

A NEW METHOD OF TEACHING ENGLISH CONVERSATION TO JAPANESE STUDENTS

by

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Introduction

This year, I decided to try a different textbook in teaching the Women's Junior College classes in English Conversation. Previously, we had been using Clark's textbook.^(a) This textbook seemed to answer some of the problems, including the difficulty the students were having understanding the basic patterns of English sentences, as well as unfamiliar words. At the beginning of each lesson, the Application Dialogue was printed in both English and Japanese, and each lesson included a Section II, which explained, in both English and Japanese, the problems introduced in that lesson.

However, I began to notice that the rate of progress seemed too slow, and many of the students were unable to understand the relatively simple sentence structures in this introductory course. I am aware that a probable majority of the college students do very little homework, and this may have been the reason for the difficulty in understanding. In any case, beginning with this year's first lessons, I changed textbooks. Now we are using Vernon Brown's "Speak English".^(b)

I

"Speak English", which employs one of the first new methods of teaching, and learning, English Conversation that I have been able to discover, is divided into four books. And each book is further divided into an instructor's book and a student's book. "Speak English" is not for beginners, but is intended for people who have studied English without learning to speak and understand English.

The student has probably "studied English for a number of years, but his experience has been limited largely to reading-translation or grammar-translation. His attempts to express himself, either in speech or in writing, are largely unintelligible. He has difficulty in understanding the simplest of English utterances. He thinks he has learned to read English, but if the truth be known, he has only learned to read Japanese from a different set of symbols. He does know a number of things about English, however. He may have an academic knowledge of English grammar. He knows the signals provided by at least a few English structures. He knows the writing system: he knows the letters and the punctuation marks, and he can spell to some extent. Finally, he knows a great many English words. That is, he knows the written symbols for these words, and he knows the 'meaning'-via Japanese."^(c)

The aim of this textbook "is to give the student control of the basic structures of the language, first in speech and then in writing."^(c)

It is "structure centered rather than vocabulary centered. The student 'knows'

many words; what he lacks is control of the structure of the language. The student learns to operate the structures almost entirely within 'known' vocabulary. The vocabulary of the four books is approximately that prescribed by the Ministry of Education for junior high school English; the vocabulary count is only twelve hundred words."^(c)

II

Until this year, using the Clark text, with its translations into Japanese, and its Japanese explanations, I would sometimes translate a word for the students. And from the beginning, I soon discovered that it took a great deal of valuable time to try and teach the students to understand even the simplest sentences that I must use in teaching, for example, "Please answer my question." Probably only ten or fifteen percent of the students could understand this sentence, so I was soon forced to use Japanese for most of these sentences. This resulted in a rather freer method of teaching.

Therefore, I was rather curious to observe the effect of the new method of teaching English Conversation, as recommended by Mr. Brown in his introduction. His textbook is intended to be taught in English, and he includes, in the Instructor's Book, a list of recommended classroom expressions. As he writes in the introduction, "do not attempt to explain the material either in English or in Japanese. Explanation takes time that should be spent in practice. Above all, do not permit translation of the material. Never 'test the student's understanding' by asking him to translate. This is extremely harmful. Test his understanding by asking him a question in English to be answered in English. Don't allow the student to speak one word of Japanese during the lessons."^(d)

Brown then proceeds to quote from another book, which I had previously studied and which I have found so pertinent that I would like to quote it here. "'But if I do not have my students translate...what they hear and read, how can I be sure they have grasped every meaning?' This most naive of all statements reveals a serious misunderstanding of both the nature of language and the nature of meaning. It seems to say that meaning is a prerogative of the mother tongue, and to deny that every language has a uniqueness and a self-sufficiency that make it absolutely independent of any other. Yet the language under study has a right to be known and evaluated on its own merits, without being constantly coupled with and compared with and overshadowed by another..... There is a place in the scheme of things for translation as a legitimate objective, but that place is not in the early levels of language learning. Translation is at once too difficult a task and too damaging to the learner to be a part of his activities until he has reached a high level of achievement in the second language. Nothing will short-circuit the language learning process more quickly...than premature attempts at matching one language with another."^(e)

III

Mr. Brown recommends that a new vocabulary item may sometimes be translated by the instructor. He also suggests that the instructor must hold the student responsible for all assignments even though he is absent. In order to facilitate the student's understanding of the classroom expressions, I provided each student, on the occasion of the first lesson, with a print of these expressions, with translations into Japanese. I also included a list of the class regulations, and an English translation of the "Intro-

duction to the Student's Book" which was in Japanese. In this introduction, Mr. Brown recommends that the student must plan to spend about ten minutes every day practicing the assigned dialogs and exercises aloud, with an additional fifteen or twenty minutes devoted to the completion of the written part of the assignment.

Although this year I have emphasized very strongly that the students must complete the homework each week, if they wish to understand the material that is presented during each lesson, I have noticed that anywhere from thirty to fifty percent of the students often have not yet completed their homework at the beginning of the class time, and sometimes these students will be attempting to finish the written part of the assignment as I am preparing to begin the lesson!

According to this method of teaching, in class "the Student's Book remains closed at all times except when he is specifically instructed to open his book for dialog reading or assignment. The student's attention must be directed to the front of the room rather than downward to his desk if he is to speak in a full voice and in unison with his classmates, and if he is to see your gestures as you conduct the responses."^(f)

IV

Since with the present textbook, the teaching method is much more strict than I have used previously, I awaited the first few lessons with great curiosity, to see if the students would be able to understand and to follow this method.

However, by the time we were in the middle of the second week's lessons, I could see by the expressions on the faces of most all of the students that they too were surprised that they could answer my questions, as well as ask me questions, all in English, without recourse to any words printed on a page. Since all my students are freshmen, they had no knowledge of the struggles the classes of former years had undergone, but I was able to note a clear improvement in the rate of learning, by using this different method of teaching.

V

When the time came to prepare the questions for the first-term examinations, I divided the examination papers into three sections. The first part consisted of a short story, based on material in the text, which I read to the students, three times. On the examination papers, there were three questions, based on this story, to be answered. The second part was based on a suggestion of Mr. Brown's, using questions, from the textbook material, with multiple choice answers. I read first one question, after which the students chose the correct answer among three written on their papers; then I proceeded to read two more questions. The third part of the examination, not based on the text, gave the students an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to write freely, in conversation style, on a specified subject.

When the time came to correct these examination papers, I was gratified to find that a large majority of the students made no mistakes in the second part, the multiple choice, or, as it is sometimes called, the oral comprehension test.

Conclusion

The method of teaching as outlined by Vernon Brown in "Speak English", seems to be so successful, that I shall most certainly use it again next year, and I am considering trying it next year in the University lessons as well.

Notes

- (a) SPOKEN AMERICAN ENGLISH (INTRODUCTORY COURSE) by William L. Clark ;
Tokyo, Kenkyusha, Revised Edition, 1962.
- (b) SPEAK ENGLISH (BOOK ONE) by Vernon Brown ; Tokyo, Meirindo, 1963.
- (c) Ibid.
- (d) Ibid.
- (e) Nelson Brooks, LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING ; New York, Harcourt,
Brace and World, Inc., 1960 ; pp. 77, 107.
- (f) Ibid. SPEAK ENGLISH.