

Breaking the Textbook Habit: English Conversation Through Social Situations

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing ESL/EFL teachers in Japan is breaking student's dependency on English language textbooks. By the time a Japanese student has reached the university level, he or she has had six years of grammar-based English instruction based almost solely on textbook instruction. Unfortunately, many students have little or no proficiency in speaking English. Most students are quite proficient in reading and writing English, but when asked to close their textbooks and start utilizing their English skills to communicate, most are afraid or unable to do so.

The problem is not the student's alone. Instructors all too often find themselves relying on a specific text to plan their lessons. Depending on the situation, many are required to use a textbook prescribed by the school they are working for. It may also be easier for an instructor to rely on a particular textbook rather than think of innovative ideas to get their student's eyes off the page and speaking English in class. However, our goal as English language instructors should be to foster our student's communication abilities without forsaking their reading, writing and listening skills.

Like most ESL/EFL instructors, I have tried a multitude of texts and activities, all striving for the same goal: to get my students to think in English and enable them to use English outside the relative safety of the textbook and

classroom. It is a never-ending battle but one that has its occasional rewards: those students who miraculously overcome their inhibitions and voluntarily answer a question posed by the instructor, successfully complete a communicative assignment in class, or those rare occasions when the student reports that he or she was able to speak to a native speaker in English.

Through trial and error I have developed a curriculum that successfully bridges the gap between textbook-based language instruction and reality-based communicative instruction, while utilizing and improving my student's reading, writing and grammatical skills. But more importantly, students are encouraged to use their imaginations and actually use English--their own English. Putting second language acquisition theory aside, the following is a practical methodology that can be adapted to a variety of student levels.

PLANNING THE LESSON

In essence, this lesson involves posing a social situation to the students and asking them to see the situation through by resolving a conflict, writing their own dialog, practicing the dialog, and acting out the situation in front of class with or without a script.

Human beings are social creatures, and we most often use language in social situations to communicate our thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, second language acquisition can be most successful and rewarding when it is achieved in a social atmosphere, out of the confines of rote memory and grammatical rules.

The number of social situations one can use are limitless. They range from a simple conversation between two friends in a restaurant to a major family crisis which must be resolved. However, the situation one chooses should be one that will interest the students, thus giving them the motivation to complete the assignment. Therefore, careful consideration of the student's abilities and needs is essential. It has been my experience that the lesson should be slightly beyond the student's ability in order to challenge them linguistically.

An excellent source of ideas for social situations can be found in Yoko Nomura's *Pinch & Ouch, English Through Drama* (Lingual House, 1985). Each lesson contains a section titled *Improvisations* which describes different situations in which two characters interact. For example:

A (father, mother)

Background: Your only son (or daughter), B, left home abruptly last year. You have reported him to the Missing Person's Bureau but have had no luck in locating him. You cannot understand why he left home. You had almost given up hope. Now the telephone rings. You answer it. It's him!

Purpose: To find out why he left home and to have him come back home.

B (son, daughter)

Background: You are an only child and you suddenly left home last year because ... (make up a concrete reason e.g. *your parents were overprotective, you fell in love with someone they wouldn't accept*, etc.) Now you are in desperate need of money. (Again think of a concrete reason e.g. *you lost your job*). You decide to call your parents.

Purpose: To get money (a specific amount) from your parents.

Nomura's situations are geared toward pair work and improvisational English. But I have found greater success by adapting the situations to groups of three students, each assuming the role of one of three characters.

Utilizing three characters also creates more of a social atmosphere where students learn to work together for a common goal, without relying on one particular partner.

Each week I provide my students with a written lesson that first explains the social situation, the three characters involved, provides a sample dialog for the students to work from, poses questions about the situation, and gives the students directions for completing the task. Taking Omura's example above, I adapt it as follows:

"The Phone Call"

I. Situation: What would you do if your only son or daughter left home abruptly last year? You have no idea why he/she left and you have not heard from him/her in almost a year. Suddenly, the phone rings and it's him/her asking for money!

II. Characters

1. Character A (Mother)

Background: Your own son (or daughter) ran away from home almost a year ago. You have reported him to the Missing Person's Bureau but have had no luck in locating him. You cannot understand why he/she left home. You have almost given up hope. Now the telephone rings. You answer it. It's him!!!!

Purpose: To find out why he/she left home and to convince him/her to come back home.

2. Character B (Father)

Background: You have almost given up hope of ever seeing your son/daughter again. His/her running away last year has made you very resentful but sad. You really love him/her but don't know how to show your emotions.

Purpose: To help your wife convince him/her to come home without losing your temper.

3. Character C (Son/Daughter)

Background: You are an only child and you suddenly left home last year because ... (MAKE UP A REASON: Your parents were overprotective; You fell in love with someone they wouldn't accept, etc.) Now you are in desperate need of money (Again think of a reason: You lost your job, etc.) you decide to call your parents.

Purpose: To get money (a specific amount) from your parents without telling them where you are or why you left.

III. Sample Dialog

A: Honey, I'm going to bed.

B: Goodnight Dear.

** Suddenly the phone rings -- RRINGGG!!!*

A: Now who could that be at this time of night?

** The mother answers the phone.*

A: Hello? (pause) Hello?

C: Hello ... Mom?

A: Son??!!!

IV. What Happens Next?

1. What does the son/daughter say to his/her mother? (Remember, they haven't talked in almost a year).
2. How does the son/daughter ask for money? What reasons does he/she give?
3. How does the mother react? What does she say? Does she find out where her son/daughter has been? Why did he/she run away?
4. Does the mother convince her son/daughter to come home?
5. How does the father react? Does he get mad, sad, or does he remain calm? What does he say?

V. Directions: TOGETHER WITH YOUR GROUP, decide who plays which part. Do the characters have names? Think about the phone conversation. Do the parents convince their son/daughter to come home or does he/she get the money? How is the conflict resolved? Finish writing the dialog or write a new dialog and practice acting it out. Don't forget to consider the character's emotions and actions. But most of all, have fun!!!

USING THE LESSON

Begin by explaining the social situation to the class. Keep your explanations clear and to the point, encouraging the students to ask questions until they fully understand the situation described. Here the instructor is free to implement visual aids such as pictures, photos and videos that help illustrate the social situation.

For example, for the above lesson I prepare my students with a brief lesson on using the telephone in English,

utilizing sample phone conversations and then having the students "phone" each other in class for a variety of reasons. Again, the level and needs of the students should dictate the amount and kind of activities to be used for preparing the students to complete the task.

Next, describe the three characters to the students. Character explanations provide a good forum for discussing different personality types, emotions, and physical characteristics. Depending on time constraints, students could even be asked to listen to the descriptions and draw pictures of the characters. This activity could be followed by the students sharing and comparing their pictures which can generate even more discussion in English.

After ensuring that my students understand the social situation and the characters involved, I provide a sample dialog to get the groups started. This part of the lesson is optional depending on the level of the students, but most seem to appreciate the example and they are free to utilize any or all parts of the dialog to suit their needs.

The dialog should end with a conflict that needs to be resolved. For lower-level students, they can simply finish writing the dialog until the conflict has been resolved. Be sure to point out the emotions and motivations of the characters involved in the situation.

The section *What Happens Next?* poses questions that get the students thinking about the social situation described and focused on resolving the conflict. Prior to actually completing the task, a class discussion can ensue on

possible solutions to the conflict. Ideas can be written on the board and more questions can be generated.

Finally, give detailed instructions for completing the task. Divide the class into groups of three and have each group member assume the role of one of the characters. Each group member is responsible for generating dialog spoken by their character, including his or her emotions and actions. However, the groups should be encouraged to work together toward a common goal.

While the groups are working, the instructor is free to walk around and monitor their activity, giving help or suggestions or even joining a group if a third member is needed. When the students have resolved the conflict and completed their dialogs, time should be given for practicing the dialog and "acting out" the situation. Students should be encouraged to use appropriate emotions, body language, actions, and even props.

Each group can then present their version of the social situation to the class. This provides the students with a tangible goal, giving them a chance to use English that they have generated, rather than reading from a textbook. If time is available, the class can end with a discussion of each group's adaptation of the particular social situation and provides an excellent forum for questions and answers.

The value of this curriculum lies in its versatility. The topics available are endless and each lesson can be adapted to any time frame and the levels and needs of the students involved. But more importantly, students are

given the opportunity to break out of the textbook habit. They are given the freedom and the challenge of choosing their own words, becoming "actors" in a foreign language, and speaking English that is alive and real.