

What to Tell High School Students about How to Study Languages (English) in an Hour

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Background to the lecture

This paper is a summary of a lecture I have given a number of times as part of the “Bridge Lecture Program” offered by the University to high schools around Hokkaido. Usually there is one hour available for the lecture, but there may be only 45 or as much as 90 minutes allotted. The theme is large and there is ample room for stretching or skipping parts as the situation demands.

The university publishes a list of the lectures offered in the Bridge Lecture Program, and for this lecture the high schools see:

気楽に語学を学び

—やる気を高めるために

英語を身につけるためには、ほかの科目でもそうですが、学校の勉強だけに頼っているのでは充分とはいえません。

英語を楽しみながら、しかも簡単に腕が上がる、自習の方法をいくつかお教えします。教室の外にも目をむけ身近な日常生活のなかで手に入る、勉強（独習）の材料についてお話します。

以上のように英語能力をレベルアップしてみよう！

The write up is in Japanese, as is the lecture, and rephrased into English it becomes something like:

Improving English learning by supplementing and boosting language learning comfortably

To master English, or any subject really, it is not enough to rely on classroom teaching. The lecture will detail some ways to improve English learning, so the English study will become easier and more enjoyable. I will talk about what resources are available for this kind of study outside the classroom, in our immediate environment in everyday life.

Key Words : English as a second language; English as a foreign language; learning strategy; learning methods; High school English learning.

The audience and the material covered in the lecture

The audience is usually about 30 or 40 first and/or second year high school students who are preparing to enter college and the lecture is given concurrently with a number of other lectures from a variety of fields by university staff from this and other universities.

The focus of the material covered in the lecture is on what I think is not usually taught in high schools, related to English and foreign language teaching, and especially things that students could really do by themselves, simply. The suggestions can also be used to support and extend the language learning the students are already engaged in. Still, were they to disregard the study in school and study with the ideas (methods proposed) in the lecture they would likely be able to master English on their own.

I have divided the lecture into parts relating to the different skills that are considered to comprise foreign language competence: Pronunciation, reading, speaking, writing, and finally there are suggestions for ways to integrate these four skills.

I do not deal with grammar. Grammar is of course important when figuring out the meaning of matters that appear opaque during the study, but as an independent component students can pick it up as they feel the need for that. The grammar instruction geared at tests that occupies much of the attention of high school English instruction has not been shown to promote competence in any of the skill areas. Here it is felt that in the acquisition of English it is sufficient for grammar to be picked up incidentally providing support when needed, or when students feel that it is necessary.

The lecture

The lecture then covers the skill areas separately (but integrates them at the end of the lecture) and due to the time constraints of the lecture, I provide one or at most two ideas for mastering a particular skill. With this limited variety of ideas for pursuing the study I still feel that students will be well equipped to think up ways and approaches that suit them and the study they may pursue individually. The “generality” (broad scope of application) of the various ideas should also be a safeguard against boredom and loss of incentive to learn more for students studying on their own.

Pronunciation

I start out by saying that everybody has an own individual pronunciation, and that we know it by our ability to recognize a large number of voices on the phone (we are able to recognize the voices of nearly everybody we are acquainted with). So there is no standard pronunciation. If our message conveys what we try to communicate, but

the other person cannot understand us that is generally a problem where the other person has to make effort to make sure that things are understood. This is of course a gross oversimplification but it is stressed here in anticipation of the frequently stated (at least in Japan) excuse for not knowing (or using) English, that “my pronunciation is poor.” Worries about pronunciation quality are not primarily a language concern.

There is often feedback from students, at the lecture or in written reports sent to me after the lecture, and in the feedback students do not seem to have trouble agreeing with this, and in the reports I have seen they have expressed great relief at being reassured that others think so too. Still, society at large and the students' elders, even language teachers, keep saying that pronunciation is a significant hurdle to language use, thus keeping the waters muddied.

There will be cases where pronunciation needs work however, and in such cases I suggest getting together with friends and mouthing the difficult words or passages, one person speaking and the others listening, then switching roles. In the classroom this never fails to improve pronunciation of “difficult to mouth” parts, if just for the moment. Repeating this kind of activity is a viable avenue to achieve a comprehensible oral output. Reading aloud is also a good way to get a feel for rhythm and the general flow of spoken English.

Listening

Listening is a receptive skill and it is necessary to have something to listen to in order to practice listening. However, when the listening is framed (overwhelmed) by extensive explanations in the native language (here Japanese) the usefulness as listening practice is limited. The ear tends to listen to what it understands and with Japanese expected to come next, it will relax during the English part. Listening is an intensive activity that requires effort and concentration and it needs to focus on the message - in the second language (English). Listening in the native language is commonly done with “half an ear,” in the foreign language listening has to be with both ears, seriously concentrating on what is being said. One distinction to keep in mind is that there is a difference between “doing listening” (practice pre-digested fully understood language) and listening (trying to catch on to what is being said).

Today there is a nearly unlimited volume of spoken English that can be found on the internet, and for a learner the problem is to find material that is interesting, as well as the material has to be of a suitable level of difficulty. Still, listening to any material will allow recognition of individual known words, and even when the overall meaning may be lost there will usually still be some parts comprehended. When only parts have been comprehended, repeated listening to even marginally comprehensible material will extend “islands of comprehension.”

Also, despite the often expressed worry about listening ability, this skill generally has relatively high scores in proficiency tests. Worries about listening are much overdone, and paying attention to what is being said and asking for repetition and clarification, as well as being aware of the topic discussed will straighten out much incomprehension.

For studying, I suggest that students get together in twos or small groups and use pictures to get ideas for what to say so that all can see and know what they are listening to. If something said is not understood, maybe absent in the picture they are looking at, it can be explained, and when it is understood it is possible to go on and keep communicating.

Reading

Reading is the skill area where students score most poorly in proficiency tests and much of the blame for that should likely be leveled at the way reading is taught. Without concern for interest or intrinsic worth. The students have analyzed any number of disconnected sentences without having had to worry about their (the sentences or short texts) place in the real world. Texts of half a dozen lines are termed “long” in the vernacular (長文) and even books may be confusingly described as “sentence” (singular). Students do not have the experience of reading (as opposed to dissecting) texts of any length or in any volume in English.

The first trick that I suggest is to not look for the grammatical subject of a sentence but to make sure of the topic of a sentence (story). The two are often the same but in a sentence like: “I like tennis,” I try to elicit that the sentence is about (the main topic [主題] is about) tennis. I am generally successful but when I am not, a few repetitions are sure to make the students catch on.

Next, I suggest that the students think about the things that a sentence tells about, and what they themselves (the individual students) think about that. Like for “tennis” above, what they think about tennis and the kind of person it could be who is playing it. My hope is that they have a clear image (positive or negative) of tennis, and potentially an opinion about the person playing tennis (a person they could get along with or one they would rather not have anything to do with). With even a limited degree of involvement in the sentence/story, comprehension and interest improves.

It is also possible to look for things said or implied in sentences (or stories or parts of stories) by determining who is appearing/doing things, where the happenings take place, what the time is, what is going on, and maybe even why the things are happening. Looking for such information will alert students to absent information and students will also begin to guess about the text based on the information available. This sort of “situation analysis” will tide learners over difficult parts in readings and improve comprehension levels of texts that are already understood.

Vocabulary is also difficult, and increasing the passive vocabulary (the words recognized at sight) is important. Here students can make up own sentences with vocabulary items to be learned, and share these sentences with fellow students (reading practice). During the lecture this (making up sentences with words provided by me) seems difficult at first but after seeing successful sentences made by fellow students (neighbors) there is much productive noise in the classroom, laughter and merriment even. Making up such “original” sentences as a regular feature of the study will improve reading ability and agility in comprehension of new texts.

Speaking

At first sight speaking appears as the most difficult skill to master in a country where the target language is not spoken. This hurdle can however largely be overcome by “speaking in the head,” practicing the spoken forms of the language in the everyday situations that students find themselves in, forming sentences unvocalized, silently, as they go about their daily lives. The language of this unvoiced spoken English would be relevant to the environment and situations a student is in during the day. Making up sentences in the head does require some mental agility and perseverance, but in everyday life there is a ready supply of words and things and situations where students would want to say something and where they are able to formulate expressions on their own.

One occasion for this can be the daily commute to and from school, here the head can be working at putting things into English while the world passes by. Deciding on “speaking in the head” for set periods (maybe between stops of the bus or subway or while waiting for the light to turn green [blue?], or during slow periods at lectures) will help students be prepared for mouthing English when required and should help bridging silences when wanting to speak.

Other tricks to get the English flowing would be to require the sentences produced in the head to be of specified lengths, requiring a “because” or other clause, or at the end of the utterance add an “and/but” or similar and think up a continuation for the utterance. Others have termed this the “+ alpha” approach (adding something to what is already there) suggesting the generality and productivity of what can be achieved when keeping talking after we were originally meant to stop.

Writing

Writing is usually done for others to read, and for a learner to find an audience is not always easy. Practicing writing alone is however possible in a number of ways.

One way is by adding to existing sentences. Deciding to add a two or three word phrase to a sentence in a text, then writing out the new sentence, with the additions.

This kind of addition can be repeated, progressively stretching a sentence well beyond breaking point, when it can then be snapped into parts and turned into a short story.

Sentences can also be rewritten to conform to situations that are different from the original. Sentences about summerly hot situations can be rewritten as a cold frigid wintery story. Even grammar can be specified, reversing subject and object or similar. As a result there will be a number of different sentences and it is possible to think about how the meanings are different. Such specifying of situations can focus on any of the parts of a story (time, place, actors, happenings, and background) and could provide plenty of stimulation and fun, alone or with a friend or two on a rainy day.

Integrating the skills

None of the skill areas above are however isolated from the rest and with any of the exercises (practice) suggested above there will be some overflow into other skill areas. Integrating the study of two or more skill areas can also be made very deliberate. One example would be to have one person read (reading, pronunciation) a text with the listeners turning the text they hear into a drawing (listening) and/or writing (writing) out parts of the heard text. Then switching reader and listener, and maybe text.

One such exercise that I use in the lecture is the following:

Please fit the following into a square: a star over “shortest” ; a wavy triangle with “Hello!” ; two crosses under a box; a slanted square in a third triangle; curlicues along the left side of the square; a point over “longest” ; and a left slanting rectangle in the middle.

When the students are told to do like the print says (students have been provided with the text) there is initial consternation. My explanation has been inadequate, students seem to think that they don't know what to do. Then we go through the “exercise” step by step and it suddenly becomes meaningful and doable. When a follow up exercise of the same format but with different details, is presented students have much less difficulty and a couple of further repetitions make them master also this kind of exercise. Repetitions and variations could for example be achieved by filling the blanks in the skeleton below:

Please fit the following into a (): a () over “()” ; a wavy () with “Hello!” ; two () under a (); a slanted square in a () triangle; () along the left side of the (); a point over “longest” ; and a left slanting () in the middle.

When students have become used to a pattern like that suggested immediately above they can be asked to describe a finished pattern (a drawing) as a text, read it back to the other students to see that it is right, and next students can dictate “requests” for drawing figures to fellow students.

When this stage is reached the initial listening exercise, has morphed into a speaking and listening pair work exercise and finally writing and reading are also covered.

Concluding remarks

The exercise to integrate the study of the different skills completes the lecture and following the lecture I have asked to see the reports that students have to write as part of the lecture participation - handed in to the high school. In the reports students appear to grasp what is going on and do not find the suggestions difficult to perform or grasp. There seems to be some degree of relief that there are ways of study in addition to the steady diet of classroom teacher centered study that they generally engage in.

One surprise for me is that the suggestions here are brand new and unexpected to the students. Most of what has been suggested here seems straightforward and commonsensical, maybe even what could/ should be introduced at the start of organized language study. Introducing these kinds of study skills would show students that the classroom study is just one facet of language learning and that they themselves have an active role to play in their acquisition of the second language, also in the classroom.

Students also state that they are encouraged by what they have heard, that it has given them courage even, to approach English anew despite expressions that they do not really like to learn English. One may perhaps surmise from this last that students are aware of the necessity and usefulness of knowing a second language but that the study they have been subjected to has sapped their interest and will to work on their own.

The suggestions for how to study, detailed above, are of course only the first steps in how independent study can be undertaken. Thinking of further ways of speeding the students along are not difficult. However, with the beginning here it may perhaps be assumed that students will get the feel for what they need to do to master English to the extent that they would like to and they may be trusted to pursue the study as far as they see fit. Encouragement and inducements along the way will be helpful but the main work will be done by the individual student.

Much is not directly mentioned, or considered, in the suggestions above. This includes developing a feel for the language, cultural concerns, and how others are using the language (English). It is however felt that such will become understood in the

course of the study when students come into contact with other English users. Such opportunities become occasions where students will learn how to adapt their possibly idiosyncratic ways to more common practices. This would be much like those who learn English through school study today find that there is much roping of sails and relearning before their laboriously learned skills become useful in the wider world.

Still the differences between “standard” usage and what the student teaches her/himself are not serious impediments to the first steps in using English. The student will know that what has been learned has been learned in isolation and if there are discrepancies those are the subject for further study and development of the English skills.

[Abstract]

What to Tell High School Students about How to Study Languages (English) in an Hour

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This paper details a one hour lecture describing how to study languages. The lecture is aimed at high school students and the purpose is to provide ideas for the students to become able to study independently. The lecture is given as a part of the university Bridge Lecture Program. The lecture details how to study in each of the skill areas (pronunciation, listening, reading, speaking, and writing). It is hoped that through the lecture the students will find ideas for pursuing independent language study supplementary to what they are taking part in at school.

[要 約]

一時間で、高校生に語学（英語）の学習方法を身につけさせる講義

トーキル・クリステンセン

この論文は、一時間で語学学習方法が身につくようにするための講義について述べる。対象は高等学校の生徒で、生徒一人ひとりが自分で出来る英語学習を目的とし、そのための有用なアイデアを提供する。これは北星学園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発表されたものである。講義では各スキル（発音・聞き取り・読解・会話・作文）ごとに、学習の進め方を詳述している。

Key Words : English as a second language; English as a foreign language learning strategy; learning methods; High school English learning.

