

## *A Communicative approach to teaching foreign languages.*

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Since I have decided to stay in Japan for a third and final year, it is now time for me to reflect on my job as an ALT. Recently I have been asking myself, what experience have I gained from my job over the past two years and how will it affect my future career as a teacher of French and German. Before coming to Japan, I trained as a teacher of modern languages. When I arrived here, I already had a fair idea of what was expected of me in the classroom. I was highly motivated and eager to start my new job. Over the past two years I have adopted many new techniques and modified old ones. I realize now, that as I move from my second year into my third year, just how far I have developed as a language teacher.

In this essay, I wish to share with you some of the techniques that I have used and found to be highly effective in the English classroom. I also want to demonstrate how my teaching technique has developed, and in my opinion changed for the better.

In short, this essay is my suggestion as to how I think a foreign language should be taught. My message is to anyone who already teaches, or is interested in teaching a language, in particular someone who is considering becoming an ALT. My opinion is based purely on my own classroom experience and from observing other more experienced teachers at work.

One of the main issues that I wish to discuss is the use of the textbook as the main source of teaching in the foreign language classroom. In my own teaching, I try to use the textbook little as possible, or as a mere reference, or guide of points to be covered. There are many reasons why I don't rely heavily on a textbook. I have used many different textbooks to teach French, German and English and I have found some use in all of them. However, the textbook should never be used as the main source for teaching for the following reasons:

1. Sometimes the textbook provides information that is grammatically, or culturally inaccurate. This may be due to the fact that quite often textbooks are produced by non-native speakers. I know this to be the case with the New Crown textbook used in most, if not all junior high schools in Ashikaga.
2. A textbook should not be used as the only source of teaching and learning. It is not designed for this purpose. The textbook is intended as a guideline, or a platform from which to spring.
3. Most textbooks are not differentiated and therefore do not cater for pupils of varying learning abilities.

If the aim of the English classroom is to help people become communicatively competent in the English language, we have to provide them with "real language" that can be used in real life situations.

### **Create your own worksheets**

There are many ways to avoid using the textbook. You can create your own worksheets and write your own dialogues. I refer to the textbook to see what grammar point needs to be taught, then make up my own activities to teach it. If we take New Crown for example, at the bottom of each page, there is bold text that highlights the main grammar point of that lesson.

Practising dialogues is a good way for pupils to learn conversational English, however it is very boring simply reading skits from textbooks about fictional characters, who as an example: "want to buy mufflers for their

mothers". With just a few alterations, the same dialogue can become much more fun and interesting for the pupils. Instead of using fictitious people, why not use the names, and if possible even the faces, of celebrities, or even better, the names and faces of teachers with whom the pupils are familiar. If you don't like drawing, you can always use magazine clippings, or photographs, or visit some of the websites, which offer free clipart.

### **Props & Visual Aids for Learning.**

The use of props in lessons is another highly effective way to teach a language. This will liven up your lessons and help your students understand. The use of visual aids at the beginning of the lesson is very important as it helps the students tune into the topic and it will also activate any previous knowledge that he, or she may have. Students are also more likely to remember what you teach them if you use lots of visual aids.

### **Playing Games**

Working as an ALT, you will quite often be asked to come up with a game for your English lesson. If this happens a lot, do not feel disheartened. Many ALTs begin to feel more like a games master than an English teacher. The fact of the matter is game playing is a highly effective way to learn and teach another language. Furthermore adolescents are highly competitive and enjoy the chance to play any game. However, if you are going to use a game to teach, you have to give some thought to what game and how you are going to adapt it in order to teach a particular grammar point, or vocabulary.

### **Use whatever you want**

All in all, it doesn't really matter what you use to teach, as long as you use it in the correct way. You should always try to be creative in your lesson planning and move away from stale, unnatural, textbook language. Creativity will flow, only if you are enthusiastic about what you do. You can use any material that you consider necessary in order to teach. It is important that you feel comfortable in your job and enjoy what you do. If you are bored, your students will probably be bored too.

### **You are the most valuable material**

As corny as this may sound, the most valuable teaching material that you have at your disposition is yourself and the fact that you are a native speaker. Use this to your advantage and bring some life into the language classroom. You should always promote your language as much as possible. The best way to do this is to use the target language as much as possible. Lessons can be carried out entirely in English, providing that the level of language use is appropriate to the learners' competence levels. This is important if students are to take the language seriously and see it as a real means of communication. Constantly translating back into the students' mother tongue makes it seem of secondary importance. It will certainly require much patience; hard work, and determination from the teacher as well as lots of exhausting gestures to explain things, but overall the students will have a much more valuable learning experience.

Phew! I'm glad I got that off my chest. Thank you!