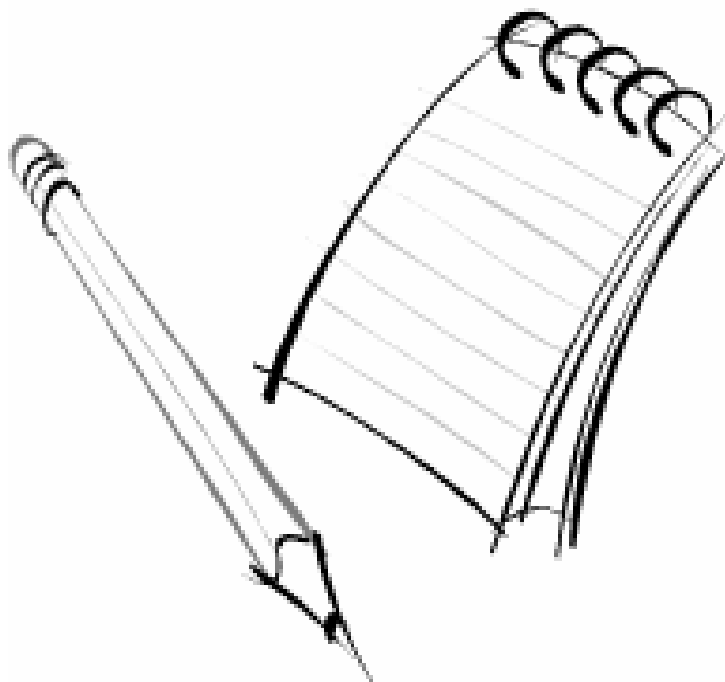


# **THE THINKING TEACHER**



**May Meeting 2006  
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## INTRODUCTION

This seminar will introduce techniques to help teachers think about their classes. Thinking about classes will hopefully allow you to deliver better, more effective, and more interesting lessons to your students. It will also make teaching more satisfying for you, as you will be able to deal with and solve problems, as well as implement new teaching techniques.

Most of the techniques we will discuss today have data as a common element. Data is essential when thinking about your classes. Without data, any theories or ideas you come up with are based on guesses that you have made about your class. These will have a much more solid foundation if they are based on actual data.

Of course, data does not have to be complicated. It can be as simple as merely ticking off students you ask a question to (in order to make sure that you are including all the students in activities). Just making a conscious effort to notice and document some incident or behaviour in class can result in the generation of useful data.

Keeping notes and records is one of the best ways to generate and organise useful data on your classes. Using the principles of *action research* can also help address specific problems.

(please see [http://ww.philselfsupport.com/action\\_research.htm](http://ww.philselfsupport.com/action_research.htm) for more information on action research)

I hope you find the contents of this seminar useful and manage to integrate at least some of the techniques into your regular teaching.

## QUICK SURVEY

### Do you...

- Write down aims/objectives for each lesson?
- Think about what kind of activities each class enjoys?
- Base your classes exclusively on the textbook?
- Think about the purpose of supplementary activities and materials?
- Plan what you will write on the board in advance?
- Talk to students and write on the board at the same time?
- Think about whether you are blocking the board when students are writing?
- Take time to check what you have written on the board for errors?
- Give clear and concise instructions?
- Ask students “do you understand?”
- Tell students what will happen in the lesson at the beginning?
- Explain the purpose of activities to students?
- Have extra activities for students who finish quickly?
- Cut activities short in order to get through the lesson plan?
- Ask students if they have finished activities?
- Set time limits for activities and tell students before they start?
- Write down student mistakes as you walk around the class during activities for later correction?
- Join in with students during activities?
- Adjust your spoken language so that students can understand?
- Use Japanese to give instructions to students?
- Use Japanese to give individual help to students?
- Use English and gestures to explain the meaning of all words?

## QUICK SURVEY

- Use students' names in class?
- Always address the class from the front?
- Give homework every class?
- Ask students to personalize language?
- Always collect and check student work?
- Make a yearly teaching plan?
- Use other media (video, reading material, computers, etc.) in the classroom?
- Evaluate students regularly?
- Make notes about how classes went?
- Give instructions in English?
- Assess students based on what they can do with English?
- Write out instructions in advance?
- Address all students when talking to the class?
- Think about how to make groups in advance?
- Give students opportunities to talk to each other in English?
- Make sure all students are involved in activities most of the time?
- Use an appropriate warm-up?
- Solicit student feedback regularly?
- Give students working in groups separate and distinct roles?
- Use a standard lesson structure for all lessons?
- Use incentives to increase student participation?
- Plan classes with your teaching partner?
- Enjoy teaching your students?

# INTROSPECTION

Introspection is another powerful weapon in the thinking teacher's arsenal. It technically means: *contemplation of one's own thoughts, feelings, and sensations; self-examination*, but here I would like to extend that to encompass the classroom and what you do in it.

Basically I am using introspection to mean thinking about what you do, and the simple act of going over your actions and thoughts can often allow you to notice things and make connections.

It is not enough merely to think about classes in general: it is also necessary to focus on specific problems or issues. Having chosen something to focus on, it is then important to consciously notice it while you are teaching.

Some issues I have focused on in my own classes include:

- Teacher attention: making a note of which students I talked to and where I was looking when I addressed the class (this was extremely interesting and helped me give more even attention to all students).
- Making a note of how much Japanese I was using in the class, and in what situations. This allowed me to think about why I was using it, and whether it was necessary or not.
- Variety of activities: looking through all my old lesson plans for a certain class allowed me to check what kind of activities I was focusing on, and whether it would be useful to introduce new ones or not. At one point I was doing lots of speaking practice in pairs and groups but no listening: once I realized this I was able to make more balanced lesson plans.

While introspection is a very personal technique, there are some ways to increase its effectiveness by introducing an outside element:

- Video your classes: watching a video of our classes gives us a 'student's-eye view' of our teaching. It can highlight our unconscious habits and mannerisms and allow us to correct bad practice.
- Lesson observation: ask a colleague to watch a class and give you feedback. A trusted colleague can notice as much as a video camera, but can also give advice and encouragement.

At the end of the day, introspection and the external input that can spark it, are just ways of thinking about classes in a more focused manner. Try to find the details you want to focus on, and this will allow you to change your classes for the better, one small piece at a time.

# STUDENT FEEDBACK

Student feedback can be an extremely valuable source of information. Without it, teachers can only guess at what the students are thinking or feeling about the class.

Of course there are several ways to collect feedback from students, including asking them informally, observing their reactions in class, eavesdropping on conversations between students, etc.

Today I would like to focus on collecting written feedback from students by means of short surveys. This kind of feedback collection is easy to implement, doesn't take more than five minutes to process for each class, and can help with:

- Identifying students who are having problems
- Explaining student behaviour
- Identifying student needs
- Discovering student interests
- Giving students a stake in the class

Surveys should be short and focused: what do you want to know? It is not necessary to take a survey at the end of every class, but I find it very helpful to do so. Students take one or two minutes to fill in the survey, and teachers spend less than five minutes to flip through and read the surveys quickly. I find the best way to check the feedback is to read it on the way back to the staffroom, picking out anything that needs to be addressed later on. I would recommend no more than two or three questions, along with a section for comments. For most students, it is important that they be allowed to write comments or questions in either English or Japanese (emphasize that while English is preferable, Japanese is acceptable). These comments tend to yield the best information.

As an example of how useful student feedback can be to teachers, the following situation took place in one of my university classes:

*During the second class of the year, one student was very quiet and unresponsive. This seemed strange, as she had been pretty lively during the first class. At first I wondered whether she was feeling okay, or whether she wasn't enjoying the class. When I looked at her feedback form though, she had written that she found the listening exercises very difficult, and was worried about this.*

This information gave me both the problem and allowed me to come up with a solution: I would help students by doing pre-listening tasks to help them understand the listening exercises. If I had not taken a survey I would not have known what she was having trouble with or how to help her.

# STUDENT FEEDBACK

## CLASS FEEDBACK FORM (SHORT):

Did you understand today's lesson? (1-5)

Did you enjoy today's lesson? (1-5)

Any comments?

## CLASS FEEDBACK FORM (LONG):

Please write a score from 5 (best) to 1 (worst) for each category:

ACTIVITY	UNDERSTANDABLE	USEFUL	CHALLENGING
Warm-up (criss cross)			
Explanation			
Main Activity (interviews)			

What activities/topics would you like to do in the future?

Any other comments?

# RUBRICS

*In general a rubric is a scoring guide used in subjective assessments. A rubric implies that a rule defining the criteria of an assessment system is followed in evaluation. A rubric can be an explicit description of performance characteristics corresponding to a point on a rating scale. A scoring rubric makes explicit expected qualities of performance on a rating scale or the definition of a single scoring point on a scale.*

*A rubric is the guide used to score performance assessments in a reliable, fair, and valid manner and is generally composed of dimensions for judging student performance, a scale for rating performances on each dimension, and standards of excellence for specified performance levels.*

A rubric is essentially a scoring guide or checklist that allows someone to classify level of performance. They are normally divided into levels (i.e. an excellent performance, a good performance, an acceptable performance, an unacceptable performance) with prerequisites for achieving each level. Rubrics tend to be fairly detailed, in order to make the classification easier.

Here is an example rubric that could be used to grade a teaching workshop:

<b>Excellent</b>	Content was highly relevant to my teaching situation Presentation was well-organized and flowed well Presenter had extensive knowledge of subject matter Materials were very relevant and useful
<b>Good</b>	Content was mostly relevant to my teaching situation Presentation was quite well-organized and had few pauses Presenter had good knowledge of subject matter Materials were quite relevant and useful
<b>Acceptable</b>	Content was slightly relevant to my teaching situation Presentation was somewhat well-organized: there were several pauses Presenter had some knowledge of subject matter Materials were slightly relevant and useful
<b>Unacceptable</b>	Content was not relevant to my teaching situation Presentation was not organized: many pauses and breaks Presenter had little or no knowledge of subject matter Materials were not relevant or useful

Rubrics are an excellent tool to help teachers when they are trying to evaluate subjective things like speeches, interview tests, or free writing.

Sharing rubrics with students in advance can help them prepare more efficiently and ensures that they are aware of what skills they should be working on. For more advanced classes, it can be motivational to have students create the rubric. This helps them think about what is important within the task.

# RUBRICS

In groups, please try to come up with rubrics for the following situations:

**1: AN INTERVIEW TEST**

**2: AN ORAL PRESENTATION**

**3: A PIECE OF FREE WRITING**

<b>A</b>	
<b>B</b>	
<b>C</b>	
<b>D</b>	

# TEACHING DIARIES

A teaching diary is a record of what happened in your class. It can be as simple as some notes scribbled on your lesson plan or as detailed as a formal write-up of the lesson.

Regardless of the level of detail, keeping a teaching diary can really help with lesson planning, troubleshooting, classroom management, and getting to know your classes.

I first started keeping a teaching diary in my third year as an ALT, when I was working at a senior high school. At that time, I was taking the main role in planning and teaching the majority of my classes.

I started taking a couple of minutes after each class to write some very brief notes to myself. Simple things, like which activities worked or didn't work, which students were sleeping or disruptive in class, and any ideas for next time that occurred to me.

Every week before the next class, I would refer to my notes and use them to mentally prepare for the lesson. This was particularly important when trying to deal with and formulate plans of action to deal with unwelcome student behaviour. Being able to remind myself before the class of which students were acting up allowed me to prepare a response to them. This in turn led to more reasoned and less emotional behaviour from me, which went a long way towards defusing the situation. Mental preparation is the key to dealing with problem behaviour in the classroom, and a teaching diary can provide you with the information you need for this for each individual class.

I wrote my notes in a teacher lesson planner (it mysteriously appeared on my desk one April –a gift from a publishing company), but they can be written anywhere. At the moment my teaching diary is much compressed, and consists of notes written directly onto the lesson plan. By keeping the lesson plans, I have a record of what I planned to do in class, what I actually managed to do, as well as the other information mentioned above.

At the end of the day, keeping a teaching diary increases the amount of information we have access to about our classes. If you have an incredible memory or only see a class a few times they may be less useful, but as a record for a regular class I have found teaching diaries extremely helpful, and use them in one form or another for all of my classes.

# TEACHING DIARIES

Here are some sample entries from hypothetical teaching diaries:

May 24 <sup>th</sup>
Class 2-3 Comparatives lesson
Lesson went well. Some students were late (from gym class –talk to gym teacher?). Warm up (speed dating) good. Explanation some students seemed confused. Asked students to work in groups and make sure they understood. Main activity (interview game) needed more practice beforehand. This class needs to do more oral drills before production activities. Toshi sleeping again. Ayako and Kanna talked constantly, distracting other students around them. Homework: finish worksheet.

An even more condensed version might be as follows:

5/24 Class 2-3 Comparatives Speed dating W-up great. More practice before speaking activities. Toshi sleeping, Ayako/ Kanna talking. Homework: worksheet
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Please take a few minutes to think about what kind of information you would like to include in a teaching diary of your classes (taking account of time limitations and the specific information that you require in your teaching situation):

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## CONCLUSION, REFERENCES, CONTACT INFO

I hope that you find at least some of the techniques and ideas from this seminar useful for your teaching. Of course, it is important to remember that not all of the techniques described here need to be adopted for all lessons. As with any teaching method or technique, teachers should choose and implement the techniques that will enhance their classes and provide a better learning experience for their students, and put aside those that do not fit their teaching style.

If there is anything linking the ideas in this seminar together, it is the idea of gathering and using information (data) to help with lesson planning and teacher self-improvement. I urge all teachers to try to think about how to use such data to improve their classes and their teaching.

### REFERENCES:

Barker, D (2006). Observing language classes in Japanese universities. *The Language Teacher*, 30 (3), 11-18

Online rubric resources:

<http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>

Action research:

[http://ww.philseflsupport.com/action\\_research.htm](http://ww.philseflsupport.com/action_research.htm)

### CONTACT DETAILS:

Please contact me at the kencho if you have any questions or suggestions regarding these techniques. I am always happy to hear from teachers in the field...

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