

# PREPARING SENKOUKA STUDENTS FOR THE ENGLISH BUSINESS WORLD

## Putting Theory to Practice

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While one often hears of the problems of unemployment facing Japan's youth, the truth is that relatively speaking, the challenges facing Japan at the moment are no worse, and usually far better than other countries. Although Japan's economic bubble has apparently burst, the effects of Japan's juggernaut economy on the international business community have been long lasting: Countries will continue to trip over each other to have an opportunity to enter into the Japanese business community. That is to say, in spite of the worries of economists and the Japanese population at large, things will get better and people will find jobs. The only provision is that with the job market becoming increasingly competitive, young people will have to equip themselves with skills which will give them an edge over other people in the shuushoku lineups. A very marketable skill is the ability to speak a foreign language, and the most advantageous language to learn is indisputably English. Of particular relevance to this paper are the business English students being trained at the senkouka level of the Junior College for Women.

When speaking of senkouka students, we are able to make several assumptions. To begin with, we are speaking of a group of women who have learned English almost exclusively in Japan, with little or no direct contact with native English speakers. Students who are more motivated to learn English may have increased their exposure time by attending an English conversation school such as "Nova" or "ECC". The most motivated and most proficient students are typically those who have spent 6 months or more overseas in a homestay or work-abroad program. However, it can be generalized that the communicative level of the *average* student is far less than fluent. Now, considering for a moment the Japanese workplace, we must think about what kinds of positions are available for senkouka graduates based on their less than fluent English abilities. I would tend to believe that jobs with international firms beyond the description of 'office work' are often reserved for those

students with at least one year's experience abroad and fluent English. So what advantage does a senkouka graduate have with what can be called a 'working knowledge' of the English language? I would suggest that the advantages are twofold. Assuming that the majority of senkouka graduates are heading for a job in a company at the level of office administration, knowledge of English may very well open the door for them at international companies who are interested in staff with at least a working, and more importantly, workable, knowledge of the language. Secondly, a practical working knowledge of the language will give the senkouka graduate an increased ability to perform well at the workplace, with the possible result of increased responsibility at the workplace, and a more satisfying, and perhaps better paying job.

It is the application of applied linguistic theory to business classroom teaching methods with the purpose of better achieving this 'practical working knowledge' which is the primary concern of this paper.

I will begin by describing a more traditional, teacher-centered model of language learning. Following this, there will be research presented showing the shortcomings of the traditional method. Of particular bearing is Krashen's *Monitor Theory*. Following this, Nunan's concepts of student-centered learning will be presented as the basis of a more practical and advantageous model of both teaching and learning. Finally, a model will be presented which describes an example lecture using a practical teaching method which allows business students not only to learn English, but also to practice it directly in a classroom situation which can be related to a senkouka student's future employment circumstances.

## 1. The Traditional Teacher-Centered Method of Language Teaching

Traditionally, the teacher's role in the language classroom was that of information giver and exam corrector. Essentially, the teacher's role was identical to that of almost any other teacher. A mathematics teacher, for example, would come into a classroom, and with minimal interaction with the students, would impart his superior knowledge of mathematics to the students. The traditional language teacher has much in common with the above mentioned mathematics teacher. Knowledge was passed to the students and the students were expected to learn and reproduce said knowledge or else fail the course.

The student's role in the traditional model was the expected opposite of the teacher's

role. The student's role was limited to filling a seat, repeating drills in unison with the rest of the class, and at times responding individually to a grammar-based question posed by the instructor: the result being that many students beginning a language course at university out of interest would often see their primary motivation to attend class changing from interest, to a necessity to gain the knowledge necessary to pass the tests. In short, the class would become an academic endeavor as opposed to a quest for a practical skill to be used for its intended purpose - to communicate.

As a typical example of a traditional language lesson, let us look at what may have served as a lesson to teach the future tense in English.

To begin with, the students would be introduced to the target grammatical structures: in this case, the 2 future tenses. A grammatically oriented textbook would perhaps write something similar to:

1: (subject) + (to be) + **going to** + (verb)

2: (subject) + **will** + (verb)

These structures would probably be followed by a very contrived mini-dialogue invented for the purpose of showing the roles of these structures within the spoken language. There would then ensue a series of mechanical exercises designed to practice manipulating the target structure, and finally, some form of oral drills. In short, the unit would be a cleanly dissected chunk of formulaic English with the bulk of the lesson being actively taught by the teacher and passively learned by the students. Perhaps an acceptable situation if the course is *about* the language; however, if the objective of the course is to teach English for communication, then this traditional model would seem to have some shortcomings.

## 2. Current Research and the Traditional Method

### Acquisition versus learning and the importance of motivation

As EFL has become more prominent internationally, so too has the amount of time and effort spent on research into applied linguistics and the use of the EFL classroom as a place for effective language learning. Virtually all of the results of the research point to serious faults in the traditional method as a means of teaching communicative language skills. Once again, the word 'communicative' has been used, as the research presented here is primarily aimed at language taught for the purpose of spoken or written communication. This is

particularly relevant when teaching English conversation for business purposes, where communicative ability and fluency can be considered as important as accuracy in terms of strictly adhered to grammatical rules.

When speaking of fluency and accuracy, I am actually referring to one of the more fundamental concepts in modern language acquisitional theory: the distinction between *learning* and *acquisition*. *Learning* describes the way which EFL students consciously learn grammatical rules, parts of speech, vocabulary, and all of the technical aspects of the language. Conscious learning plays a major role in the traditional language classroom. In contrast to this, *acquisition* describes the way that individuals are able to “pick up” language skills in much the same way that a child might learn a language. Acquisition occurs in situations where the language must be spoken for communicative purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Although conscious language learning has a role in attaining 2nd language fluency, it has been shown that optimal language learning depends primarily on acquiring the language.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it has been suggested by Krashen that “conscious learning is available to the performer only as a Monitor.”<sup>3</sup> According to Krashen’s Monitor Theory, utterances are based on language which has been internalized through communicative use. It would seem that in normal speech, an individual does not have the time to consciously sift through volumes of linguistic information while still being able to participate in a conversation. Instead, utterances produced are based on the language learned through the acquired system and then acted upon by the learned system. Diagrammatically, we can see:<sup>4</sup>



For example, if a secretary is speaking with a potential client on the telephone, she may produce a sentence such as:

**Would you like me to send you an information package?**

To produce such an utterance, a student having gone through the traditional method of conscious learning (that is, with almost no real communicative practice), would first have to try to remember how to make an offer by beginning with “*Would you like*”. Then, there

is the problem of word order between the subject, verb, the indirect pronoun of “*you*”, and finally the direct object, “*an information package*”. To top it all off, she would also have to think about using the correct sentence stress to make it all sound like a polite offer.

On the other hand, the Monitor Theory predicts that a student who has had communicative practice beforehand in similar situations will have already acquired much of the communicative ability necessary to produce the request, and will have internalized and become fluent in such functionally necessary phrases such as “*would you like*”. While producing the sentence, if the secretary has the time to apply some conscious learning, she may be able to correct the potentially erroneous:

**Would you like me sending you an information package?**

By monitoring what she is about to say and applying some of her consciously learned knowledge, she is able to catch the mistake, change “*sending*” to “*to send*”, and produce a more accurate, yet quite fluent, utterance.

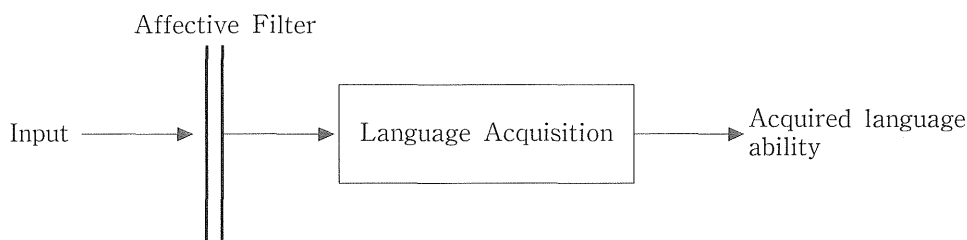
It is important to mention here that even if she had *not* had the time to monitor her utterance, she would still have been able to achieve her goal of offering an information package in a very fluent manner.

Motivation is another problem in the traditional classroom. Although instructors have generally realized the important correlation between motivation and performance, research would indicate that it is a much more important factor in language acquisition than previously imagined.

Motivating students is generally considered the responsibility of the teacher and is usually thought to be an ability related to the instructor’s personality. However, in the traditional classroom, it may have been the teaching method *itself* which was the problem. Research has shown that when asked to repeat oral drills or to complete repetitive exercises of grammar manipulation, students soon lose interest. Particularly in the traditional classroom, where example sentences can have little or no practical communicative value to a student, students quickly stop paying attention, and it would seem that the meaning of these exercises “does not strike very deeply”.<sup>5</sup>

The topics chosen to be taught may also have had a profound effect on motivation. It has been suggested that an “affective filter”<sup>6</sup> may exist which acts to delimit the linguistic input given to a student before the student mentally processes that input. For example, if a business

student's only interest (motivation) is to learn about telephone English, then attempts to teach about 'finding an apartment' will meet with little success: The student will filter out all of the 'unnecessary' linguistic input deemed as 'non-telephone English' before it actually reaches the cognitive centres of the brain. Diagrammatically we can see:<sup>7</sup>



Related to this concept of the affective filter is *instrumental motivation*, which is “the desire to achieve proficiency in a language for utilitarian, or practical reasons.”<sup>8</sup> Instrumental motivation is related to the affective filter in that for many students, once having reached a level deemed as being advanced enough to meet their perceived future or current linguistic needs, their acquisition of the language slows or stops. Even though the student is still enrolled in the class, his or her affective filter has become strong enough to block acquisition. Although instrumental motivation is not every student's primary motivational factor, I would suggest that it is very often the primary factor with senkouka business students, whose motivation to learn English is often for the express purpose of the eventual reality of dealing with foreigners at their future places of employ. Concepts such as instrumental motivation and the affective filter are justification for creating a classroom in which students have control of what they are taught.

### **3. New Directions in Teaching: The Learner Centered Classroom as Used to Motivate the Senkouka Business English Student**

Although it is commonly believed that the optimal setting for language acquisition is complete immersion in a foreign culture, it has been suggested that an EFL or ESL class with teaching methods geared towards real, task-based, meaningful communication, may be the most effective environment for beginner to intermediate level adult language students. When compared to most natural communicative settings, the EFL or ESL classroom has the greatest potential to give understandable input for language acquisition.<sup>9</sup> In terms of direct classroom related research, Nunan's concepts of the learner centered classroom are helpful for practical constructive changes in teaching strategy.

When speaking of a learner centered method, we are really speaking of the antithesis of the traditional classroom. I believe that it would have been unheard of even recently for a teacher to ask students what they wanted to learn. Traditionally, the instructor was in control of all curriculum topics and teaching methods. However, one of the most fundamental principles of the learner centered curriculum is that learners have control over what they are learning. Students may not have complete control ; however, the students play a primary role in determining what will be taught and how.

It is particularly important for an instrumentally motivated senkouka student to be asked what she wants to learn so that course work can be based on tasks which the student believes will have some relevance to her company-oriented future. Through direct communication with the class instructor, these learner needs and learner wants can be accurately assessed.

It would seem that a student's very choosing of a specific topic such as business English means that they have already given the instructor a mandate to teach what is deemed as 'business English'. That is to say, it would seem that the course is already learner centered. However, within business English there are many sub-topics from which students can still be given a choice. In terms of conversational English, one can create detailed units on many subjects such as talking on the telephone, making appointments, dealing with visitors to a company, visiting another company, dealing with foreigners in Japan, travel abroad, etc. By carrying out an appropriate needs analysis on students at the beginning of the course, the instructor can learn exactly what the students *perceive* as being the most potentially useful for their future careers. (Even if what students perceive to be useful is not exactly accurate). Although the instructor may have chosen the potential topics, the students have been given a feeling of control by being empowered with the responsibility of choosing the course content. Even though it is possible that students in business English will pick more or less the same topics as the instructor feels are important, the critical point to be made here is that it is the students who feel that they have had a choice, instead of having a predetermined course content imposed upon them.

Learner centeredness also implies that students participate more in the classroom. That is, rather than having the teacher do all of the talking and writing, students play a greater role in these activities. Even something as simple as writing student answers on the board is better left to the students, even if it takes a little more time. By doing so, the students are employed as active participants in the lesson, increasing their alertness, their attention, and

their motivation.

#### 4. A Practical Classroom Model

I would now like to present what I consider to be a very practical sample lesson which incorporates both a task-based lesson as well as a learner centered approach. In fact, the lesson I have prepared here was tried with success as an introductory lecture for the Senkouka Business English Course. Although the lesson content and analysis is original, I am deeply indebted to my TEFL trainer, Mr. Damian Lucantonio, who taught me the basics of communicative activities as well as teaching me the use and relevance of those activities as they are presented here.<sup>10</sup>

As with most lessons, an authentic conversation was used as the source of both the grammatical as well as culturally related points which were taught. The dialogue presented here is a slightly modified transcription of the authentic recorded conversation:

<b>MIKE:</b> Hi!	<b>RICK:</b> California.
<b>HELEN:</b> Mike! Mike, how are you?!	<b>MIKE:</b> Yeah? And how do you like it here?
<b>MIKE:</b> Hi! Good thanks! How are you doing?	<b>RICK:</b> Ah.. I'm enjoying myself.
<b>HELEN:</b> Oh, I'm doing good, Um, Say! This	<b>MIKE:</b> Yeah? It's kind of colder than Cali-
is my friend Rick Webb. Rick, this is Mike	fornia, isn't it?
Critchley.	<b>RICK:</b> Yeah! Every place is colder than
<b>RICK:</b> Hi!	California!
<b>MIKE:</b> Hi there! Nice to meet you! How you	<b>MIKE:</b> (Laughter)
doing?	<b>RICK:</b> Where are you from?
<b>RICK:</b> Nice to meet you. How you doing?	<b>MIKE:</b> Ah..I'm from Canada. From Van-
(Shaking hands)	couver.
<b>HELEN:</b> So, would you like to sit down?	<b>RICK:</b> Oh Really??
<b>MIKE:</b> Thanks! Eyaaa....So, ah....How long	<b>MIKE:</b> You've been there before.....or?
have you been here for Rick?	<b>RICK:</b> Yeah, I've been to Vancouver.
<b>RICK:</b> Ah....just a couple weeks!	<b>MIKE:</b> Yeah, Oh really! Good, good....(Turn-
<b>MIKE:</b> Really!	ing to Helen) Listen, I just wanted to see if
<b>RICK:</b> Yeah!	you wanted to go out tonight?
<b>MIKE:</b> Where are you from?	<b>HELEN:</b> Well, um... Really Mike, we're kind



of busy tonight.

**MIKE:** Oh really?

**HELEN:** Yeah.. um.. But.. You know.. How about tomorrow?

**MIKE:** Sure, sure!!

**HELEN:** Saturday?

**MIKE:** Sure! How about you, Rick? Do you... Sometimes we go out to eat, once or twice a week.

**RICK:** Are you talking about dinner tomorrow?

**MIKE:** Yeah! Why don't you come out with us!

**RICK:** Yeah, that sounds fine!

**MIKE:** Good! So what time shall we meet?

**HELEN:** Um...hou about 6??

**MIKE:** Ok!

**HELEN:** 6 o'clock!

**MIKE:** Shall we meet here at 6 o'clock tomorrow??

**RICK:** Yeah, I can make that, That's fine!

**HELEN:** Yeah, me too.

**MIKE:** Good! Listen, I gotta go now, I'm kind of in a hurry....so...Rick! Nice meeting you!!!

**RICK:** Yeah, you too!

**MIKE:** Take care, eh! See you around!!

**RICK:** Yeah, bye bye...

**MIKE:** See ya!

**HELEN:** See ya!

From this dialogue, specific learning objectives were drawn. In this lesson, the students are expected by the end of the lesson to be able to lead and participate in a conversation at their own English level involving an introduction with some small talk in a semi-formal to casual situation involving 3 people. Upon determining objectives, a lesson plan and teaching materials can be developed.

In the first stage of the lesson, the presentation stage, when the student's first hear the dialogue, some form of listening exercise is used so that the students are involved in the listening. The dialogue is very long, and it is probably incomprehensible to the students at first. However, presenting it with appropriate listening exercises encourages students to develop their prediction skills. That is to say, even though students can not comprehend every word, they can at least get the gist of the conversation and follow the meaning.

An example of such an exercise would be a scatter sheet, which encourages active listening and prediction of the meaning of the conversation. By selecting key words, the instructor can make the gist of the conversation comprehensible to the students. The addition of bogus words can be used to increase the difficulty level of the exercise. However, regardless of the difficulty level, this exercise is a process exercise which allows even the least proficient students in the class to complete at least a part of the exercise. This builds

confidence and increases motivation by giving students the feeling that they were partially 'right'. The following is an example of a general outline of a scatter sheet for this particular dialogue:

**1. Listen to the dialogue and check (✓) the words you hear.**

Natto	Dinner	Meet	Train
Colder	Sit	Umbrella	Weeks
Tonight	Where	Lunch	Hurry
Trick	Friend		Busy

**2. Listen to the dialogue and put the words in order as you hear them.**

**3. Now guess what you think the dialogue is about.**

Once students have been able to pick up the gist of the conversation, the lesson can progress to a more detailed listening-oriented exercise. An exercise such as a gapping activity not only works on listening skills, but also allows the instructor to highlight key points which will eventually be taught as discreet grammatical points, discourse markers or expressions. The following is an excerpt of a possible gapping exercise for this particular dialogue:

**MIKE:** Hi!

**HELEN:** Mike! Mike, how are you?!

**MIKE:** Hi! Good thanks! How are you doing?

**HELEN:** Oh, I'm doing good! Um, Say! \_\_\_\_\_ Rick Webb.  
Rick, this is Mike Critchley.

**RICK:** Hi!

**MIKE:** Hi there! \_\_\_\_\_! How you doing?

**RICK:** Nice to meet you. How you doing? (Shaking hands)

**HELEN:** \_\_\_\_\_, would you like to sit down?

**MIKE:** Thanks! Eyaaa....  
So, ah....How long have you been here for Rick?

**RICK:** Ah...Just a couple weeks!

**MIKE:** \_\_\_\_\_!

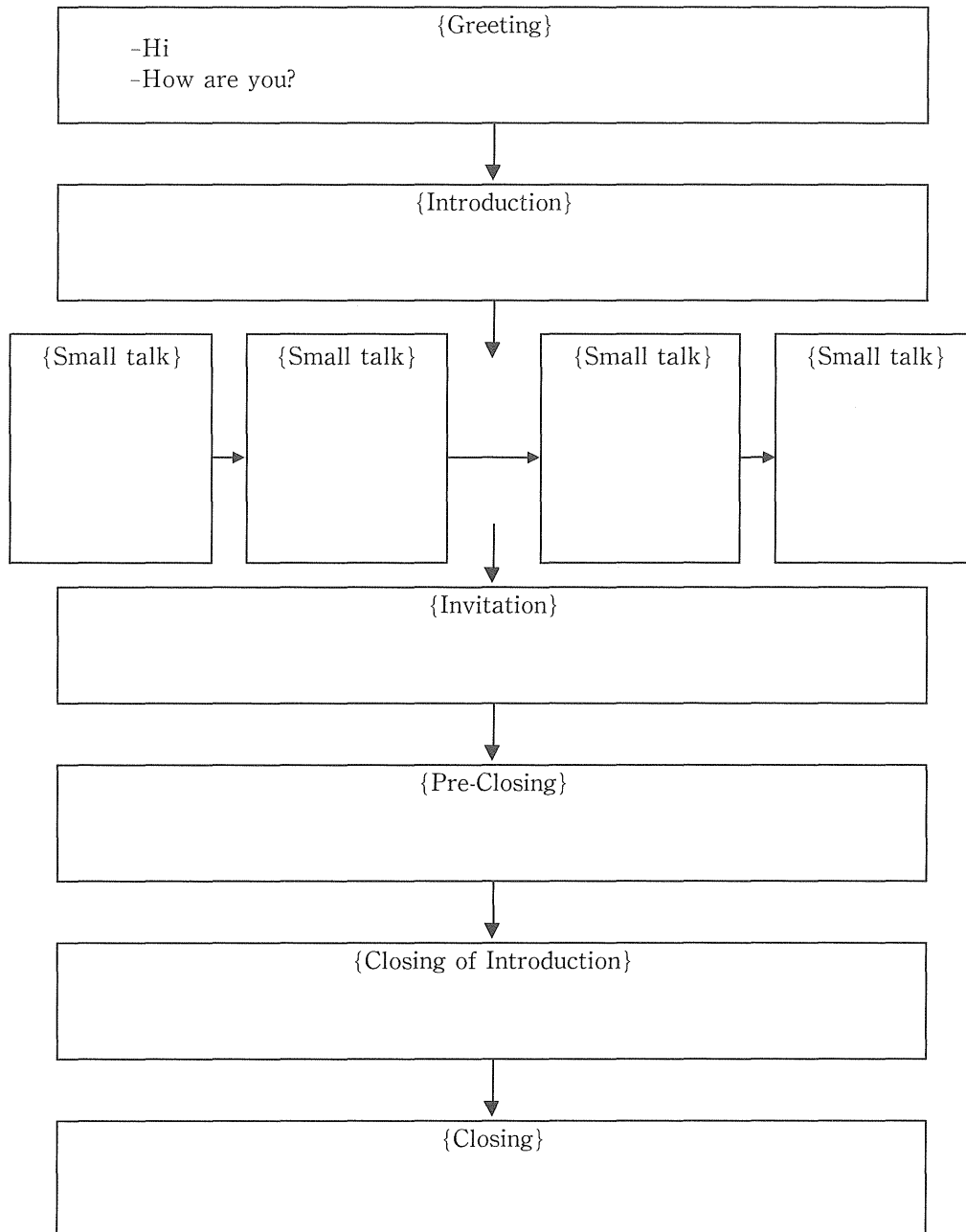
By now, students have a clear idea of the *gist* of the conversation, even if they cannot understand every word. The instructor may now hand out a transcript of the conversation for the students to read while listening to the dialogue. It is then safe to move on to a more detailed explanation of the parts of speech as they are being used within the conversation. For example:

- So...** : Is used to begin a casual conversation  
**Would you like to...** : Is used when offering somebody something.

In addition to the linguistic aspects of the conversation, the cultural aspects are also taught here, using students whenever possible to assist playing the roles presented. For example, students are shown how to give a firm, businesslike handshake. They are also shown how to stand when being introduced and how to act appropriately. It is explained that face to face encounters with North Americans at a company will generally be much more casual than they would be with Japanese co-workers. Information such as what kinds of questions one can ask when meeting somebody for the first time (e.g. It is OK to ask about a person's country or job, but impolite to ask about age, religion, or salary); or who is responsible for ending a conversation of this nature, is also taught. Most importantly, the entire conversation and all of these explanations are presented within a completely defined context. That is, students are told who is speaking, how formal the situation is, and where the conversation is taking place. By explaining context as clearly as possible, students are able to form a concrete image of what is happening in the conversation, they are able to better understand the language associated with the situation, and they are also able to see the practical use of the conversation in their future positions in Japanese businesses. (In this case, they can see the potential use of being introduced to, and participating in a short, culturally appropriate conversation with a foreign worker in their company).

To further explain the parts of the conversation, a box-diagram is often useful. Please see the following page for an example of a box-diagram which may be used for this particular conversation:

While listening to the dialogue, write down in the boxes the words which belong to each part of the dialogue. The first box has been done for you.



Now the students can clearly see how the conversation is put together in a culturally relevant manner: Culturally relevant because almost all semi-formal introductions involving 3 people which students will encounter in the business world will have most of the main parts shown in the box diagram; and all of the main parts are expected to be used in the correct order for native speakers to feel comfortable. For example, regardless of the greeting used, it is essential to greet people when we see them. Following the greeting we go through the process of introductions, and then move onto a short period of 'small talk'. Once again, it is stressed to the students that it is preferable to make mistakes attempting to create small talk rather than to skip it all together. English speaking people generally place far more importance on the concept of friendly small-talk than they do on grammatical correctness.

After the invitation stage, which was unique to this particular conversation, has been passed, we return to another standard part of the introduction, the pre-closing. That is, the excuse one makes upon leaving, regardless of whether the excuse is valid or not. It is extremely important in most English-speaking cultures, and would often be missed entirely in the dissociative nature of the traditional method, where language is taught in individual fragments of conversation which have been stripped of contextual relevance.

It is safe to assume that following all of these exercises, the students will be at a point where they can begin practicing their own conversations, beginning by using the box diagram, and gradually relying less and less on written cues.

The final portion of the lesson is the assessment stage, whereby the instructor can observe how well the students are able to participate in a 3-person introduction, producing the language required with no outside help. Assessment takes place in the form of a role play situation.

It is important to stress that the students are not expected to memorize the original dialogue. Rather, they should be able to use the language points they have been taught during the lesson, or any language they have at their disposal to complete the task of a 3-person introduction in a culturally appropriate manner. In fact, students are not actually evaluated on how grammatically accurate their utterances are. Doing so just reinforces the student's already obsessive concern with grammaticality, thereby hindering communication. Instead, they are marked on *how well* they are able to communicate and complete the task at hand at their individual level of proficiency in English. That is, "the criterion for success lies not in formal correctness but in communicative effectiveness."<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, if a student is trying to communicate an invitation, it does not matter whether the English is 100%

correct. As long as the listener is able to understand that she is being invited to join the other participants for dinner, then the task has been completed. In this case, the whole, real-life task is to participate in a 3-way introduction with some small talk and an invitation. If students can go from “Hello, how are you,” to “Good bye”, and if they are successful in communicating all of the sub-tasks in between in a culturally appropriate manner, they receive a good mark. The more effort a student puts into her individual studies tends to be reflected in her performance during the role play, and consequently in her grades.

## **5. The Results**

Upon completion of the lesson, students will have accomplished a real-life task. They now know that they can participate in almost any semi-formal to casual situation involving an introduction and be able to complete the task from start to finish. The students should have more self confidence, be at least slightly more motivated, and will be equipped with a real-life skill which they can carry across to their place of employment, or any other facet of their lives.

## **6. In Conclusion**

It would seem a lot to expect students to be able to digest such a long conversation with so many functions involved (asking, inviting, introducing, etc.) However, the conversation has been completely broken down and explained so that all students can understand completely the communicated messages of each part of the conversation. This allows students at all levels to acquire the language they need to reproduce the same communicative functions. It must be stressed that students are not expected to memorize exact phrases, but rather to complete the communicative task.

As to concerns with grammaticality, it is often suggested that it is wrong to teach students phrases which are not 100% grammatically correct. In fact, while teaching the lesson, most phrases and grammatical points are contrasted with their more grammatically correct counterparts. However, as in the case of this dialogue, semi-formal English often uses less than grammatically perfect phrases, and students must be able to understand them if they are to hope to understand authentic English conversation.

It is also important to note that although a very long dialogue, the time given to teaching

the lesson is also relatively long. If the grammatical functions in this dialogue were to be taught separately as in the traditional method, they may take 2-3 full lectures. In fact, the sample lesson I have written here also takes between 2-3 lectures; however, it has the added benefits of teaching a complete task along with a wealth of culturally related information all set in a clear, highly contextualized framework.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1) Stephen D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 1.
- 2) Ibid., p. 37.
- 3) Ibid., p. 2.
- 4) Ibid., p. 2.
- 5) E. Stevick, *Memory, Meaning, and Method*, (Rowley, Ma.: Newbury House, 1976), as quoted in Krashen, p. 103.
- 6) H. Dulay and M. Burt, "Remarks on Creativity in Language Acquisition," in M. Burt, H. Dulay, and M. Finnochiaro (eds.), *Viewpoints on English as a Second Language*, (New York: Regents, 1977), pp. 95-126, as quoted in Krashen, P. 110.
- 7) Adapted from N. Chomsky, *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1946), and H. Dulay and M. Burt, (1977), as produced in Krashen, p. 110.
- 8) Krashen, p. 22.
- 9) Krashen, pp.104-105
- 10) Damian Lucantonio, BA, Dip. Ed., Dip. TEFL, MA (TESOL), *The Japan Times Educational Projects* course in TEFL, Tokyo, Japan, 30 October 1993-4 December 1993.
- 11) B. Carroll, *Testing Communicative Performance*, (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981), as quoted in David Nunan, *The Learner-Centred Curriculum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.117.

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