

Fostering Fluency through Wrong English: Working with What Learners Have

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Teaching English at Japanese universities is one of the most challenging jobs I have ever had. It has also, by far, been the most rewarding. I taught first as a full-time contract teacher at Sapporo Gakuin University, and am currently tenured at Hokkaido Information University (HIU). I also teach part-time at Hokusei Gakuen University.

Among the variety of classes I have taught—including presentation skills, academic writing, seminars, and my all-time favorite, English Language History—I have mostly taught compulsory EFL classes to non-English majors: so-called “general English” classes that are required for graduation by students in all majors. These classes, as many of my colleagues who teach the same classes have similarly observed, tend to be populated with students of lower levels of proficiency. Their attitude toward being in these EFL classes varies, but it is fair to assume that, above all, they are there because they have to be.

Teachers’ motivation to teach general English classes varies too. Over time, some teachers succumb to demotivation. They slog through them for the same reason as some of their students: because they have to. I have only been teaching at university for 10 years now, but in that short time, I have learned how to relish general English classes. My students are—for the most part—talkative, engaged, and they use English for the most of the class. Understandably this surprises some of my colleagues. A few have asked what kind of magic I use. One thing I love to do in class, I respond, is to encourage wrong English.

Wrong is not the right word. What I mean is, I deemphasize accuracy. I want what so many of us as EFL teachers want: for my students to talk in English, to each other, in class. So, I simply redefine what acceptable English is. I embrace a philosophy of anything-goes-as-long-as-meaning-is-negotiated: as long as one person tries to convey meaning, and as long as the other person tries to understand. For example:

A: You. . . free. . .

B: Free?

A: Free time. . . you. . . are you. . . free time?

B: Are you . . . what mean?

A: You are. . . you have. . . free time. What you do?

B: Ahh! Game.

A: Oh! Game! Me too!

This is a perfectly acceptable rendering of a more native-like exchange:

A: What kinds of things do you like to do in your free time?

B: I like to play video games.

A: Oh! Me too!

Teachers of compulsory English classes at Japanese universities routinely—and accurately—point out student resistance to engaging in English conversation in class. The literature on Japanese university students' EFL anxiety reflects these observations (see Williams & Andrade, 2008; Cutrone, 2009; King 2013). Getting students to engage in English conversation may seem a particularly herculean task in some classrooms—ones that many of us are familiar with: non-English majors in compulsory classes with collectively low proficiency and low motivation (e.g., McVeigh, 2002; Kikuchi, 2015).

So when I find myself not dreading these classes like some of my colleagues, sometimes I doubt myself. For the most part, my students are awake, engaged, and use a lot of English with each other in free discussion on a given topic.

I'm not feeling the same disenchantment as some of my colleagues are. I must be doing something wrong. I have fun watching my students have fun, as they fumble with their rudimentary proficiency, inadvertently bending, twisting and fracturing the rules of English that other teachers sweat so hard to teach. It seems like my classes aren't serious enough.

The truth is, I take my job very seriously. For lower proficiency learners in compulsory classes at a non-prestigious university, the reality is that they have had a lot of English language forms pushed upon them, again and again, in order to get through high school. Now, here they are at university, and who am I to get them all to use the “be” verb perfectly? Not that that's bad, but I would simply rather not. Instead, I want them to use what they know right now. This is usually more than they collectively think, and when I get them to realize it, the magic starts.

How do I get them to reveal what they know? By virtually doing away with requirements on form. In the research there is a long-standing debate about how and what kinds of language form are ideally incorporated into EFL classes (see e.g., Ellis, 2016). My classroom design a significant departure from the traditional prescription of language forms. That departure is summarized below.

A topic is introduced to the entire class. I do this every two weeks. It can be any topic that can be talked about from opposing viewpoints. Fast food tends to work well as a starter topic. Arguably, fast food is cheap, convenient and fast, but (again, arguably), it's unhealthy. My HIU students tend to love the topic of video games. Potentially, they're a communication tool. You can learn things from them. They're fun. But they're also addictive, eat money and time, and not the real world.

Students are put into groups of three. They have an all-English (or mostly English) conversations for about 10 minutes. The rules: (1) all English, but just use whatever you can; don't worry about grammar; (2) not all members can take the same position (e.g. fast food is good, fast food is bad); and (3) keep the conversation going.

Groups change members about every 10 minutes, and the conversation starts again. Sometimes I walk around and listen in on conversations. Occasionally I join them if I feel like it, or if I see them struggling too much. Between rotations, I elicit some of the language the students used, and write it on the blackboard. Sometimes I suggest other phrasings or introduce vocabulary and simple phrase structures. Or, I offer phrases that other classes have come up with over the years. Frequently, I observe groups coming up with ideas and expressions that are passed along to other groups when they change members. Students borrow and recycle them when they join other groups. This act of pilfering and recycling words is something that I heartily encourage.

There are two conversation tests per semester. I prefer to call them performances, not tests. In randomly chosen groups of three or four, on a given topic with arguable viewpoints (e.g., “Video games are

good or bad?”), students have to navigate an all-English conversation for about 10 minutes. They can use halting, clumsy utterances with mime galore if they want. If the others get the main idea, it's OK. If not, they can ask for clarification. And even if they can't convey exactly what they mean, or if the conversation stalls, they can reset it using something like “Anyway, I think (video games are not good, because...)” and continue the conversation.

A 20-minute writing performance precedes the conversation performances. Each student writes a fictional conversation between two people on a given topic, each from an opposing viewpoint. They cannot use any Japanese, but they can use sloppy grammar and horrible spelling if they want. I don't care. I'm interested in the ideas they come up with. In some cases even I won't understand what they wrote. In that case I'll mark it with “What do you mean?” Grades of A, B, C, D are holistic: The more they talk and/or write, the better their grade.

Amid the wreckage of atrocious spellings and helter-skelter grammar, some truly amusing exchanges of phrases and ideas emerge. Here are a couple of in-class group discussion excerpts from spring 2018:

A: “Do you like English?”

B: “No.”

A: “Why?”

B: “English is difficult. I don't like grammar.”

A: “Oh. Grammar. Me neither. But. . . I like talking.

B: “Oh. I don't like talking.”

A: “Why?”

B: “I can't speak English.”

A: “. . . But . . . you talk English now. . .”

B: [smiles sheepishly]

A: “I think video game is good. I like play video game. You?”

B: “No.”

A: “No?”

B: “No.

A: “What mean no?”

B: I think . . .no touch game. I think video games is. . . should. . . don't touch.”

A: “Don't touch game?? Why? What do you mean?”

B: “I think video games is perfect. So . . . wonderful. It's god. God is no touch. God is...” [makes hands-together praying gesture, bowing head]

A: [pointing, emphatic] “You. . . pray video games??” [praying gesture] “Not play??” [using game controller gesture]

B: “Yes! Game is god. God is pray. [praying gesture] God is don't touch.

A: [laughing] “You are crazy!”

This kind of language is what comprises the bi-semesterly performances, as well as the in-class practice. Groups rotate frequently, and students practice navigating conversations with different partners each time.

There is some irony in the approach I have taken toward my EFL classes. My background with language learning had been very forms-focused. As an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota who double-majored in English and Latin, I spent years—happily, I will add—fussing over translations of Latin, Old English and Middle English. For my undergraduate major project I wrote a poem in Latin—a tongue-in-cheek lament about how it ‘devolved’ into the Romance languages—in dactylic hexameter, the same meter Virgil’s *Aeneid* uses.

The only living language I formally studied in college was Japanese. I took two years of it, and I was good at parsing verbs and memorizing kanji. As I recall, there was very little free conversation practice. I had wanted to visit Japan since I was in middle school, but it was around that time that my dad developed early-onset Alzheimer’s, which contributed to my putting long-term international travel plans on hold.

So I engaged in other, domestic pursuits. One of these included making my way into proofreading—first part-time at the University of Minnesota’s newspaper, the *Minnesota Daily*, and later full-time at a financial document printing company, proofreading prospectuses and other finance-related documents. The 1990s U.S. economy was doing well, and I often got to travel to branch locations within the country often. I even got to go to London once. Proofreading can be tedious, but I was thankful to get paid to work with language. I might have continued that, had I not taken a chance to travel to Japan for a 10-day vacation. I so instantly fell in love with it that I vowed to come back on a one-way ticket, and not as a tourist.

Several years later, I did just as I said I would. What happened after I got over the rainbow (or rather, the Pacific Ocean) was yet another challenge. I had only ever really worked with language forms. I studied them, I memorized them, I manipulated them. But when it came to conversation, I was tongue-tied. All I could see around me were seasoned veteran expats whose Japanese gushed effortlessly from their mouths. It felt like everyone around me could fold beautiful origami cranes, while I could only make ham-handed paper airplanes that dove straight downward despite the mightiest of arm-swing launches.

I wrestled to unravel my tongue. I bought piles of study materials and banged my head against them. After all, I had gotten decent grades in college. I had landed a job working with English. I was supposed to be good at language. Now, suddenly, my communicative competence seemed infantile. I felt inept, uncouth, enfeebled.

All I could manage for the better part of my first year in Japan were awkward, bungling utterances. Those around me were so kind. They encouraged and complimented me on my efforts. But I was inconsolable. I couldn’t say what I wanted to, couldn’t understand what I needed to, no matter how many notes I jotted, or how vehemently I flung myself at my study materials. Why was this taking me so long, I wondered. I had to do something.

The first thing I did was relinquish the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program job as an ALT, which I had worked so hard to get, after just one year. I joined an intensive Japanese one-year study program at Nagoya Gakuin University, then returned to Hokkaido as a private ALT. I then pursued a Master’s degree in TESOL through a distance program at Macquarie University in Sydney. That is what helped me understand the foundational background of how languages are taught, learned, studied, and acquired. In turn, that knowledge helped me finally to accept the good advice that so many kindly Japanese people around me had been hinting to me all along: What else can you do, before you become fluent and gain confidence, but use crappy Japanese? It’s all you can do for the time being. If you and another person understand one another, then whatever you said to each other was, for that instance, good enough.

It was a matter of learning to work with what you have. That was something my dad used to say. It has also become what I most want my students to experience: to use what they have; to find out what they have by trying to use it, and in the process add to what they have through observing and interacting with others. Certainly their reasons and their motivation to learn English may be different from mine. Most will not jump continents to start an entirely new life on the other side of the world. However, the principle is the same: You can never really get a sense of what you can do until you try doing it. And through doing it, you get better at it.

What many of my students have is, in truth, rudimentary. It is clumsy, halting, awkward, and far from what textbooks would have us think we should be speaking. In actual conversations, sometimes it doesn't work. Through personal experience, I can totally empathize. But when it does work, when meaning is successfully negotiated, even amid the grainiest of word arrangements, I get to share in their enthusiasm. That is the joy I find in teaching “wrong” English. For me, it is the right thing to do. At the same time, like my fellow LD SIG members and teaching colleagues, I am continually learning about learning. In that sense, learner development could refer to us as well as to our students. We develop through feedback and dialogue, and I look forward to anything that you, the reader, are willing to offer.

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