

LEARNING: THE FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING

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January 1992

SUMMARY: The reflections and experiences of a first year teacher at Hokusei Tandai, 1991-92. Discussion of mistakes, effective and ineffective teaching ideas, including examples, related in the first person.

要 約：

1991-92年度の北星短大における教師一年目の、反省および体験である。間違いや、効果のあった教え方、効果のなかった教え方について例も含めて述べる。

My development of teaching is somewhat like this typewriter--there is no correct tape so all of my mistakes show and they come most plentiful just when I am really getting going. I am learning to slow down and think through (even if that last sentence doesn't look like it).

Looking back on this journal entry after my second day of teaching at Hokusei Tandai I see that the sentences are understandable and perhaps my mistakes were, too. At any rate, I certainly learned from them.

The Second Year Students

With one term of "Methods of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages" and a three week TESOL course behind me I selected a text (*An American Sampler*, Addison-Wesley, 1983), sketched a tentative outline and went boldly off to teach my first class of second year students.

I introduced myself to the thirteen expressionless faces and gave a short speech of welcome, encouraging them to interrupt and ask questions if there was anything they didn't understand. They responded with shy smiles and nods. Then I asked them to speak. Deafening silence. I tried again. Wrinkled brows, hesitant nods. In the next five seconds all my preparations, confidence and solid wall of pedagogy disintegrated. They didn't understand; I was failing (or flailing, as the journal entry reads).

Since the books had not arrived, I tried going over a copy of the first page with the students. Reading aloud was fine--although I could hardly hear the timid voices. But again discussion was dead. No comments, no questions, just nods. I began to wonder if my role was to read their minds. What was the problem? Speed? Vocabulary? My looks? Their lack of interest?

At the end of the longest hour and a half of my life I collected their one-on-one introductory interviews. One answer to the bonus question "Why are you studying English?" challenged me not to give up: "I want to more understand and speaking English. But, now, I don't understand English. I must study English very hard. Please teach me."

The second week a few students were absent. I tried hard *not to take it personally*. I felt much more comfortable, though, with the new arrangement of moving the desks into a semi-circle and seating myself in a desk in front of them. Dividing into groups

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of three or four I gave them the "Desert Survival Game" (included at end of article). As they grew excited about ranking the items necessary for survival after their plane crash in the desert they conversed more and more in Japanese. I stopped them and wrote 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 on the board. We read the numbers aloud together several times. After that I listened to Japanese conversation mixed with English numbers.

Once the text book arrived I thought things would be easier. But choosing the book with no knowledge of the students' abilities was another mistake. I soon found that they didn't know how to write comparative sentences, much less paragraphs. Syntax in one's native language is hard; in a foreign language...well, I decided to concentrate on conversation. But how to get even that far...

About the sixth week of class I finally produced a written syllabus for the students. But the text was still difficult and the students weren't particularly interested in the topics. Discussion was something they could not comprehend. I had expected adjustment to take a while, but after four or five weeks, surely I should have found the magic solution. Yet I couldn't force the students to change all the years of learning not to ask questions, not to express opinions, not to answer unless they had a perfect response. So I decided to change myself. The students were often surprised at the result--and so was I. But slowly things began to work.

Toward the end of May I tried a topic of mutual interest: cooking. We spent two weeks discussing cooking experiences and favorite recipes for about 20 minutes per class. Each student had to tell how to make a Japanese food. I pleaded ignorance to any Japanese cooking and was happy to see the students coming to each others' aid in explaining (with lots of gestures) how to fix their favorite dishes. This exercise challenged them to communicate--

and as they realized they were being understood English became less frightening. Then one morning I passed out a very simple recipe for "peanutbutter treats." All the ingredients are mixed together at once with no heat required. After explaining how to measure and mix, we all marched down to the cooking lab. For many it was the first time to see oatmeal and peanutbutter (my first time experience came the night before when I tried to buy peanutbutter after 9 pm!). When some of the groups finished early, I challenged them to find a food (in English) to go with each letter of the alphabet. Maybe they thought the game a little childish, but the laughter it brought helped them relax and enjoy themselves.

The cooking lesson taught me that when I'm doing something I enjoy and have enthusiasm for, even when things don't work as planned (i.e. when the recipe contains a typo that accidentally doubles one ingredient), the overall class will go smoothly. Of course, there are unavoidable things which I would rather not teach. Grammar, for example, cannot always be ignored. But there are two ways to look at it. It is a hand with fingers of nouns, verbs, etc. That hand can be a fist for beating information into the students' heads; or it can be opened, extended to help and guide them along the path of language learning. I try for the latter image--searching for simple, applicable grammar structures and then hypothetical situations to use them in.

By the end of June I had seen enough of the students' writing and heard enough of their conversation to know how much they were or were not progressing. "Exam" sounded bad, so I assigned an "end of term project." Each student came to class with questions she had always wanted to ask a foreigner. We discussed these in class and chose the ones they really could ask. I typed up 19 questions, along with a short explanation of the assignment in English and gave the students two weeks to go find a foreigner (preferably one who could not speak Japanese) and interview

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him/her. Anyone who did not interview a foreigner and report back to class on it would not pass. All of the students who had been coming to class regularly completed the project. As they reported back to the class each spoke with a little more confidence. Several smiled shyly at the question "Where did you meet the foreigner?" and confessed that it was a good excuse to speak to an interesting young man, a well dressed woman or some other eye catching entity.

In September I began class with a handout explaining my goals for the term. I knew the students would think the English of the syllabus was too difficult--but I also knew they would find a way to understand it. The goal for the term was very simple: to enjoy speaking English. I no longer dreamed of fluent discussions on world issues, but if the students could believe in their communication abilities that would be worth far more. The hour and a half sessions were divided into three parts: discussion topics, book work and creativity.

At the start of every class I asked each student "How are you? " They soon learned that I expected an honest answer, not a canned "Fine, thank you." This helped me also to know if they were suffering lack of sleep or excited about a dance party or just having a normal day. In turn I was able to tell them how I was feeling--and they began to ask questions of me and of one another to understand the source of another's joy, excitement, or bad mood. Then we would launch into the discussion topic (see end of article--these were collected from various friends and unknown files then modified for this class). The topic was always selected a week ahead so the students could prepare. After the first two sessions, however, I outlawed the reading of prewritten answers. To encourage attentiveness and facilitate "discussion" after each student finished relating, for example, her most embarrassing moment, I would call on others at random to ask her questions.

One of the best discussions came near the end of November. The students usually selected the next week's topic, but that time they had taken longer than usual and I had suggested "Qualities of a good husband." The discussion yielded a list of 38 points ranging from "likes my family" to "pulls the long black hairs out of his nose." We eventually narrowed it down to 11 essential ones, but the students enthusiastically copied all 38 to share with their boyfriends.

Since the reading text first term had become increasingly uninteresting to the students, I selected a new text for the second term (*On Course 2*, Oxford, 1990). This text presents a variety of model conversations and substitution exercises. The first lessons were overly easy and the students worked through them quickly and confidently. Then I skipped toward the back of the book, selecting grammar forms I felt they could use. Book work usually took the second half hour of class with explanation, modeling and practicing in pairs.

The last part of class was the most challenging. I passed out role plays typed on index cards or gave the students a true to life situation, planned to coordinate with the grammar points of the day. Then I pushed them to produce a dialog or skit using the grammar they had just learned. After 20 minutes of work the last 10 minutes were given to performances. Of course they couldn't produce much in the small amount of time, but again this exercise emphasized communication. During book work time I corrected strictly--no mistakes allowed. But for performances only often repeated or comprehension blocking mistakes were singled out and discussed after each performance.

One of the greatest benefits of this system of time management is that I had to be more organized. Having a clear idea of what I was doing and how long I had to accomplish it reduced my "flailing" moments and helped me to keep going even

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if parts of the lesson didn't go as well as I had hoped. Although the desperate feelings Thursday nights, trying to prepare for Hokusei on Friday, didn't magically go away, they did become bearable. Still, I always felt there was somehow more I should or could be doing. Thus one morning I awoke with a bad cold, but decided it was no excuse to stay home. By the end of the first half hour I could barely whisper. The students did a lot of talking in English that day--but even in the most desperate case, I would not recommend this as a method for inspiring speech.

Another interesting adaptation was the bonus question of the month. I began by asking the students to find the English mistake at David's Cookies. Only a few actually attempted this venture and no one discerned that ICE CREAM CORN is actually ICE CREAM CONE if not written in katakana. The activity might have worked if I had given the students the exact address and hours of the store. The next bonus question was about the highest mountains in North America. No one attempted to answer it. Once again I had picked a subject with a vital lack of interest for the students. But this venture did teach me that a reward system can indeed help motivate students. Thereafter, the end of class hangman, bingo, or round of spontaneous questions might earn a small candy bar or a balloon for the more talkative students.

Suddenly it was the end of the year. At this point I realized that a few common sense items would facilitate teaching for the next year--things like a complete understanding of the class and activity schedule *before* the year began. I also wished that I could have really gotten to know a few other teachers. The occasional smiles, nods, and five minute conversations never gave me time to voice my doubts or confusion or to share the stories of joyful progress. Yet everyone else had seemed so busy and coordinated and I had felt so overwhelmed. Nonetheless, there was little time for reflection since it was time to choose another end of

term project.

The option of an exam in January did not appeal to me or to the students--but I wanted them to have at least one more new experience in

English conversation. Nine students were still coming to class and I explained the project to them in two sentences. "You will call me and speak

to me on the phone for five minutes. In English." Their stricken looks told me they clearly understood the directions. As before, if they didn't do it, they didn't pass. I wasn't concerned with how perfectly they could handle phone conversations, the point was to use English in this new (and possibly terrifying) situation. On the last day of class two students still hadn't called--but I cleared up their misunderstanding explaining that *by* the last day meant before class, granted them a few extra hours and they called me that night.

Because the phone calls were done outside of class, there wasn't a particular need to vary the class for the last day. but I felt indebted to the students for all they had taught me. Perhaps they didn't understand my reasons, but they were more than happy to bring snacks and drinks for a party. The wrap-up activity worked like this: *On a blank piece of paper each student wrote her name in the middle and drew 4 lines out from it to divide*

the page evenly: 1) one word describing you; 2) something you like to do; 3) favorite food--when, where and with whom; 4) draw a picture from your life 5 years in the future. I had used this activity with various items (1-4) for introductory games at workshops and retreats in the US. I used it here to lead into our party--set five years in the future. We asked each other questions about our future jobs and families. Silent pauses and grammar mistakes still laced the conversation, but I tried not to worry so much, letting those moments be rest or think time for the students

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and planning time for me. Finally, the questions gave me a chance to share what I most wanted to talk about--my reason for being here: Jesus.

As we gathered up the leftover cookies and brushed crumbs from the desks, a few of the students told me that they really hoped to continue studying English. I believed them. All the tears of frustration and late night agonizing over lesson plans had been brought the desired goal. They hadn't attained fluency but they had achieved an interest and a willingness to take (and continue to take) the risk of communicating in English.

The First Year Students

The first class with the second year students was the longest hour and a half of my life, but the first classes of first year students were even longer.

For the first class, there was no attendance list. I began reading the list from the office, but the students only looked blankly at me. I read all thirty names, zero attendance. But there were twenty-nine young women seated in front of me. I had each student say her name and I wrote them down. Happily, I even remembered a few of the names on the first try, but unfortunately that seemed to be all the English these students knew. Speaking extremely slowly and clearly I tried introducing myself. A sea of dark, unreadable eyes stared back at me and I began to wish I didn't know English either.

Simple introductory games helped ease my anxiety. I had the students walk to opposite sides of the room according to likes and dislikes. Of course, in the second class this game worked much better because I knew how to modify questions to avoid

embarrassing students. The neutral questions with a fair number of people on both sides seemed safer although they all laughed that only one person disliked pizza and that I was the only one who would rather hike in the mountains than drive through them.

The text book, however, was not simple. Again, my journal sums it up: "In short, the book was too hard for me--to explain, that is." I didn't know how to set up the exercises and the students' pained expressions indicated that they had no clue anyway. Thus I quickly switched to emergency backup plan number one and continued with simple English games till the end of the class period. I asked if there were any questions before dismissing class. "Do you have a boyfriend? Are you married? Do we have a test?" I was amazed at how they could suddenly speak English.

The second week I gave up trying to speak extra slow. The effort gave me a sore throat and didn't seem to improve their comprehension. The cassette for listening exercises was the new adventure of the day. The students understood...very little to nothing. I felt frustrated. I could see the students struggling to understand every single word. That was impossible. How could I communicate to them that grasping the gist of the meaning was what mattered?

Bingo worked well, but again a few commonsense plans would have made it smoother. The next time I played a game where the students had to prepare something on paper I dilligently patrolled the aisles, looking for mistakes as they were happening to avoid re-explaining six or seven times.

At the end of class I tried just talking at normal speed for two minutes and having the students write down what they understood. I told them several times it was OK to hand in a blank paper. But they were terrified of turning in anything less than perfect and whispered back and forth rapidly until everyone had

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the same thing written on their paper. So much for an easy way to check comprehension, I thought.

My journal entry that day reflects a feeling of being handicapped by my background:

I want Japanese language so badly, I guess I just expect everyone to want to learn like I do. But then why do they need it in their secure environment with lots of friends and a dance party next week? It's harder for me to teach here than in the US because I don't really know what life outside the class is like. I don't even know what life inside the class is like. I have very little perspective on myself for evaluation and feedback. I don't know what is good or bad and just have to learn by trial and error. I wonder if my students have any idea how much experimentation I am performing on them. I was wishing for the magic formula this morning--the way to give them instant English. But as in my quest for instant Japanese--it's not to be found. You have to be willing to work and to make mistakes in order to get there. And the same is my experience in learning to teach...

As I thought about these feelings and frustrations I decided they could either be a stumbling block or I could just accept myself for who I was and find ways for my uniqueness to be an asset.

Learning the students' names was a challenge. I asked each student to give me an index card with her name, address, birthday, major, reason for studying English and a picture. I was surprised to receive several cards with a pencil sketches done by the

students. Then they taught me the difference between *photo* and *picture*.

Lessons inched by. I purposely overplanned in order to keep the students busy. One thing I really disliked was students sleeping in class. I tried hard to keep them too busy to sleep--or to switch activities when heads began to nod. After several tries, I gave up on the cassette--it seemed to signal nap time to many of the students. And slowly the book drifted out of use as well. I just didn't know how to use it.

By June the class began to have some structure. First we would review last week's lesson and have a question for each student to answer. Then I collected homework. Next came some an attempt to use the book, followed by a variety of things I created to supplement the book. Finally, some games to fill up the time. The main part of class went into the "variety of things." These tended to be useful grammar structures. I would type a few sample dialogues and then supply phrases for substitution. Homework would follow through on this with the students creating more examples using these structures. For example, one week we did commands and requests, another time I taught them to ask permission to do things. I was glad when July came and I had some time off to think.

In September we began a new text (*Coast To Coast*, Longman, 1990). This gave me a structure I was comfortable with as well as lots of ideas for supplemental games and activities. I had become accustomed to using the teachable moments as they came. That is, if a student asked a question that interested the others and led us into a different subject, then I would expand on it, thinking as I talked about how it could be molded into the lesson of the day or incorporated into the next week.

My search for interesting ways to use English was a little better than fifty percent successful. The day each student gave a

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two minute speech I was elated at the progress they had made in using the grammar from previous lessons. But I also saw that while one student talked the other 28 or 29 were each individually occupied with some activity besides listening. Next time I'll ask them to evaluate each other.

The success of small group work hinged on the attitude of the students (and the teacher) as well as the intrinsic interest of the activity. The two activities I would recommend are "Guess the Person" and "Psychiatrist." For Guess the Person each student brought in a picture of a person from a magazine. Then, in groups, they created non-physical descriptions of the people. Group A then displayed their pictures for Group B and read the descriptions. Based on the hints from the descriptions--lifestyle, occupation, age, etc.--Group B guessed which picture matched which description. Then Group B displayed their pictures for Group A and repeated the process. The winning group was the one with the most correct guesses. For Psychiatrist each group selected a person to be the psychiatrist. This person was sent out of the room while the game was explained. The students sat in a circle--and each assumed the identity of the person on her left. The psychiatrist's job was to diagnose this problem by asking "yes-no questions" of the students. (Note: physical description questions should be modeled for this so students understand that visible clues will help the psychiatrist--if they try to ask personal question, the game won't work.) For example, the psychiatrist might ask "Are you wearing glasses?" to which the person asked would respond "Yes" or "No" depending on whether or not the person on her left was wearing glasses. If, however, the answer was uncertain--for example "Are you wearing a watch?"--rather than turn and search the person on her left for a watch the person asked would respond "I don't know" at which everyone would jump up and find a new seat in the circle. Once everyone was sitting down again, they

assumed the identity of the new person on their left and the psychiatrist's questions continued.

The first year students showed much dread of exams so they too were given "end of term projects." In July they spent two weeks working on their dream vacations. Each group of 3 or 4 was given a certain amount of money and time and told that they were going, as a group of friends, to an English speaking country of their choice. I gave them a simple list of airfares and tour packages and allowed them to request group discounts. On the last day of class I discussed the vacation plan with each group and gave them a situation within their vacation plan to deal with. Overall, the project gave them practice in writing, reading, speaking and listening--and it gave me practice in tour management and paper correction.

In December I did not want the volume of paper that the vacation project had generated so I did personal interviews with each student. This helped me to really see how much the students had come to understand. Happily, most of the students were no longer nervous about talking to me. However, in answer to the question "Did you learn much English in this class?" the standard reply was "Class was fun." I felt a bit discouraged at this, but then I remembered that fun was part of enjoying English. Reading over the Likes and Dislikes lists I had asked the students to write anonymously I found that at least eighty percent had enjoyed the class, several were hoping to see me in English II and the things they hadn't liked were basically homework and not being allowed to sleep in class.

Finally

As I look ahead to the next year of teaching I have many ideas I want to try. I realize that some of them may never work,

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others will go well, and others will, when they finally come to being, be far different than I now imagine them. The experience I have had so far teaches me that many factors crowd in to affect how well a day of teaching goes--how much I was rained on while riding my bike to school, how many students fall asleep during listening comprehension, how much I have left to plan before teaching my evening classes. But the days that go "well" have little to do with these factors and everything to do with forgetting about myself and trying 100% to discern and meet the needs and interests of the students. There will always be days with lonely lunches (is it better to eat alone in a crowded cafeteria or in a nearly empty classroom?) and chapel services where I can almost not quite understand. But also there will be the telling moments when class begins and I look at all of the attentive eyes and know that I have prayed for each by name before class and that, whatever happens, we will all doubtlessly learn something.

Weekly Discussion Topics

- Who is the funniest person you ever met? Describe him/her.
- Who is the person you admire most? Why?
- What would you do if you had a million dollars?
- What is the most difficult thing you've ever had to do?
- If you had to move, where would you move and why?
- What are some of your New Year's Resolutions?
- Three things I'd like to do before I die are...
- 3 to 5 qualities that make a good husband...
- What is the most embarrassing thing you've ever done?
- Describe the best vacation you have ever had.
- Where is the place you would most like to visit?
- Describe the worst vacation you have ever had.
- What is the best/worst thing about your job/school?
- What is the best meal you have ever eaten? When? Where?
- With whom?
- What is the best/worst thing that happened last week?
- What do you do when you are depressed?
- Describe your dream job.
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- If you had all the money you wanted, what kind of house would you live in?
- If you could be any age besides the age you are now, how old would you be? Why?
- If you were rich and could buy any gift you wanted, what gift would you buy and who would you give it to?
- If you could visit another era, what one would you visit and why?
- Tell three things you did on your last trip to Tokyo.
- Describe a perfect day.
- What is the biggest transportation problem you've ever had?
- (This can be with anything—bicycle, car, train, airplane...)

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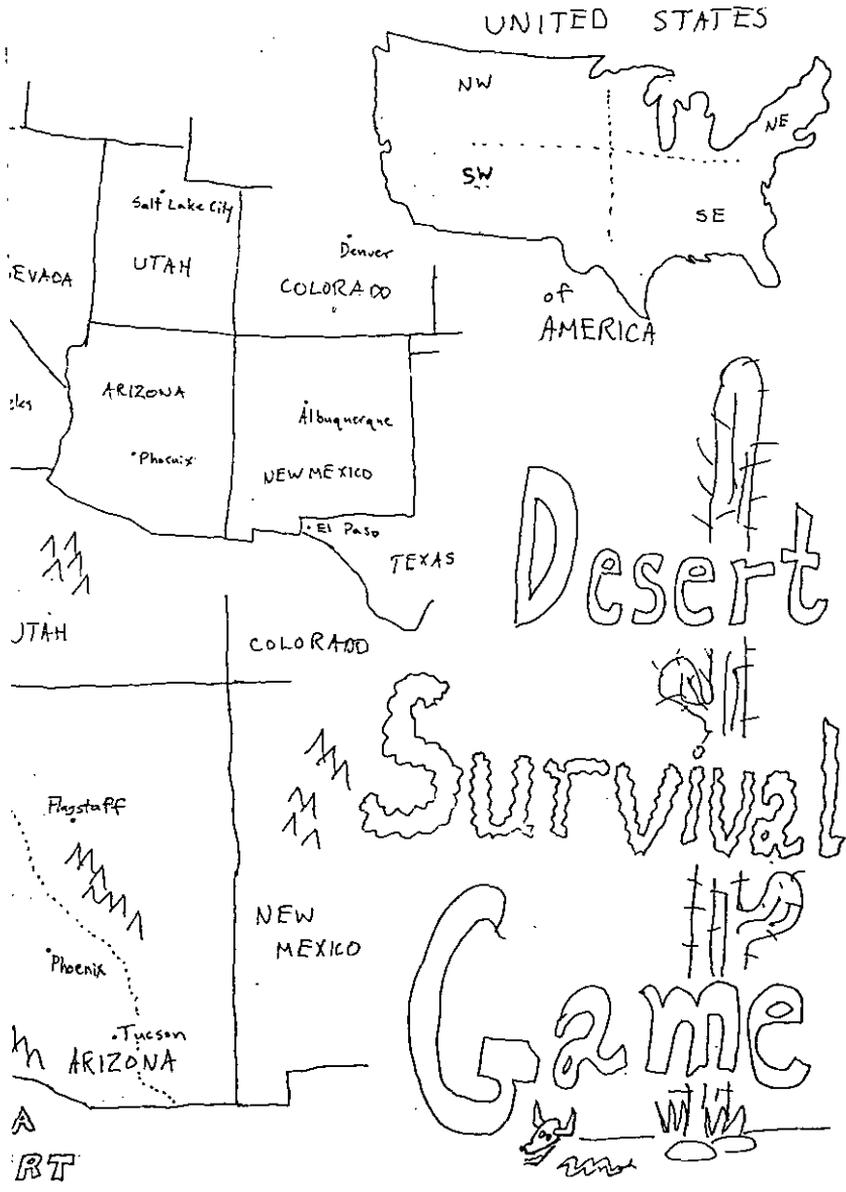
What would you like to have happen on your birthday?

Describe the perfect family.

Where was your favorite place to go as a child?

the Late Great...





SURVIVAL EXPERT'S RANKING AND REASONS

- 1—cosmetic mirror. The mirror can be used to reflect sunlight and signal search planes.
- 2—top coats. Even though the desert is very hot during the day, it can be very cold at night (10 degrees Celcius). The coats will be necessary to keep warm—also, they can be used to make a tent to keep off the heat during the day.
- 3—2 liters of water per person. The bare minimum for surviving one day in the desert.
- 4—sectional air map. Provides landmarks, distances and directions if you want to walk.
- 5—parachute. This can be used to make a tent and is also large enough to be seen by a plane flying overhead.
- 6—jack knife. Used for carving cacti so that you can suck on the juice and for cutting parachute and coats to make a tent over the frame of the plane.
- 7—plastic raincoat. Tent material and to construct a cistern to collect dew at night.
- 8—.45 caliber pistol. Good for signaling.
- 9—sunglasses. Useful for eyes—and to start a fire by reflection—also for signaling if mirror is lost.
- 10—first aid kit. For injuries and snake bites.
- 11—magnetic compass. Not terribly necessary because if is easy to tell directions from the sun.
- 12—flashlight. Might be used to signal a search party at night, or for walking at night.
- 13—“Edible Animals of the Desert”. Possibly useful to start a fire. Read if bored.
- 14—Vodka. Worse than useless in the desert, all alcoholic drinks actually make you more thirsty.
- 15—Salt Tablets. Only better if you want to die quicker.

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Points Survival Chance

1-10 = 90%

11-20 = 70%

21-35 = 50%

36-50 = 10%

THE SITUATION

It is approximately 10:00 A.M., August 15, 1991 and you have just crash landed in the Sonora Desert in the southwestern United States. The light twin engine plane, containing the bodies of the pilot and the co-pilot, has completely burned. Only the frame of the plane remains. None of the rest of you have been injured.

The pilot was unable to notify anyone of your position before the crash. However, he had indicated before impact that you were about 40 kilometers south-southwest from a mining camp which is the nearest place of habitation, and that you were approximately 26 kilometers off of the course you had filed in your flight plan.

The area where you are is flat and empty, except for a few cacti. The last weather report said the temperature would reach 45 degrees (Celcius) which means the temperature at ground level will be more than 50 degrees. You are dressed in light-weight clothing - short sleeved shirts, pants, socks and street shoes. Everyone has a handkerchief. Collectively, your pockets contain \$2.38 in coins, \$85.00 in bills, a pack of cigarettes, a pack of chewing gum and a ballpoint pen.

YOUR TASK

Before the plane caught fire your group was able to salvage the 15 items listed on the next page. Your task is to rank these items according to their importance to your survival, starting with "1" the most important, to "15" the least important.

You may assume—

1. the number of survivors is the number of people in your group;
2. you are the actual people in the situation;
3. the team has agreed to stick together (that is, you must all walk or all stay) ;
4. all items are in good condition.

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STEP 1: Each member of the team is to individually rank each item. DO NOT DISCUSS the situation or problem until each member has finished the individual ranking.

STEP 2: After everyone has finished the individual ranking, rank order the 15 items as a team. Your goal is to agree, as a group, on what you should do—A) will you try to walk out or will you stay by the plane wreck and therefore. B) how important are the items? Once discussion begins do not change your individual ranking.

ジュリアン・ウィリアムス

ITEMS	1 Your Individual Ranking	2 The Team Ranking	3 Survival Expert's Ranking	4 Subtract Step 1 from Step 3	5 Subtract Step 2 from Step 3
flashlight (4 battery size)					
jack knife					
sectional air map of the area					
plastic raincoat (large size)					
magnetic compass					
first aid kit					
.45 caliber pistol (loaded)					
parachute (red and white)					
bottle of salt tablets (1000 salt tablets)					
2 liters of water per person					
a book titled, Edible Animals of the Desert					
a pair of sunglasses per person					
2 liters of 180 proof Vodka					
1 top coat per person					
a cosmetic mirror					
			TOTALS ↳		