

Members' Voices

メンバーの声



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Hello everyone. My name is Seamus, and I come from Dublin, Ireland. I arrived in Japan on the JET program in 2014, where I was placed in a small town in Fukuoka Prefecture. I intended to stay for a year and return to Ireland to complete a Master's in medieval history, from which I had been given a leave of absence. However, when one year didn't feel like enough, I ended up staying for another and then another, and I am still in Japan today. During this time, I completed my Master's degree in TESOL and began working at a University in Chiba. My Master's thesis, "An investigation into the acquisition of high-frequency words in a Japanese high school context", introduced me to vocabulary acquisition, word frequency, and corpus linguistics in general, which have been the main focus of my research to date. Although my main research interest has now moved to historical corpus linguistics, I am constantly working on smaller projects related to corpus linguistics for language acquisition and how it can benefit learner autonomy.

Recently, I have been trying to bring elements of DDL (data-driven learning) and inductive learning into my classroom activities. One corresponding exercise is the student's use of corpus data websites to create original sentences from target vocabulary. Currently, my students are using websites like COCA (The Corpus of Contemporary American English) and Flax (Flexible Language Acquisition) when creating sentences from target vocabulary items, as part of a TOEIC preparation class. Although both websites are essentially corpus analysis tools, they can easily be used to introduce vocabulary items in context and in my class, retrieve common collocations for the

target words. This adds an element of learner autonomy to the classroom. Similar approaches have been attested to by Flowerdew (2015), amongst others. Although I have yet to conduct research on the outcome of this (which I intend to do in the future), students noticeably improve their command of particles and prepositions.

Learner autonomy has further made its way into my professional career through our University's self-access center, for which I have created a student-led podcast. The onus of the podcast is to create awareness of events and activities happening around the university, and to demonstrate to students the English abilities of their peers, working on the concept that students are more likely to be motivated by hearing their peers speak English than their teachers (Walters, 2020). The podcasts take the form of 20 to 30-minute interviews, and each ends with an open question to the listener. This open question is intended to encourage the listener to engage with the content and provide a conversation topic for students in our university's self-access center. For students partaking in the university's new TALL (Transformative Autonomous Language Learning) course, it also comes with some comprehension questions that students can get credit for answering.

My classroom always leans toward student-centrism. Instruction is kept to a minimum, and practice to a maximum. As for many students, language learning begins and ends at the start and finish of each class period; I try to provide as much time as possible for student output and to create a space where students can learn by doing. Learner autonomy and helping students to help themselves have long been the core tenet of my teaching philosophy.

REFERENCES

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I am Mart Christine Johnston, originally from the Philippines, and I have resided in Japan since 2014. Before my relocation, I spent six years working in Singapore, where I had the opportunity to contribute my communication skills at both a safari and a retail establishment. From my time living there, I learned to adapt to different accents and adjust my grammar and vocabulary accordingly so that I could be understood. Because of this, one of the key principles I have followed since I started teaching in Japan is prioritizing meaning over accuracy. Understanding that effective communication is the ultimate goal, I make my students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of making mistakes. Aside from this aspect, I share the knowledge I gained from living in Singapore and the Philippines with my students particularly when discussing the benefits of English proficiency when traveling or working abroad.

I served as an educator in Osaka for six years, specializing in preschool, kindergarten, and *eikaiwa* instruction. I find that a task-based language learning approach works wonders for younger students. I have observed that children will effortlessly absorb new phrases and words. When they feel ready, they apply a “replacement method” by using these new expressions in various contexts. I have also seen this phenomenon firsthand with my own three-year-old daughter who is exposed to both English at home and Japanese at her daycare. In addition, reading aloud plays a crucial role in expanding students’ vocabulary and enhancing their understanding of grammar. However, one aspect I am not in favor of is testing the proficiency levels of young students. Such

evaluations can easily demotivate them and hinder their natural language learning process. It is important to create a supportive and encouraging environment where they can freely explore and express themselves without the pressure of assessments.

It took me some time to discover my passion for teaching university-level students. While I recognize the value of a task-based language learning approach for younger students, my focus and enthusiasm lie in motivating older students, particularly by imparting study skills to help them excel in improving their English, and I will share with you some of the challenges that I found recently while teaching university students.

In the wake of the global pandemic, I have undertaken the role of an online educator. As such, my focus has been on how students can achieve more in this format. Within this context, I often teach students testing strategies, with a particular emphasis on TOEFL ITP. Most of these students aim to pursue higher education abroad or enroll in a university in Japan offering coursework solely in English. In these classes, I use clear, simple PowerPoint slides (one target sentence per slide). Well-thought-out PowerPoint slides can be very effective. They improve student engagement, minimize cognitive load, and enhance focus regarding teacher-student and student-student interaction. I extend this approach to listening test items, ensuring consistency in my teaching methodology. Additionally, I supplement prescribed materials to aid clarity and encourage interaction. I have found that this practice also elevates students’ motivation levels, making their class participation more enthusiastic and purposeful.

I also have students whom I teach in person. The use of PowerPoint in such situations may be a topic of debate among teachers as slides can sometimes be distracting for students, particularly when they contain excessive text. However, I have come to realize the importance of incorporating slides into my lessons. Regarding reading comprehension, before implementing slides, I used to simply write

notes on the whiteboard. I would primarily use a read-aloud technique, and offer explanations where necessary. However, I realized that some students struggled with this.

Now, in my slides, I incorporate not only the Japanese translations of the target vocabulary, but also relevant pictures depicting key elements from the reading texts we discuss. I typically use these slides as part of a pre-reading activity and have noticed that this approach enables my students to answer reading comprehension questions better. I have found that it is best not to completely dim the classroom and take my time with each slide. By using a PowerPoint presentation prior to reading the text, I have gained confidence that my students' comprehension has improved.

Whether I teach online or in-class, when it comes to class participation, I make an effort to engage every student in every lesson. In the Philippines, classes can have as many as 50-60 students, and I recall that only a few students would have the opportunity to participate orally during a 50-minute class. However, my classes typically consist of a maximum of 20 students each. This allows me to take advantage of the smaller class size and ensure that every student has a chance to be heard. The only downside is that some students may lose focus on other aspects of the lesson when they are aware it is not their turn to answer. To mitigate this, I make a conscious effort to maintain a steady pace throughout the lesson, encouraging students to stay engaged and focused as much as possible. Aside from individual participation, I also use collaborative group activities as much as possible, allowing students to enhance their presentation and writing skills while working alongside their peers. This dynamic often makes students feel more comfortable as they rarely find themselves the focus of the entire class.

A portion of the student body consists of individuals from diverse Asian nations, including Brazil, Russia, Korea, Nepal, China, and Bangladesh. One of the challenges of teaching these students in Japanese universities is the significant variation in learning levels among them. Some of the foreign students exhibit

greater spontaneity than others, which may be attributed to either their strong study habits or the extensive language learning opportunities they had in their home countries. For example, in the Philippines, even though our local language is spoken outside the classroom, we learn subjects such as science, world history, math, and even Physical Education (P.E.) in English.

Because of the wide learning gaps, there are still some students who need help with reading comprehension and decoding some of the most important academic or common words. An important realization emerged from this experience: I recognized the need to recalibrate my assessment strategy to cater to the average learner within my cohort rather than tailoring tests exclusively to the highest or lowest performers. Specifically, I design tests in which I incorporate previously assigned materials. I also utilize the exact items from their textbook. In other words, I rarely introduce new vocabulary items. If I do, I strive to construct simple sentences and provide context clues or common words to assist students in choosing the correct answers. Having experienced the confusion of encountering unfamiliar words during my own Japanese language learning, I aim to create tests that align closely with the vocabulary they have been taught. Therefore, I would rely on context clues or familiar words to understand the meaning.

My experiences in various educational institutions have been incredibly enriching. Interacting with students of varying proficiency levels has been particularly advantageous, as it has allowed me to adapt my teaching methods and discover effective ways to foster motivation. Whether it is through online or in-person learning, I am eager to continue exploring new approaches that inspire and motivate students.