

This short essay will outline the content and purpose of a spoken English course taught at the Institute of Language and Culture Studies, Hokkaido University in the second semester 2002. The course was titled English III Speaking and taken by first-year students in the Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine. The purpose of the course was to develop the active communication skills of the learners. Japanese university students typically have extensive passive knowledge of English, but are unable to communicate. The course is specifically designed to activate the language they have already learned. The course is centered around small-group discussions on a number of different themes along with two group projects in a fourteen-week syllabus.

Most of the classes begin with discussion questions in simple English on the theme of the day. The students are not given any English to help them answer the discussion questions and must marshal their existing linguistic resources to communicate with a partner. The next stage is to focus on some common first language interference errors. The class shifts from a focus on communication to a focus on language form. All the errors are presented in single sentences contextualized within the day's discussion theme. Finally, the learners are presented with language that native English speakers would typically use to discuss the topic in question. Having already attempted to express similar ideas with their existing linguistic resources, learners are likely to be ready to acquire some new language at this point.

Approximately thirty minutes of each class is dedicated to two group projects lasting six weeks each. The first project requires students to design a survey on a topic of their choosing and to present the results of the survey to the class in a 5-10 minute presentation. The purpose of this project is to develop research skills, working within a fixed introduction-method-results-implications-summary framework. The second project is culturally focused; students watch either an American or British movie and present a review of their opinions. They are asked to address the question of how the film presents British or American culture in their reviews and presentations.

The course outlined above is taught only in English so clarity is very important. Ideally, teacher talking time will only be about 10% of the total class, so students do not need to be able to comprehend spoken English to participate in the class. All essential instructions are presented in written form and supported verbally. I do not slow down my speech from natural speed when addressing the class. To foster motivation, I get out of the way and let the students do the bulk of the work. Students control their own discussions and also choose the themes they want to focus on in the projects. There is no regular testing of the students in the syllabus. The students are assessed by their participation in group discussions, the quality of their two presentations and by a final group oral test. The assessment tools are designed to be in line with the course purpose; communicating in English.