

What to Tell High School Students About Learning to Read in an Hour

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Introduction

A few years ago Hokusei Gakuen University started the so-called "Bridge Lecture" program where teachers from the university go out to high schools and give lectures there, to give the students a taste of what it is like to study at a university. I have taken part, offering a lecture with the title "Learning to read English comfortably," and several high schools in Hokkaido have asked to hear this lecture which is given in Japanese.

In planning the lecture I thought about the reading skills a beginning learner of English would benefit from, then looked at the skills that the students entering university appear to possess as well as those that seem to be lacking, and set out to provide material that could help fill the gaps in these skills as the deficiencies appear to me.

High school students display a lot of nervousness about English. Possibly because they feel that their English abilities are inadequate or that they are unsure about being able to cope with the English they are presented with. One sign of this is that students are generally not well equipped to perform even the very simple tasks that appear in entrance examinations. The students appear to display little sense that English is a medium of communication that is used to get along in the world. Students seem to have laboriously worked over only cut and dried - unnatural - tasks that are dissected in amazing detail with no particular attention to the wider world.

To an outsider (a non-high school person) it appears that high schools use the worry about English as a test subject to impose a quite inefficient and ineffective curriculum. This curriculum appears to be without concern for learning the language in any sense or for the study at college. Even when the study does not seem to equip students for anything really, it is proffered as a response to the entrance tests and the subjects (high school students) of these (university entrance) tests accept what is offered at face value and try to keep up with the taught, and teachers continue not to teach what could be useful.

My aim with this lecture was to provide alternatives to what students are usually offered, in the hope that some of these alternatives would be helpful and of benefit to the students. The selection of ideas and tasks offered is very subjective and is based on personal impressions, as well as the one hour time limit of the lecture. It is however hoped that the

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students will be encouraged by the material presented to develop a more personal approach to language study than I generally see in the incoming students.

The basis for my choices for what to include in the lecture is the competencies that I have observed in the reading habits of the incoming students at the Junior College here. Generally I have found that students are not flexible or curious, they are greatly concerned with form and rather than wanting to get on with an assignment the concern seems to be to work out what they have to do and then only do that. There is very little personal involvement, beyond a superficial directed interaction with the material at hand.

The lecture

At the start of the lecture the students receive a handout providing a focus for the material and activities of the lecture. The handout contains much more material than will be covered in the lecture, to guard against the eventuality that the lecture does not go as planned, and also to offer students material that they can use on their own after the lecture.

I start the lecture by looking at how we could react to simple un-contextualized sentences. When asked what a sentence or short passage in English says, students remain silent or come up with stilted and even incomprehensible Japanese, and they rarely show any confidence in their responses. Apparently they view English as a string of words that, while maybe grammatically ordered, need not reflect everyday life or human activities. The students do not seem to try to grasp or comprehend English globally, as in any way relevant to their world or part of their daily lives.

To suggest a way out of this, I present several short and longer sentences, one at a time, and first ask students to identify the theme, the topic of the sentence. For the sentence "I like tennis a lot," I work to get the students to say that it is about tennis. There are of course any number of other possible responses, but here my aim is for the students to note that tennis is the focus of the sentence and to use that as an "organizer" for their thinking about the sentence. I also ask students to tell me what they think about tennis and who this "I" could be (what kind of person), if they know anybody else who plays it, and what they think about tennis (being high school students they have usually all tried it). The answers I am looking for include whether it is a person the students would be able to get along with. A "nice" person, maybe a "sportsman," hoping to avoid the answer that it is "a person who likes tennis," I want them to make inferences from their own experiences. Then I go on to the next sentence. I am careful to avoid a literal rephrasing into Japanese and also do not discuss the grammatical points that such a sentence may offer.

According to informants, English classes, as commonly taught, look at sentences word by word, first give a Japanese equivalent to the individual words, identify the grammatical categories of the words, and move on to a rephrasing of the whole sentence into Japanese. I would like students instead to think about what the topic of the sentence is, what they think about the topic of a sentence, how it appears to them in their own situations.

Students also appear to be poor at isolating information in sentences. The problem is probably not that they do not notice details, only that they have not been asked to think about what is said in a sentence, or to pay different degrees of attention to different parts of a sentence. Here I present a slightly longer sentence, and ask leading questions to identify who appears in the sentence, where it is happening, when, and what goes on in the sentence, maybe even why the sentence says what it does. I use a sentence that has all these elements, like: I found a letter in my bag this morning as I was getting ready to go to school. Eliciting each of the four (or five if we get to "why") items above is not simple or straightforward, but students catch on. Then, with sentences that do not include one of these elements, I ask the students to identify which element is missing. It seems that students have never been asked to think about these things but just a little prodding is all that is needed to make them perform this task. Paying attention to this they could become aware of the parts of the sentence (time, place, etc.), what is there and what is not, something that they do not seem to be greatly attentive to.

Paying attention to what is stated and what is not clear in a sentence, students would be helped to identify what information is and is not available. It then becomes possible to guess about the missing and to straighten out comprehension where there are misunderstandings. Students seem unable to do these things a lot of the time.

Next, I have students make up sentences from a list of half a dozen words that I have provided on the handout. The words may be the apparently unrelated list: hat, elephant, street, morning, walking, and wet. Before I ask the students to make their own sentences with two or three of the words, I demonstrate what I want them to do on the blackboard, first putting two of these words in a sentence, then three of the words in another sentence, and finally all six words in one sentence. Then while the students are struggling with putting together and writing out their individual sentences I walk around the classroom and provide assistance and encouragement. No great literature is generated, and I help where grammar is upset, but the difficulty of performing this task is obvious and continues to surprise me. Again, I guess English lessons do not usually engage in such undirected activities, maybe as this would not count as "new" study that the whole class can puzzle over and dissect as a class. The difficulty students display in generating such sentences could also arise because students are overly sensitive to what they think is expected of them in terms of complexity, grammar, the appearance of handwritten words, or they may have other concerns that are not related to the language they have been asked to generate.

The idea for this exercise is from my own language studies, and from the spoken spontaneous English I have heard students use. Students have apparently had little experience in generating English in response to clues that are available in their immediate environment, and surprisingly disorganized language results when students attempt to express themselves spontaneously, vocally or in writing.

When most students have succeeded in creating sentences here, I ask them to share their sentences with their neighbors, showing their own sentences around and looking at

those of their classmates. Students usually sit in neat rows and have four or more neighbors within easy reach. The first reaction has always been merry laughter at this point. Seeing the sentences made by their colleagues seems wonderfully enjoyable. The sentences of neighbors are of course generally different from the own sentence, but just the appearance of a sentence in English that is immediately comprehensible (and made by someone they know) would account for some of the happy surprise.

The next task is to make drawings based on written instructions. In my teaching I have been surprised at how unexpected and difficult students find this kind of task. Asking students, and not just high school students, "to do like it says," when faced with the sentence "Write a 3," leads to very little action without a lot of prodding.

In a lecture the initial puzzlement and hesitation can be overcome by demonstrating on the blackboard and the frustration after the initial confusion is manageable. When asked to do as it says a second time, with a similar set of sentences many catch on, and looking over shoulders and across aisles makes success possible for also the slower students. Repeated a third time, even with different instructions, most students do very well.

During the repetitions in this part of the lecture I draw attention to the value of repetition, here students really feel (and are reminded by me) how they become better at the task we are doing by repeating the same task even with the slight changes I am introducing. Initially being lost, then risking a response, and finally becoming confident in doing what they are asked to do. This exercise provides a good example for how it is possible to vary a "pattern" (see Appendix) and come to master it without boredom. Students are told to think of ways to imitate this, and try to repeat and go back over everything that they study. That way they will develop flexibility, become inventive in English, and make the material they have encountered part of their general competence.

They are also provided with a "skeleton" exercise outline that they can use themselves or with friends. The Appendix shows an example of this kind of exercise with its skeleton, where the parts that can be varied have been replaced by brackets.

This exercise is also an example of a text that becomes a specific, and verifiable, drawing (a picture), and at the end of this exercise I point out that turning a text into a picture is always an option. Any piece of text can be turned into a drawing, it can be represented by a picture, and I suggest that the students always try to imagine what the texts they read would look like as pictures.

This more or less completes the lecture, and the remaining parts of the handout are used to repeat and reiterate (reinforce) what has been presented so far.

The remaining parts of the handout consists of stories of different kinds. Some are short, about 100 word long stories that are used to provide examples of contextualized situations for the various activities we have worked on.

There is also a longer story, that is simply read and that the students can tackle on their own, as well as a couple of handwritten stories that were created by first year Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College students, just this year. These stories are written

around specified words (the words are shown with the stories) and this is explained. The stories are like elaborations on the sentences that we all made earlier in the lecture with the string of words.

Concluding

The lecture described in this paper is given at high schools in Hokkaido as a one off occasion and aims to make reading in English more doable than how incoming college students appear to approach this basic element of language competence.

The lecture looks at text examples and relate them to the everyday lives of the attending high school students. Then uses well known words to create new English, and to visualize how text can be represented pictorially. This, with frequent repetitions and stressing how the students themselves can do this kind of thing, irrespective of language and irrespective of the treatment of language they are usually exposed to in their classrooms and everyday study.

The reason for the choice of activities and the matters stressed are that I find the students lacking in a clear awareness of English as a tool to achieve ends other than sitting for examinations. Students do not seem to relate what they study in school to their own lives and when performing language learning tasks there seems to be little concern with the wider world. The study they usually do does not seem to aim at any general, or generally useful linguistic competence. There also appears to be very little awareness that what has been learned in one situation feeds into other situations, or into anything else really.

By asking students to identify facets that may be simply related to the daily lives of students, arising from texts in English, it is hoped that English will become less foreign and alien. Making students depict what a text expresses would also help in this manner.

Occasionally the schools where the lecture has been given has provided feedback in the form of reactions to the lecture by the students. This feedback appears to be part of an assignment reporting on what they learned in the lecture, the reactions to the lecture. The feedback I have seen has shown that students catch on to what is being introduced and that they appreciate the difference from what they are usually offered. The feedback that I see is likely a selection that has been made for the purpose of showing that the objectives of the lecture have been achieved, and so it would represent only a sample of the reactions of the students. It is however encouraging that I have seen no reports where students were not clearly aware of what the lecture tried to convey. Students appear to catch on to what they are presented with and respond to it in a manner that seems positive and indicates interest in learning what goes on in the lecture.

That said however, the incoming students still display the deficiencies (oddities?) that I have described above. It may be too much to hope that a one hour lecture will make a notable impact on the effects of the relentless picking over of words, rephrasing into Japanese, and maintaining the language as foreign. The potential for a much more positive language

learning experience seems waiting and ready to be exploited in the students, but is not realized through the treatment they are exposed to, in high school certainly.

Appendix

Exercise for making a drawing:

Write a 3.

Draw a triangle around the three.

Draw another triangle around the first one.

Fill in the space between the triangles.

Write a 6 over the triangles, a 5 under them, a 4 to the left, and a 3 to the right.

Underline it all with two straight lines and a wavy line.

Write 'Great' between the straight lines.

The "skeleton" for the above exercise:

Write a ().

Draw () around the ().

Draw another () around the first one.

Fill in the space between the ()s.

Write a () over the ()s, a () under them, a () to the left, and a () to the right.

Underline it all with () () lines and () line.

Write '()' between the () lines.

[Abstract]

What to Tell High School Students About Learning to Read in an Hour

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This paper describes the activities that the author selected for a one hour lecture for high school students about learning to read in a foreign language for use in the Bridge Lecture program offered by Hokusei Gakuen University to high schools in Hokkaido. The talk centers on ways to make text relevant to learners, and suggests ways of individualizing the study as well as developing intuitive reactions to dealing with reading in English.

一時間で高校生に英語の読解を教えるには

要約

本論は、どのように外国語で読む方法を身につけるかについて、高等学校の生徒を対象とする1時間の講義のために著者が選んだ内容について述べる。これは北星大学の設けた北海道の高等学校のためのブリッジ講義で使用されたものである。講義の中心は、テキストを学習者(生徒j)にとって身近に感じさせる手段についてであり、生徒個人に合わせた勉強方法や、英語読解に際して自然な反応を引き出す様々な方法を提案する。

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