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JAPAN

Instant Feedback for Learner Training: USING INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT CARDS

As an English teacher in a Japanese university, I am aware of the need to cope with a number of limitations, such as large classes, insufficient class time, and deeply ingrained study attitudes and habits that are inimical to learning to communicate in a foreign language. Many English courses consist of only one lesson per week, which is insufficient to enable students to retain what they learned because their English course is likely to be their only regular contact with the language. To compound the problem, the majority of students have been taught English as a body of knowledge in preparation for multiple-choice exams through translation and memorization of rules. They are not accustomed to studying English for communicative purposes, so they lack not only basic communication skills but also awareness of how to develop those skills. The students need more practice than can possibly fit into 90 minutes per week. Even if an EFL class is lucky enough to meet more than once a week, for many students the lessons are their only opportunity to communicate in English, and time is always in short supply.

For many years I struggled with the problem of how to train my students to adopt efficient learning strategies and I often wondered whether, in the time available, this was really an impossible dream. About six years ago, I hit on the idea of using individual student assessment cards, and I've refined the system to the one I am still using.

Theoretical background

In spite of time constraints, I believe it's worth going to the trouble of reforming students' approach to learning. By systematically reinforcing the adoption of certain valuable, but unfamiliar attitudes and strategies, and by discouraging the use of old ones, teachers can make the "impossible" possible. The following four guiding principles form the theoretical underpinning for my belief that taking the time to develop useful learning strategies and attitudes is worthwhile:

1. Learner strategies facilitate obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using language.

This is a definition of learning strategies formulated by Rubin (1987). Many learners believe that success in language learning is largely a matter of hereditary aptitude, a matter in the hands of fate, which they can do little to change. They need to learn that they can improve their own learning by adopting effective learning strategies.

2. Being actively involved in the learning process is necessary.

Many researchers, including Wenden and Rubin (1987), Naiman et al. (1978), and O'Malley et al. (1985), have stated that active involvement is essential for learning. This means learners will not learn just by being told or shown the rules of language or the meanings of words. They must internalize information and skills in ways that are meaningful to them. This is common sense, but it is easy for a teacher to forget that this principle is equally valid for getting students to apply learning strategies.

3. Consciousness raising is essential for effective learning.

Since the Natural Approach was promulgated by Terrell (1977) and subsequently publicized by Krashen, applied linguists have asserted that the deepest kind of learning is implicit, or unconscious, as is first language acquisition by children. More recently, other researchers (Bialystok 1978; Cohen 1981; Rubin and Henze 1981; Wenden 1982, 1986) have reclaimed a valued role for explicit, or conscious, learning among adults. However, I concluded that the training and reflection time for metacognitive strategies recommended by these researchers would leave little time for language learning in our non-intensive EFL programme. Moreover, such an approach would be ill-suited to our non-academically inclined students. I was looking for a method of consciousness raising that did not require a great deal of verbalization.

4. Social strategies and communication strategies are indirect aids to learning.

These strategies don't directly lead to learning, but can greatly increase the chances of it happening. In brief, social strategies are those by which learners create or offer to others opportunities to be exposed to and practice English. Such strategies include initiating or joining a conversation. Communication strategies enable learners to remain as participants in a conversation. They include techniques for compensating for the student's lack of knowledge, such as paraphrasing, repairing breakdowns in communication, and confirming or checking one's own understanding. These techniques enable learners to prolong their exposure to English in a communicative situation and learn from what they hear. Students can test their own knowledge and understanding by noticing the effects of what they say on their interlocutors. Using these strategies in class can have a beneficial effect on group dynamics through sharing "the floor" (role as principal speaker) and through attentive and responsive listening (see Rubin 1987).

Problem

A number of coursebooks and books for self-instruction have been written about language learning strategies (for example, Rubin and Thompson 1982; Ellis and Sinclair 1989; Murphey 1998). There is considerable doubt, however, concerning the effectiveness of teaching learning strategies as a separate course. For example, the teaching of grammar separately from practical communication has not necessarily enabled students to transfer what they learn in their grammar course to real life communication. Furthermore, students who use effective reading strategies in their native lan-

guage don't necessarily transfer the same strategies to reading in the target language unless explicitly trained to do so. One would expect a similar lack of transfer if learning strategies are taught in isolation from the language courses they are meant to be applied to. If strategy training is integrated into a language course, however, a conflict may arise. More time devoted to strategy training means less time for language training. As mentioned earlier, where I teach the weekly time allotted for language training is not generous.

This lack of class time presents a dilemma. On the one hand, most Japanese students need help developing a repertoire of learning strategies that will enable them to use their time more efficiently while learning to communicate in English. On the other hand, the habits and attitudes they have acquired during six years of high school preparation for university entrance exams—which are mostly inappropriate for learning to communicate in a foreign language—are deeply ingrained as part of the students' educational culture. Therefore establishing new habits takes time and attention. The task seems impossible in the limited time available if students are also to cover enough of the language syllabus. Clearly, something must be done, because, as can be seen below, significant differences exist between the common habits and attitudes of learners and the desirable ones they need if they are to communicate successfully in a foreign language:

At least there's one point of agreement! However, persuading students to give up their exclusive reliance on memorization and mechanical practice and to adopt new learning strategies for learning English is no simple task. Changing old habits requires constant and useful reinforcement. If the task is attempted only through repeated verbal reminders from the teacher, it has little effect other than to enervate both student and teacher. There is not enough time to constantly stop the lesson to explain yet again what the students should be doing in class. Even taking time periodically to practise a particular learning strategy does not change ingrained subconscious habits. What can the teacher do?

Individual assessment cards to inculcate learning strategies

In my teaching situation at a small four-year, liberal arts women's university, students are placed in English classes according to their level of proficiency. The placement exam measures reading and listening comprehension in various situations, and discriminates between the following six levels: beginning, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, pre-advanced, and advanced. Approximately 85 percent of our students enter at the beginning and elementary levels, 10 percent enter at the pre-intermediate or intermediate levels, and the remaining 5 percent enter at the two highest levels. In the first two years, all classes follow a

Common Habits and Attitudes	Desirable Habits and Attitudes
1. Aim to learn about English through Japanese.	1. Aim to learn to communicate in English.
2. Study, translate, and memorize a body of knowledge.	2. Use and practice skills, study a little.
3. Wait to be taught by the teacher.	3. Take responsibility for own learning.
4. Making mistakes, or not knowing, is shameful.	4. Learning from mistakes or by asking questions is okay.
5. Learn through analyzing written texts word-by-word.	5. Learn by using global context and listening. Read later.
6. Mutual help between students is great.	6. Mutual help between students is great.

standardized, level-graded syllabus. Basic learner training with simple strategies is an integral part of that syllabus. For students who continue with English to the third and fourth years, a wider range and choice of strategies can be gradually introduced.

I decided to devise individual assessment cards because of the shortage of class time and my reluctance to use much of that time to explain learning strategies in Japanese to students. Due partly to demographic factors, the overall academic ability of high school graduates has declined in recent years, as has English proficiency, and many students tend to suffer from low self-esteem as learners. For these reasons, I have opted to focus on a few basic learning strategies, which can be demonstrated and understood easily in just one or two lessons without a great deal of discussion. They could be called "macro strategies" because they can be applied to a wide range of classroom activities and are not really specific to any single language skill. In addition to the long-term objective of learner training, an important short-term objective of this assessment card system is to support class management.

Assessment cards

The system consists of giving each student her own individual assessment card on which she writes her name and student number. She collects her card at the beginning of each lesson, keeps it with her during the lesson, then returns it at the end of the lesson. One side of the card is used to record absences or late arrivals, assignment and test grades, and comments from the teacher. The other side of the card is used for continuous encouragement and reinforcement of the use of appropriate learning strategies in class. (The two sides of the assessment card are shown in the Appendix.) The focus is mainly on behaviour, that is, the process of learning English rather than the product. The card allows each student to see how well she is progressing at any point in the course.

The strategies listed on the card are as follows. (The letters in parentheses are only for reference.)

Macro strategies listed on the card

(E) Speaking English, not Japanese, for routine classroom communication.

(C) Using correctly a phrase from a list for classroom communication.

(Q) Asking questions when the student doesn't know or understand something.

(A) Answering the teacher's questions promptly, even if only to say "I don't know."

(L) Speaking loudly and clearly to avoid wasting time with repetitions.

(P) Participating actively in class (usually pair or group work).

(H) Helping classmates to understand and enjoy the lesson.

(I) Following the teacher's instructions attentively (especially homework).

The last line of the card (T) is not a strategy, but simply a space to write the total score.

Phrases for classroom communication listed on the card

How do you say... in English?

How do you spell...?

How do you pronounce this (word)?

What does... mean?

Here you are.

I'm sorry. I don't know.

I don't understand…

I couldn't hear.

Once more, please.

I'm sorry I was late.

A longer, separate list of useful expressions for classroom communication is also given to each student.

For some time, I have also been considering adding a ninth strategy: listening carefully to classmates and the teacher. Much teacher interaction with individual students is intended to be instructional for the rest of the class. Students are expected to listen to such exchanges, but many students tend to switch off when others are talking. Sometimes this is because they are thinking about something said previously, or planning what they themselves want to say next, but sometimes it is just inattention. Some students think that listening to other students is a waste of time because their classmates' speech is full of errors. They have a point; however, if the focus is on communication or fluency, they are not likely to notice errors. If the focus is on accuracy, the teachers should be careful to let everyone

know if an important error occurs. This can be done either through direct correction, or reformulation (echoing what the student said with corrections discretely inserted). Many students need to be trained to listen more carefully to others and perhaps to question the accuracy of what is said. However, I have not yet decided whether such a strategy would be identifiable in a sufficient number of cases to make it worth adding to the card. Eight strategies are already a lot to keep track of.

Procedure

Since I began using these individual assessment cards, I have devised the following procedures and routines so students can quickly understand how the system works.

Getting started with the cards

In the first lesson, students read an explanation in English about the strategies listed on the card and why they should use them. While reading, they underline any words or phrases they don't understand, having been told that they should each ask at least one question using the sentence "What does… mean?" The teacher gives one mark (one point) on the appropriate line (Q) on the card of each student who asks a question, and another mark on the C line if the question is correctly worded spontaneously, that is, not simply read aloud from the card. In this way, the desired behaviour is immediately demonstrated and practised. It's very important that students understand they must volunteer their questions and create their own learning opportunities. They don't get a mark if the teacher has to nominate them to ask.

Asking the teacher questions in front of the whole class is not a normal thing for Japanese students to do, so initially, patience is required while students pluck up the courage to speak. Provided that students have understood what is required and the teacher appears confident that they will comply, one brave soul will eventually ask a question. Then, as the students see that they can earn marks on their assessment cards, others will follow suit. The patience required while waiting in silence for questions to materialize is a necessary investment that will be repaid many times over in subsequent lessons as asking questions becomes routine.

During the first two lessons, other expressions from the separate list of useful expressions are introduced and practised, either through artificially created situations, such as the "What does… mean?" example mentioned above, or spontaneously as the need arises.

Beginning each lesson

One routine that I initiate early in the course is to have the students start the lesson themselves by standing—either in pairs or groups of three—and chatting as they would at a cocktail party. Students normally sit together and chat in Japanese while waiting for the teacher to start the lesson. I tell them that this is a waste of their time and ask them to go out and come back into the classroom. I ask them to put their books on their desk and remain standing, find a partner, and repeat in English what they just said in Japanese. I emphasize that it doesn't matter if their English is good or bad, as long as they try to speak in English. I write on the board "How do you say… in English?" and then throw them in the conversational deep end. At the first opportunity, I find a student who needs to ask "How do you say... in English?" then I interrupt the class to use her and her partner for a demonstration. I write the question on the board, then point to it every time I find another student who needs to ask it. I circulate, awarding points to everyone who speaks English, even if it's only "Hello. How are you?" As I go round overhearing snatches of conversation, I may make a comment or suggest a word occasionally.

The students are not allowed to sit down because sitting triggers the mindset of the familiar classroom situation: "Now we can chat in Japanese until the teacher arrives and starts the lesson." Standing up is a physical reminder to students that they should do something different in their English class. It also facilitates getting everyone to quickly change partners. This activity usually lasts from 10 to 15 minutes and is an easy way for students to collect points, so it improves punctuality. During this time, after laying out my materials and any equipment for the lesson, I go round the class and try to award a point to every student for speaking English. While students are busy conversing, I collect any assessment cards still unclaimed from the desk at the front. These belong to absentees. I quickly mark the absences without having to call each student's name.

This soon becomes a regular routine for starting every lesson and is always one of the most popular activities we do. Of course, students can ask their question(s) to a partner or to the teacher, but those who are keen to collect points quickly realize that attracting the teacher's attention with a question may be more "profitable"!

Other uses of the cards

Another situation in which students can easily earn a point for participation, and when it is easy for the teacher to award at least one to every student, is during pair or group work or an individual writing activity. Students can earn two points if they ask or answer a question using one of the phrases on their list correctly: one point for the question (Q) or the answer (A), and a second point for accurately using a recommended phrase for classroom communication from the card or the separate list (C).

In later lessons, while students are working in groups or pairs, I circulate around the room and encourage students to use the listed strategies by adding marks on each student's card in the appropriate category. In this way, I reinforce appropriate behaviour continually, without having to explain or discuss it at length. Students who forget to use these strategies are reminded by the behaviour of classmates, or occasionally, by a minus point on their card. The teacher may also give hints ("Ask me a question about that.") or, if a student fails to respond to a question, ask another student to suggest what her classmate should say ("I'm sorry. I don't know" or "I don't understand."). If the teacher nominates a student to speak, the student doesn't receive a plus point under the Q or A categories, but she can get a point if she uses one of the listed phrases correctly (C), or if she speaks loudly and clearly (L).

It's difficult for the teacher to award points when addressing the whole class from the front of the room, but it is still manageable. At such times, if a student volunteers to answer a question from the teacher, or asks a question, she can be signaled with a gesture to bring her card to the front to receive a point. Meanwhile the teacher can continue talking to the class without interrupting the flow of the lesson.

Negative reinforcement (minus points) can be used, but it is advisable to do so sparingly, for example, if a student is obstinately negative or is deliberately disruptive. One example is when a student repeatedly speaks loudly in Japanese and deserves a minus point (under strategy E). However, it is important to allow for the option of speaking in the first language when it is really necessary, such as while making a complicated explanation. A student who is obviously not participating in a group activity may receive a minus point for strategy P to get her back on task, but the teacher should check first that there are no extenuating circumstances. Students who repeatedly speak inaudibly in spite of several requests to speak up may also need to be shocked out of this bad habit if it is wasting class time (strategy L). Nevertheless, it is better to use the threat of minus points than to actually award them, and to do this in a light-hearted or humorous way. Alternatively, an extra point can be given to everyone except the offender(s).

In a class of about 30, students are told that they should each be able to score an average of two points per lesson. The academic year consists of two semesters of 12 lessons, so their target is to get 24 points or more per semester. The spread of points marked on the assessment cards can vary considerably within one class and between different classes. Highly motivated students may get 40 or more points per semester, while the poorly motivated ones may get 10 or less, especially if their attendance is weak. The fewer classes attended, the fewer points can be earned.

I have found it necessary to set a maximum score based on the class. In recognition of the different levels of motivation among students, I now set a lower maximum score (20 points per semester) for low level classes because their self-esteem as English language students tends to be lower from the start. For upper level classes, the maximum score is 30. Grades are also given for written assignments, the final exam, and attendance.

Student reactions

I have been using this individual assessment card system with my first- and second-year courses for the past five years. During the course, all the students complete a questionnaire or write journal entries in which they explain whether they like this system and find it useful. I use this feedback for metacognitive discussions with each class.

On average about half of the first-year students dislike the system, because they find it stressful to be assessed every lesson. However, half of them find it useful. On average less than half of the second-year students say they dislike the system, while about a quarter say they like it. About three-quarters of second-year students say they find the assessment cards useful. Over half of the students in third- and fourth-year classes say the cards are useful. However, the poorly motivated second-, third-, and fourth-year students who are repeating a course they failed previously tend to dislike the system and doubt its usefulness.

Benefits of using the strategies

The benefits of the assessment cards can be shown by referring back to the four guiding principles for strategy use and the eight macro strategies that students put into practice:

1. Learner strategies facilitate obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using language.

This clearly applies to all of the macro strategies as far as obtaining the target language is concerned, especially strategies C (using expressions for classroom communication) and Q (asking questions). Storage and retrieval are two sides of the same coin. They are closely linked to the ability to contextualize new language items in easy-to-remember ways and to practise using them. Contextualizing, a strong memory aid, means relating new language to existing schemata. It is demonstrated in behaviours such as selecting one's own topics and taking the initiative in negotiating meaning or getting clarification when one needs it. All eight strategies are aimed at making storage and retrieval easy. The first four strategies promote habitual use of English for communication.

2. Being actively involved in the learning process is necessary.

All the macro strategies help to involve the learner actively in the learning process. As the marks on cards gradually accumulate, the teacher can clearly see which students understand what is expected of them and which do not understand—or do not accept—its relevance to them. The teacher can then devote more attention to trying to counsel those who are not getting enough points. During group or pair work, asking more confident students to encourage their shy classmates to participate

more can be very effective. The teacher can point out which students have already earned enough points for a good grade, thus facilitating cooperation rather than competition.

3. Consciousness raising is essential for effective learning.

It is difficult to discern the extent to which students become more aware of how they learn or whether the cards directly influence their awareness. It's possible that the awareness comes from some other influencing factor. Nevertheless, my experience using the individual feedback cards suggests that students are better able to focus on strategies if they are explained and demonstrated during the first few lessons, just like other procedural aspects of any course. After that, there are the options of using student journals or questionnaires, which need not take up much class time, to get students to reflect on learning strategies. Such reflection can be very helpful to the teacher, by providing an indication of whether more time needs to be devoted to explanation or discussion and which students need help. Of course, the teacher may simply draw a student's attention to the reason for awarding points for using a particular strategy. Perhaps an even more effective method of checking awareness is to ask the student, "Why did I give you that point?"

4. Social strategies and communication strategies are indirect aids to learning.

Being comfortable using English for communication, at however rudimentary a level, can have the positive effect of getting the learner accepted as an interlocutor for a while, instead of being ignored by a more proficient speaker. This may involve memorizing and using accurately a few key English phrases (C) for negotiating meaning and speaking loudly and clearly (L). Such strategies enable learners to stay in a conversation long enough to gain some benefit.

Strategy A (answering questions promptly) is a communication strategy for another reason. In Japanese culture, it is normal when someone is addressing a person of superior status to respond to questions with silence, usually accompanied with a smile, nervous grin, or a giggle. This is a respectful way of sending the message "I'm not sure what to say" or "I don't know." In English, silence as a response to a question is often taken as insolence or

hostility. My Japanese students are very reluctant to admit to not knowing the answer to a question or not understanding. They may even respond to a *wh* question with yes, or to a yes/no question with yes when the answer is really no. The intended meaning is usually "I hear what you say." They need to learn that, in English, it's quite acceptable, and often necessary to say "I don't know" or "I don't understand"—especially when addressing a person of higher status.

Conclusion

This system of using individual assessment cards introduces students to the usefulness of learning strategies. It includes only those basic strategies I consider necessary for minimal success. The cards are intended primarily for first- and second-year students. First-year students are being introduced to the idea that learning a foreign language in order to communicate is different from studying a foreign language in order to pass a multiple-choice exam. Second-year students benefit from reminders to continue using these basic techniques to improve their communication abilities in English. For all students, learning English as a practical communicative skill is an achievable goal if they learn the right strategies.

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Class: _____ Year: _____ Student Number: _____

Given Name: _____ Family Name: _____

	CLASSES 1 - 12		CLASSES 13 - 24		T
	PLUS POINTS	MINUS POINTS	PLUS POINTS	MINUS POINTS	=
E					
C					
Q					
A					
L					
P					
H					
I					
T					

Key
E = Speaks English, not Japanese, for conversation in class.
C = Routine classroom communication in English.
Q = Asks questions when she doesn't know / understand.
A = Answers teacher's questions promptly.
L = Speaks loudly, clearly, so that everyone can hear.
P = Participates actively. Doesn't waste time.
H = Helps classmates to understand and enjoy the lesson
I = Follows teacher's instructions carefully

English for the Classroom
How do you say ... in English?
How do you spell ... ?
How do you pronounce this?
What does ... mean?
I'm sorry. I don't know.
            I don't understand.
            I couldn't hear.
Once more, please.
Here you are.

(Want to put a small photo here?)

Name: _____ Number: _____ Class: _____

Attendance	Blank = Present			/ = Absent		X = Late (Half Present)			
Month									
Day									
Record									
Absences:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Score:	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0

ASSIGNMENTS	Date Due	OK	Late	Rewrite	Score Raw	Final	Comments

in the class and discuss the different sounds the letters in combinations represent.

Conclusion

Learning phonetic symbols may not be worth doing for its own sake. However, it is invaluable as a tool for decoding and pronouncing words correctly. As Anderson et al. (1985) recommend, phonetic symbol instruction should be completed at the early stages of learning. Once students have some facility in reading words, they no longer need instruction in this skill unless there is a special need. Emphasis should be placed on applying the knowledge of phonetic symbols to actual pronunciation rather than to the learning of generalisations. The knowledge of the phonetic symbols and letter-sound combinations should also support the growth of students' English vocabulary.

Achieving good pronunciation and reducing the interference of the students' native language can be a lengthy task but it is worth the effort as a way to improve the quality of ESL teaching and learning and to solve a long existing pronunciation problem that requires urgent attention.

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