

Elements of Teaching: ideas for team-teaching classes

Ben Shearon

Miyagi BOE

This presentation grew out of visits made to observe re-contracting senior high school ALTs in Miyagi in the spring and summer of 2006. I am very grateful to all the teachers, ALTs and JTEs, who opened their classes up to me and took the time to sit down and discuss them afterwards.

In order to operate effectively, teachers need to have a collection of practical techniques (classroom management, activities, lesson planning) and also a sense of the theory behind them. In this workshop I would like to introduce some techniques I have seen in classrooms around Miyagi, briefly discuss some ideas as to how and why they work, and then encourage participants in the workshop to share their own ideas and classroom practice.

We will not have time to report back on our discussions during the workshop, but I would like to ask each group to make a record of ideas they discussed. These will be collected, typed up, and distributed electronically after the meeting. Please choose one person from each group to take notes during the discussion segments.

There will be four discussions, for each one please consider the following questions, as well as the specific ones for each topic:

Do you agree with what was presented? If not, please explain your opinion

What activities or techniques do you use in your classes for this?

Do you have any problems or questions relating to this topic?

Warm-ups

Warm-ups allow us to get students ready to participate in English class, switching them from Japanese mode into English mode, and from passive to active. I believe there are *four elements* to the perfect warm-up:

Simple: the activity should be easy to explain and easy to understand, so that giving instructions doesn't take too much time*

Short: the activity should not take more than five or ten minutes before moving on to the main part of the lesson

Easy: all students should be able to do the activity with ease. Warm-ups should not be used to test students or introduce new material, but rather to help students relax and get back into using English

All students are actively involved most of the time: this is important in terms of efficiency, to ensure that we are using class time to benefit all students, and not just the more able or motivated ones

The warm-up is connected to the contents of the lesson, or the previous lesson: [OPTIONAL]

this can make the warm-up seem more relevant and gives students a chance to review or build interest in the target material, resulting in more efficient use of class time

*this can be circumvented by using a complicated idea several times. The first time will take more time to explain, but once the students know the activity this time can be saved.

Not all warm-ups cover all these bases. The popular criss-cross style warm-ups in particular leave most students standing around doing nothing for most of the activity. Line race warm-ups have one active student per row and five or six passive (non-participatory) ones at any one time. Pass the parcel type activities might have half a dozen students answer a question over a five minute activity.

We can do better than this. Given that students probably only have three or four hours of English class per week, and most of this will consist of listening to and taking notes in Japanese, we should do our best to make sure that in our classes students have the opportunity to use as much English as possible, whether actively by speaking and writing, or passively by listening and reading. In all activities, there should be a reason for students to participate actively.

Of course, it is not necessary for every single warm-up to conform to the schema detailed above. However, teachers should be aware of, and attempt to use warm-ups that address all these elements at least some of the time.

Introducing new material or activities

Introducing new material is one of the most important parts of a lesson. Doing so effectively involves getting the students' attention, creating a need for the students to try to understand and get to grips with the material, and making sure that the students understand the material by the end of the introduction.

Getting the students' attention is the first step when introducing material. This starts with making sure the class is quiet and students are listening, through to provoking their curiosity and interest. One key point that contributes to this is to ensure that students can understand what is going on, and what teachers are trying to tell them. Ensuring that students are receiving comprehensible input requires careful planning and language selection. For this reason, I often recommend that teachers write a script when they are going to give instructions or explain something, particularly for the first time, and then read from it during the class. This cuts down on superfluous or difficult language.

Demonstrating or showing students how to do something, rather than explaining it, can also help ensure that they understand and are therefore more inclined to pay attention.

Giving students a reason to try to understand or get to grips with the material is the next step. Often, teachers accomplish this by setting the students tasks, such as quizzes or activities, that require an understanding of the material to be completed. In addition, if material is intrinsically interesting to the students they will make more effort to understand it, and some teachers use their knowledge of their students' interests to personalize material presented in class.

Making sure that the students understand before moving on is often overlooked by teachers. This can be done by various means, including but not limited to the following:

- observing students
- asking questions of students
- asking students to explain in their own words (in English, or more likely in Japanese)
- asking students to carry out simple tasks

Failing to introduce material well can seriously hinder subsequent activities and student achievement. Often teachers put all their effort into planning activities that allow students to practice the target language, and leave the introduction stage as an afterthought. This is a serious error. Planning and preparing how you will introduce material and activities goes a long way towards making them accessible and successful.

Teacher-centred activities

Teacher-centred activities occur when the teacher is the main focus of the class. Talking to the class, giving instructions or explanations, or asking students questions in front of the class are all teacher-centred activities. Teacher-centred activities are most appropriate for transmitting information, especially in larger (25+) classes.

In Japan many classes consist exclusively of teacher-centred activities so students tend to be used to this kind of class.

The following are examples of common teacher-centred activities:

- Introducing new language
- Explaining a grammar point
- Giving instructions as to how to conduct an activity
- Asking individual students questions in front of the class
- Modeling language through dialogues or skits
- 'Read and repeat' drills

Student-centred activities

Student-centred activities have students working individually, in pairs, or in groups. Ideally, they allow students to work at their own pace or level. Doing research, preparing presentations or reports, conducting surveys, doing free writing, learning vocabulary, and testing each other are all student-centred activities. They tend to be best suited to practicing or developing skills.

Many students in Japan do not have much exposure to student-based activities, so it can be helpful for teachers to think about how they will introduce the activities and train their students for this new style of learning. It is important that students be very clear as to the purpose of activities, as well as to how they are expected to carry them out.

The following are examples of student-centred activities:

- Working in pairs to make a dialogue
- Playing a board game in groups
- Doing free writing individually
- Preparing for and conducting a debate
- Researching and doing a presentation

Technology

Using technology to enhance our classes can allow us to conduct novel activities that would be impossible without it. Effective use of technology can motivate students, make our classes more dynamic and interesting, and renew teacher enthusiasm as they learn new skills and techniques.

Computers, video, audio, and other technology can all bring the outside world into our classes, making them seem more relevant and helping students understand that English is more than just a school subject.

Audio is probably the easiest technology to integrate into the classroom. It uses established technology and most teachers are comfortable with it. Audio is great for introducing music, listening exercises, and bringing other native speakers into the classroom. Some activities that have proven successful include:

- Cloze activities (where students choose or fill in the missing words as they listen)
- Have other people introduce themselves on tape, then ask the students questions about them

Video is more difficult to use efficiently. It is tempting to show whole movies or programs, but this tends to be less useful for students. Often, a short clip watched several times gives students more practice and makes it easier to concentrate. Some ideas for using video include:

- Watching clips and asking the students questions about the action (not the language)
- Making student-produced videos and showing them to other classes in the school/swapping them with other schools/doing video letter exchanges with schools in other countries
- Shooting skits or conversations featuring teachers and their friends using English or interviews of other non-English teachers at the school in English (students love seeing their P.E. or art teachers speaking English)

Teachers with access to computers can use electronic presentations to streamline classes, the internet to develop students' research skills, and software to drill language. Despite the prevalence of computer labs, this is probably the trickiest form of technology to use in schools, as both teachers and students tend to be lacking in computer skills and knowledge. Thus, the first couple of classes can be taken up just trying to get the students set up and working on computers. The best advice is probably to keep things as simple as possible.

Of course, using technology without a clear goal or purpose, just for its own sake, is unlikely to result in positive learning outcomes. Technology is a tool, and it should be used because it is the best tool to accomplish a task. It should not be used just because it is new and teachers want to try it out, but rather to achieve a specific goal.