

TEACHING ENGLISH CONVERSATION AT JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES: A SURVIVAL HANDBOOK

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SUMMARY

This paper gives suggestions as to how a foreign teacher of English conversation at a Japanese university can best deal with the fact that Japanese students have minimal English speaking skills, never raise their hands to ask questions, and have no confidence in English conversation. Ten helpful suggestions are enumerated that can serve as aids to survival in an unfamiliar environment like that found at a Japanese university.

Faced with endless rows of students who have minimal English skills, have never raised their hand to ask a question in their educational lives, and have no confidence in English, how does one survive? This is the starting point from which anyone teaching English in Japan must begin. The road to survival is long and torturous, and is strewn with the unfulfilled dreams of countless conversation teachers who have given up and dropped out in despair. Survival is possible, but it is far from easy. There are signposts along the way, and hopefully this brief handbook will serve as a rough map that will allow new teachers to steer a course toward successful college teaching in Japan. Below are ten important signposts to follow.

1. HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Remember that you can only do so much within the limited framework of your students' overall education. Usually classes meet once a week for an hour and a half, for a yearly total of about 25 classes. These 25 classes are scattered throughout an educational year that is shot through with countless vacations, holidays, special events, and so on. There is very little continuity in the total educational process. As soon as some progress is made, a summer vacation or semester break intervenes, and when the student returns almost everything has been forgotten.

Your class is only one of many classes, and must be viewed in that light. It is part of the educational totality, not THE totality. Most students will learn some English, but to expect them to be fluent speakers is an unrealistic expectation.

2. MAKE THE STUDENTS ENJOY ENGLISH

If the students will not be fluent speakers of English, what CAN be accomplished? The first thing to be accomplished is to make the students enjoy English. If they do not enjoy English all your work has been for naught. If the students enjoy English they may continue studying after college at a language school or culture center, and they may use English on a trip to another country or form a friendship with a person from another country. Enjoyment is the key that will open the door to their English future.

3. GIVE THE STUDENTS CONFIDENCE

Give the students confidence. Don't be too harsh or demanding by expecting them to perform beyond their abilities. If they are given basic linguistic tools with which to communicate and a confidence in using these tools, the way has been prepared for future learning. Praise and encouragement work wonders.

Just by exposing your students to a foreigner who is non-threatening and supportive, the students will have the confidence to meet other foreigners in situations outside of an educational setting. They will have confidence to take trips where they can make practical use of English, and this, in turn, will fuel further confidence.

4. KNOW WHAT CAN BE DONE IN ONE CLASS PERIOD

Most college classes are one and a half hours. Japanese students can rarely be expected to concentrate and process information in English for a full 90 minutes. To break up the time, a sub-text is useful, particularly one that has a different focus and approach than the main text. It should be lighter and offer a change of pace. Dramatic acting out of situations and passages in the main text adds vividness and humor to the class, and keeps the students interested. If a classroom has a video machine students can relax while watching part of a video in English. English songs also provide a welcome break. English games and puzzles also add variety and a break from heavier and more concentrated English learning.

5. BE STRICT ABOUT ATTENDANCE

No learning takes place if the student is absent from class, so the careful checking of attendance is critical. If the student knows that attendance is not being taken, he will in all probability not attend, even if the class is enjoyable. One of the most useful ways of assuring the attendance of students is to test students after every unit. If the student is absent he receives a zero mark for the test. Multiple tests are not too heavy a burden on the teacher because the students can exchange their test papers with other class members and correct them.

6. BE CLEAR ABOUT HOW YOU GRADE

It is important that students know where their grade comes from and how it is made. At the beginning of the year the teacher should explain in clear and understandable fashion how their grade will be determined. Grades should never be arbitrary, and blanket grades of "A" should be avoided. Students need to be constantly reminded what factors go into making up their grade, and they need to see the results of absenteeism, failure to study for a test, etc. Good students should be constantly rewarded to serve as an example and encouragement to students who are not putting forth their best efforts.

7. STRUCTURED CLASSES ARE BEST

English conversation teachers should avoid free conversation with their students. Their ability is not high enough to carry on a sustained dialog, and students soon lose interest and discipline is lost. That is not to say that students should not speak in the class. If possible, it is important that every student answer verbally at least one question in English every class period. A well-structured, interesting text book is vital to a good language class. Questions from the text should be asked in random order so that no student can predict when they will be asked to respond. This keeps the student on his toes and assures student attention throughout the class. Only if students speak can their pronunciation and speaking ability be checked.

8. AVOID EXCESSIVE INNOVATIONS

Although some novelty and innovation is important, it must be remembered that Japanese students have gone through a very rigid educational process before they enter college. Most, if not all, of their college classes will likewise be very formal and structured. Remember, this is Japan and not a western country, and Japan has reached center-stage in the world by such educational methods. You can and should have novelty, but making your class completely different from every other class they have known will leave the students without a compass and anxious about your extreme changes.

9. MAKE AN EFFORT TO GET ALONG WITH OTHER TEACHERS

It is probable that no other teacher will ever see you teach a class. You will, most likely, be judged on how well you get along with the other teachers. In any university there are personality conflicts, disagreements, and often friction among the staff. It is essential that you avoid entanglements in university policies and inner dissension. If you make an honest attempt to get along with others you will enjoy much greater success and happiness during your teaching career. Remember, too, that out of school parties are an excellent way to form bonds with

others. This often means drinking, staying out late, bar-hopping, and being patient when you would rather make your excuses and go home early. In western countries there is a firm line between job and your own time, but such a line is not as firm in Japanese society. Parties and school trips are a time to get away from formal situations and relax together. Such times are among the most important moments for you, because this is when close friendships and deeper communication takes place. Remember to be patient, polite, and never take offense.

10. MAKE YOUR LIFE OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL AS FULL AS POSSIBLE

Although this last point does not fall directly under the heading of university life, it is crucial for survival in Japan. If your life is active, happy, and full, your classes, your teaching, and your relationships with others will reflect that happiness. It is very difficult to live in another culture, particularly one as different from western culture as Japan. When first coming to another country there is a novelty period when everything seems fresh, exciting, and interesting, and during that time the frustrations of ex-patriot life seem more like challenges. But after the initial bloom has worn off, the hard task of day to day living must be dealt with. Taking trips, forming friendships, beginning hobbies, doing sports, getting exercise, reading books, going to parties--all these things make your life richer and happier, and make Japan seem more like your home than just a place where you reside while you earn your living. If you are not happy, your fellow teachers and your students will know it. Survival in Japan starts within yourself, and ensures that your university experience will be a memorable and happy experience.