

Reflecting on Freshman English: Ten Strategies for Success

Jennifer Altman

My first semester teaching Freshman English (FE) was largely frustrating. I had one hundred and forty Japanese students--one hundred more students than I had taught during one term in the US. In addition to having so many students, I had to adjust from teaching three hour classes as I had in the U.S. to teaching forty-five minute classes at Asia University (AU). By my second semester, I had figured out a few things that made it easier to manage the large number of students and increased my success as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher. As I finish my fourth semester, I have clarified ten strategies that help me to surmount the challenges of teaching an average of twenty-five students per class, four times per day. The strategies listed below require the teacher to share openly with the students what, why, and how lessons will be disseminated.

Strategy 1: Explain your teaching style and methods to your students.

When students enter the FE classroom they are surprised not only that the lecture is conducted exclusively in English but also that they are expected to speak only English. Additionally, students are expected to participate in a different way. The Japanese Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) trains teachers to present textbook material thoroughly in a prescribed sequence, and socializes students to listen silently and respectfully to teachers' explanations and to retain information as stated in the texts (Nordquist, 1993, pp. 65-66). *Monbusho*, with the assistance of teachers, socializes students to demonstrate participation in class through silence and attentive listening. This is at odds with current western methods of language instruction which often require students to participate by asking questions which may require interrupting the teacher's lesson, answering questions in front of the group, and volunteering to help the teacher model activities. To assist the students in comprehending and adapting to this new situation, it is useful to explain your method concisely and simply, to model it, to explain your expectations, and to remind the students of these things periodically.

Strategy 2: Provide an opportunity for students to experience differences in culture and communication.

For many AU students, the FE teacher is the first non-Japanese person they have met, although many may have had Assistant English Teachers from the JET program in their junior high or senior high schools. Differences in communication styles between cultures exist and it is useful to point this out to students (Meares, 1997, p. 90-98). VFM Mary Meares' Intercultural Communication (ICC) Unit enables students to experience and define culture and communication and gives them a process to solve intercultural communication problems (Meares, 1998). Meares' ICC Unit consists of eight experiential lessons in which students explore culture, verbal and non-verbal communication, stereotypes and generalizations, subcultures, and intercultural problem solving. After experiencing this ICC unit, students have the tools to carefully examine their communication with people from different cultures, including their FE teacher.

Strategy 3: Understand some of the factors that influence student performance and motivation.

A number of factors influence student performance and motivation in FE. The primary factor teachers must consider is that FE is a required course. This is not to say that all students are disinterested; some are very interested. However, others are in class only because they have to be. To hold their interest in learning English, I recommend giving students a lot of individual attention and doing a survey at the beginning of the year to find out what their interests are. Then teach to those interests as much as possible.

Students do have many other priorities other than their studies, including club activities, making friends, and part-time jobs. The college years may be the only time Japanese students

have to pursue their interests; they spent their high school years intensely studying for the university *exam hell* and they will spend their years after university graduation working long hours (Kober, 1991, p. 19). Students spend a lot of time with their clubs because this is where they will make lifetime contacts and friends. While students participate in club activities and work at part-time jobs, they often live at home with their parents. On the average students have a one or two-hour commute from home to school. Consequently, students come to class exhausted from a combination of long commutes, part-time jobs, club activities, social activities with friends, research papers, and exams for each of their dozen or so lecture classes. Since FE students are exhausted and have little free time I recommend giving only thirty minutes of homework each week and teaching lessons which do not depend upon students having completed the homework.

This exhaustion partially explains why some students have little energy to expend for language learning. Another reason some students put out little energy in FE is a lack of understanding. Typically, students' lack of understanding manifests itself in silence or inactivity, or by doing activities in Japanese rather than in English. Another sign of lack of understanding is for students to rely upon the best students in class to participate while the rest simply follow along (Nordquist, 1993, p. 65). For example in my FE level 4 Economics class in 1997 the students consistently rely upon the most verbal student to conduct all verbal communication with me in front of the class. Additionally, before proceeding with an activity less able students often decipher the instructions using Japanese as opposed to asking me for help. If this occurs, I recommend reassessing the situation and either explaining again more slowly and simply, or checking for comprehension—*is it okay?* or *are you ready?* Most importantly, keep directions simple and short. If the task has many steps, give the directions for each step one at a time. Consider modeling the directions or writing key words on the board, either as alternatives or in addition to your verbal directions.

Strategy 4: Assess students' communicative competence throughout the year.

Since the FE Placement Test only evaluates reading and listening skills, it is important to assess students' ability to produce spoken language early in the year. This will be the main conduit of communication between you and your students, so it makes sense to find out how competent they are. Not only will it help you know how to adjust your language, but it will also help you to select communicative activities appropriate to the students' levels and to group students during such activities for maximum language-learning benefit. After the initial assessment, continually evaluate students' abilities to assist you in successfully communicating with them. One oral assessment tool I find particularly helpful is the oral portion of the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), which also includes a reading, writing, and grammar section; it takes five minutes to conduct an interview and appraises both fluency and communication skills. A written assessment tool I use is having the students evaluate each lesson. See Strategy 7 for further details.

Strategy 5: Be clear, firm, consistent, and concise.

When explaining rules or directions it is vital to be clear, firm, consistent, and concise, particularly when explaining your class rules. Students will not only fully understand, but they will also respect the rules or directions if you are consistent. Model the rules, draw pictures, write key words on the board, or distribute handouts to ensure that students fully understand. When you draw lines between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in class and demonstrate consistency in administering consequences students will understand that you will enforce the rules; in the end, you will have fewer problems with students. Given mitigating circumstances, for example serious illnesses, consider making exceptions appropriate to the student's situation.

Strategy 6: Praise students often.

After six or seven years of English language education, it can be surprising and a little discouraging for students to discover that they do not understand their teacher's every utterance, nor can they perfectly or smoothly express themselves in English. Because students

previously learned to dissect sentences and to look for minute details of English sentences, they lack the skills to widen their focus and understand the general idea of a phrase or passage. As their FE instructor you must repeatedly ask them to do widen their focus. Every day, my students and I repeat our class mantra, "I am not shy! I can!" before each lesson. At the end of the lesson, I praise them again for a job well done. As students become accustomed to the mantra, I adapt it to the day, to the lesson we are doing, or to their mood. One result of slightly changing the mantra is that students seem to enjoy the modification; they see that I am having fun playing with English and they can too.

Strategy 7: Get feedback from students.

Finding some vehicle for students to share their responses to the lessons and to reflect on the lessons and their own status as language learners is an excellent way for the instructor to find out how lessons and instruction are being received (Brooks and Brooks, 1993, p. 60). The instructor can then make adjustments by either reviewing material or repeating an activity the students enjoyed. I have my students submit class summaries once per week in which they reflect upon each lesson they had with me the previous week. Through the summaries, I learn what the students thought about working alone or in pairs or about a particular lesson, how the lesson has impacted their lives outside FE, what they are doing outside class, why they were absent, why they are feeling discouraged about FE, and ways in which they would like to improve their English. The class summaries allow students to privately communicate their thoughts with me, and me with them. I offer encouragement, praise, and goal-setting advice in writing as I read through their comments. We push each other to improve; I as an instructor and they as language learners.

Strategy 8: Set curriculum goals.

With the flurry of activity at the beginning of first semester, it is easy to neglect setting some initial curriculum or learning goals. This can make your first semester frustrating; at first, I felt like I was captaining a ship without navigating equipment. Set some goals, even if you feel like it is impossible without having met your students. You can always change your goals later.

By the middle of the first semester of my first year at AU, I had gathered enough information about my students to set some intelligent goals for the second semester and for the following semester. For example, my first semester goals for the 1997-1998 academic year were to improve the students' oral and aural communicative fluency, to teach them how to be successful FE students, and to teach them how to function in an American-style classroom. Second semester, my goals were to further increase students' communicative competence, to increase their understanding of other cultures, and to improve their critical thinking skills in English through writing. My goals were designed to complement the goals of the FE program, to increase students' communicative competence, understanding of other cultures, and critical thinking and language-learning skills (Morrison and Paullin, 1996, pp. 138-9). To measure your success as a teacher, you need a "ruler," and this is what your goals are. Decide what you want the students to be able to do and how you can accomplish your mission.

Strategy 9: Choose your textbook carefully.

In my ESL training course, my teacher, Nancy Butler Tulare, emphasized the importance of selecting a good textbook. She defined a good textbook as one that clearly states functional and targeted language, learning goals, and sequences each chapter from anticipation activities to reception to production to extension with a variety of evaluative activities throughout (N. B. Tulare, personal communication, July 31, 1992). At the same time, the text should be appropriate for the students: their culture, ability level, maturity level, and interests. Remember that topics interesting to you may not be interesting to them and that confrontational topics may raise their affective filters as well as depress them; students may lose interest in learning English as a result. Of course, the text and the supplementary materials you select must also meet your own goals and the goals of the FE Program.

Strategy 10: Share classroom control with the students.

The communicative method assumes that teachers will create an atmosphere conducive to communication. In such an atmosphere, students feel free and motivated to communicate (Taylor, 1987, pp. 49-50). Student-centered classrooms contribute to communication-friendly atmospheres. One component of a student-centered classroom is teachers and students sharing control over the structure of activities and of performance feedback. Most of the control should reside with the teacher at the outset of the course. It should be slowly and increasingly shared with students. Part of control is the students' responsibility for learning, attendance, grades, and performing to the best of their ability, to name a few categories.

Administratively, students can be responsible from the beginning for being on time, and for keeping a record of their attendance and their participation points. When students are tardy, they must approach the teacher at the end of class, inform the teacher of their tardiness, and explain why. Otherwise the students are marked absent in the attendance log. VFM Christina Maxwell finds that this system encourages chronically tardy students to take responsibility for changing their behavior. When students are absent or tardy they miss instruction. Rather than the teacher bearing the onus of catching up with every absent or tardy student, students can take this responsibility. This can be achieved by assigning "homework buddies"; absent students contact one of their homework buddies to get a summary of the lesson as well as a copy of any assignments. This system has the incidental benefit of reinforcing the lesson for the contacted student.

Conclusion

These ten strategies for a successful FE teaching experience have enabled me to improve my teaching and to increase my students' language understanding and proficiency. In reminding myself of these strategies and following my advice (gathered through my own experiences and from the experiences of other VFMs), I avoid falling into the trap of negatively stereotyping students (*they cannot do this because*). By using these strategies, my students and I have been able to increase our ability to understand each other and to communicate successfully more often. In addition, I have been able to help students see their language-learning potential. These strategies have allowed me to give students something we both desire: a successful FE experience.

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