunity for students to actively use the English they are being taught. When students make the move to tertiary education, they may be surprised to learn that they are expected to be active participants in their English classes. For some students, the fear that they feel about speaking out in English can greatly hinder their learning progress. There are some factors that educators should take into consideration which will help make the transition smoother. In this paper, I outline my own experiences and offer some suggestions for creating a learning environment where students feel confident and empowered to become active participants.

Ask many Japanese people about their experience with learning English in high school, and you can almost guarantee the answer will be the same. Most will tell you that their English classes involved reading and writing silently, rote learning of expressions, and little to no active use of the language. The predominance of this teaching style is evident both through stories I have heard from students about their hours of classes spent translating long passages into English, and in previous research published on the topic. Kimura et al. (2001) note that “in Japan the most popular teaching methods have been teacher-centered rather than learner-centered” (p. 50), with a focus on a lecture-style class where the instructor speaks and students listen. This can then lead to confusion among students when they enter university and find that their English courses take a much more active approach to learning.

While there may be students who embrace the change and throw themselves into the English-speaking environment with enthusiasm, the majority—in my experience, at least—are hesitant at best and can be completely uncooperative at worst. Couple this with the fact that many of these students are living away from home for the first time without their parents pushing them out the door to class each morning. It can be a challenge to get them into the habit of attending classes where they are expected to actively and enthusiastically use English every day. However, there are some steps we can take to make the process flow more smoothly. Here are some ideas that worked for me.

## **Set expectations early on**

“[T]he switch from passive to active learning (AL) cannot happen unless the students are prepared by the teacher to participate in learning activities,” notes Kanduboda (2020; p. 153); therefore, setting the expectations that you have for the students from the first class onwards is critical. Give students the outline of the course, including any group projects or assignments that will be required. Start the first lesson off with ice-breaker activities that put students in groups to work together or discuss a topic. In my classes, I have found that one great way to get students working together is to set a competitive group activity as the first warm-up. One example that seems to bring students together is “Correct the Teacher”. I show the students 10 sentences, each one containing an error in spelling or grammar, and they have to work together as a team to identify all of the mistakes. The first group to correct all 10 sentences wins. Another great option for groups is a version of Scattergories. Choose three topics (for example, fruits, country names, verbs) and one letter. Students must work together to list as many words that begin with that letter as they can in each of the categories. The team with the most correct words after three minutes wins. Allowing students to choose a team name together gives them a shared identity as important members of the group, and the competitive aspect really helps to bring them out of their shell in pursuit of victory. There are no prizes for winning or penalties for losing so it keeps the atmosphere light and fun.

Another option that will help to set expectations is designating your

classroom as an English-only zone with signs if necessary. This helps to reinforce the speaking expectations you have for students. For example, you may set a rule that it's perfectly fine for them to chat together before and after class but, when they are in your classroom, they must chat in English. However, if they are completely new to learning English, you may find it easier to allow some conversations in the students' mother tongue to avoid students feeling like they can't express their true feelings at all. I find that it's helpful to walk around the room and monitor the discussions. Use your best judgement. One student quickly explaining an instruction to another in their native language will not be disruptive to class, but a group of students completing the class speaking task without using any English will. Where necessary, jump in with simple instructions in English or a gentle reminder to any students speaking Japanese too frequently. After a few classes, I have found that students in my classes will start to police themselves and each other, and it becomes unnecessary for me to step in and remind them to speak English.

## **Make it easy at first**

Spend any amount of time in a classroom in Japan, and you will learn that most students will be reluctant to speak out or offer an opinion unless specifically called on to do so by the instructor. And even then, many will hesitate to share what they really think, worrying that they don't have the "right answer" even in situations where there is no "one right answer". Their fears may range from making mistakes in English, to "wasting" other students' time by sharing their own thoughts, to giving an opinion that is out of line with the rest of the class. Questions may not be asked because "if [students] could not understand something, they would blame themselves for their lack of understanding, rather than questioning the teacher" (Banks, 2016; p. 71). Students are likely to feel far more comfortable giving an answer when they have had some time to consult with group members or prepare what they are going to say ahead of time, rather than being put on the spot and asked to speak spontaneously.

While it may seem a slow and laborious process to allow students to consult with each other before saying anything, recognizing and embracing this

preferred style of communication can have a positive impact on students' overall feeling towards speaking up in English in the future. So, for the first few weeks, make things easy for them. Miller (1995) advises that, when teaching Japanese students in an active communication style of English lesson, “[g]iving learners rehearsal time and pointers on delivery might help to assuage students’ initial fears about doing poorly. As time passed, opportunities for more spontaneous and unrehearsed talk could be introduced” (p. 47).

I put this technique into practice in almost all of my lessons in the first few months of the school year. For example, in a lesson where students used new vocabulary presented in class to complete a gap-fill exercise, I allowed them some time to work by themselves, then to check their answers with a partner and help each other with any unknown answers. I walked around the room to monitor their discussions and when I felt that they had had enough time to complete the exercise, I then called on students to share their answers. The students who were called on answered correctly at this point, having felt empowered in their choice of answer by confirming with another student first. When students understand that they won't be put on the spot and pressured to speak without preparation, they will feel comfortable in the class. As time goes on, this comfort will turn into confidence, to the point where they and feel able to speak up without needing advance preparation time in the future.

## **Praise and encourage**

The impact of praise on students' motivation can't be overstated – especially if those students are nervous about expressing themselves in English for the first time or in a new way. “One way to promote a growth mindset is to use effort praise to students, including those who are struggling. Teachers should regularly praise the efforts of their students as this can eventually lead to better... skills,” write Calingasan and Plata (2022, p. 609). The accuracy or length of speech is not important here; the key is the effort that the students are putting in. Recognize the difficulty that students may feel and how much they may be pushing themselves out of their comfort zone and embrace any willingness to make an effort at this early stage in their English language journey. In my classes, I try to consistently

monitor students' use of English and commend their efforts for speaking, no matter how short the sentence they are able produce is. In this way, I try to create the feeling that the classroom is a welcoming environment where students can feel like productive members of the conversation.

The method of error correction used in class can also have an impact at this stage. Rather than pointing out individual errors directly to the students who make them, I monitor classroom activities and make a note of the most common mistakes I hear and give some general feedback about these points to the group as a whole. For example, if there is a grammatical error that comes up frequently, I will write an example of the error in an incorrect sentence on the whiteboard and have students help me to correct it. I then follow up by explaining why the original sentence was wrong and how students can avoid making that error in future. In this way, students can still learn from their mistakes without feeling like they are being pointed out in front of the group. This will encourage students to become braver in the future and try more complex utterances safe in the knowledge that there is no punishment for failure, rather that they will be rewarded for trying. As Burden (2004) writes, "If teachers reward successful communication, they send the message to their students that there is more to language learning than just grammatical rules and forms" (p. 14).

## **Be flexible**

Finally, learn to go with the flow. Each class group is made up of different personalities, with different goals for learning English and different preferred learning styles. What may work perfectly for one class may go down like a lead balloon in another. Be prepared to adapt and adjust your lessons based on the needs of students, and you will be rewarded with increased interest and interaction from them. I often advise my students that the best way to learn is by making mistakes, and I feel that the same rule applies to educators as well. By learning what does and doesn't work with our classes, adjusting our lesson plans to fit the needs of our students, and keeping a flexible attitude, we can create a learning environment where students feel secure and motivated to jump into this brave new world of active communication in English.

## Conclusion

As first-year university students are thrust into an active learning classroom for the first time, it is understandable that they may feel uncertain and nervous about participating fully. Their fears can be compounded if they feel that they are at a lower ability level than others, or if they don't understand what the teacher is instructing them to do in class. If this is not recognized and addressed by the instructor, it can cause some students to shy away completely from speaking English and result in poor test scores and a complete unwillingness to participate in speaking activities. "When learners view the classroom as anxiety inducing, they often feel as if they are swimming among sharks and become less socially oriented, less assertive, and more withdrawn" (Burden, 2004, p. 17). In my first-year university English classes, I have seen students in week one who would only speak Japanese in group and pair discussions, and who would react with terror when asked to contribute their opinion to a discussion. By using the techniques mentioned in this paper, these same students were enthusiastically engaging with their classmates in English within a matter of weeks.

With careful action, instructors can create a welcoming classroom environment where any effort from students is praised, where learners are supported to feel confident in their abilities, and where every member of the class can thrive and succeed.

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