

Teaching Methods and Skills in English Education in Japan

Mitsuaki HAYASE* & Mingyuan FANG**

This is a discussion of three popular teaching methods by describing, analyzing, and commenting on three classes which both or one of the authors observed. By reviewing those three classes, the authors hope to understand one aspect of English Education in Japan.

Keywords: teaching methods, English Education, Japan

0. Introduction

English teachers may differ in their choices of teaching methods, which may, in turn, have a great influence on their teaching effects. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) hold that there is not a single best method, so every teaching method has its own advantages and disadvantages. The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has long been used by many language teachers around the world. Is this method popular in Japan? Besides this method, are there any other methods and skills that are used in Japan? Do any problems exist in the practical use of different teaching methods in the classroom? With these questions in mind, we will sum up our observations of different English classes and activities in several schools and try to find something meaningful.

1. Communicative Language Teaching

1.1 Communicative Language Teaching in a junior high school

In November 2013, we had a chance to observe an English class in a junior high school. This English class was taught by a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. All the students were divided into groups and took turns in giving their presentations about houses in different countries. The students who were not giving their presentations had to listen carefully and ask questions after each presentation. The English teacher acted as a facilitator and students had more chances to interact with each other.

At the beginning of the class, the teacher briefly mentioned that in that class the students would give their presentations on different houses from different countries. It is important to let students know what they will do during the class, since “when students have an idea of what will happen in each activity, they feel more secure” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011: 91). Of course students had prepared their presentations well beforehand. After the teacher declared that the 35 students should be divided into the usual nine groups, with three or four students in one group, they began to move their desks and chairs quickly, which showed that in this class, students had been used to moving desks and chairs according to the teacher’s instructions; otherwise, they could not have done it so quickly. In fact, teachers should know how to let students rearrange desks and chairs efficiently so that “it is both easier and more natural for students to see and talk to each other” (Lewis & Hill, 2002: 40). Rearranging desks and chairs is especially important in CLT, for it may have a great influence on the effects of different activities.

Before the students in Group 1 started their presentation in the front of the classroom, the teacher had stressed that all the students in class should give their presentations loudly with smile and a lot of eye-contact

*三重大学教育学部英語教育講座

**中華人民共和國、安徽農業大学外国語学部

with the listeners. Then the students in Group 1 gave their presentation in about 3 minutes and the students in the other groups were required to listen to them carefully and try to figure out questions about the content of the presentation. Then the students in the other groups took turns to give their presentations. Some groups performed better since they were able to present loudly in English without resorting too much to the scripts they had prepared beforehand. At the same time, they had more natural eye-contact with other students with smile on their faces, which showed that they were not nervous when speaking in English in front of many people. On the contrary, some groups could not perform so well since the students in those groups had to read their scripts in a low voice and they could not raise their heads and have enough eye-contact with listeners; the absence of smile on their faces showed that they were a little nervous or lacked confidence in using English. After the end of each presentation, the teacher reminded the other students of giving big hands to the presenters and encouraged them to ask questions positively. Students were required to raise their hands first if they had questions, but they could not talk until the teacher called their names. Most of the students asked their questions in English, while there were students who asked theirs in Japanese. Most of the questions were answered by the presenters in English, while there were also cases in which Japanese was used. During the presentations, most students listened carefully; however, there were a few students who looked absent-minded or murmured with their teammates. The teacher did not talk much during the class. In CLT, students are encouraged to speak more, while the teacher does not talk too much. But it is necessary for the teacher to be able to control the class well; otherwise, class activities cannot go smoothly.

It is of our opinion that in a communicative English class, a good topic has a great influence on the activities and even the learning effects. In this class, the students were required to talk about different houses in different countries. This was an interesting topic which generated students' interest and motivated them to study English by using it. However, inevitably, students would meet many new words that were connected with the description of different kinds of houses. For example, it seemed difficult for some students to pronounce and spell the names of their chosen houses, which might have had a negative effect on students' learning enthusiasm and motivation. It is essential for the teacher to be able to choose an interesting topic which can be easily expressed by the students by using their knowledge available.

Teachers should just act as advisors in CLT, "answering students' questions and monitoring their performance" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011: 122), but more interaction with students will be better. For example, in the class we observed, more teaching skills could also have been used. In one situation, a student asked how to spell a house's name in English and received the answer, but they might have been still confused about its pronunciation and spelling. In this case, the teacher could have written the word and its pronunciation on the blackboard and read the word together with the students several times. "The technique of choral pronunciation, in which all the students of the class repeat simultaneously, is much under-used," say Lewis & Hill (2002: 67). This technique is also effective in reducing students' anxiety, since students worry less about their pronunciation, stress and intonation when reading together.

The English teacher told us that in this junior high school, English class was taught through presentation once or twice every semester. However, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) claim that some other skills such as language games, picture strip stories and role-playing can also be used in a CLT English class. Using different techniques together in one English class can make the class more interesting and attractive. In the following communicative English event, a more colorful CLT model was observed.

1.2 Communicative Language Teaching activities in an elementary school

On Feb. 1, 2014, Fang joined a big English event, which was named the School English World in an elementary school. It was a big event because many students' parents and many foreigners who spoke English were invited to join this event. At 9:30 in the morning, the opening ceremony of the School English World was held in the gymnasium. One thing that was effective for creating an English learning atmosphere was flags of different countries on the walls. Visitors later found that not only in the gymnasium, but also

in the corridors and in the classrooms, flags were seen here and there. Those flags implied that the school is very international and the guests from all over the world and students were expected to communicate with one another in English. There were eight students who introduced the guests in turn in both English and Japanese. After that they sang an English song together and taught the guests a dance. The students were divided into different groups and danced together with the guests who joined them. After the headmaster of the school finished his opening address, the opening ceremony of the School English World came to an end.

After the lively opening ceremony, students from Grade 1 to Grade 6 performed in various classrooms what they had prepared in advance. Every guest had a time schedule and as long as they followed this schedule, they enjoyed six wonderful performances one after another. In fact, the students did a very good job in using English to tell stories, to act out dramas, and to play games. Not only did Fang appreciate their performances in English, but he also interacted actively with them. What impressed him deeply was the games called “Soybeans Change into Many Things” and the “Chinese Zodiac”. The former was performed by four boys and two girls in Grade 3. In the front of the Grade 3 classroom there was a long desk, on which some basins, pots, a soybean milk machine were orderly placed. Then the students showed how soybeans changed into different things one step after another as in real life. For example, in the first step, students put some real soybeans into the soybean milk machine and pretended to turn it on. After that, they asked the audience to guess what the soybeans would change into. In this way, they demonstrated how soybeans changed into soy sauce, soybean milk and bean curd.

The Zodiac game was very useful for students to memorize the twelve animals that originally indicated the birth dates of Chinese people. It was a good idea to use it in English learning, for the twelve lovely animals could arouse students’ interest. There were two big circles on a carton board; on the left was a Chinese era diagram and on the right was a birthday diagram. A big finger that could be turned around was in the center of the birthday diagram. Then some volunteers were invited to the front and tested their fortunes. One of the students asked the volunteers what their zodiac signs were or on what day they were born. Based on their answers the finger’s pointing direction was adjusted by the student. After that volunteers turned around the finger and saw where it stopped. Usually their futures were “Wonderful!” or “Lucky!”. After having lunch together with students in Grade 1, several teacher guests were invited to play a card game based on the Chinese Zodiac together with all the students. The students were divided into four groups and there was one guest in each group. Everybody got twelve cards with twelve different animals on them. But three cards from each participant had to be put away. Then the homeroom teacher read the names of the six animals one after another. If the animal the teacher mentioned was one of the nine animals you had, you scored one point. Finally the teacher and students counted together how many points the students and guests received. The students were able to improve both listening and reading ability through playing this game.

The School English World was a big English event rather than an English class and its scope was impressive. From this event it can be inferred that a CLT method must have been used to teach English in this elementary school; otherwise it would be impossible for all students from Grade 1 to Grade 6 to give their presentations in a communicative way. In this event, students tried to use English to convey meaning although Japanese was used more. But at least, from Fang’s observation, most students were not afraid to speak English. This was a very successful event because the students were able to learn English by using it in different kinds of activities and at the same time, their motivation and interest were greatly enhanced in the English learning environment created by the school. The ALT of that school, a Japanese who had grown up in the US, made a great contribution to the cultivation of students’ speaking ability and the success of this event.

2. The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)

On November 19, 2013, Fang was able to observe a TOEIC class for non-English majors in one university. There were 24 first-year students in this class. After a brief introduction, the instructor first led the students

to do the exercises assigned in the previous period. The students were given several minutes to go over the five fill-in-the-blank questions again, for they must have done them beforehand as required by the instructor. In each question, students were required to fill in the blanks with several words based on the sentences that were written in Japanese or in English (four in Japanese, one in English). To some extent, it was equal to say that students were basically required to translate the Japanese sentences into English sentences, with most parts having already been translated. Take Question 1 for example, the Japanese sentence was “公園に木がありました (が、今はもうない。)”。Based on this sentence, students were expected to complete the following sentence: There () () () a tree in the park. One student was invited to tell what he had filled in. His answer was “used to be” and it was correct. Then the instructor went on to explain why they should choose “used to be” and explained in details about the difference between “used to be” and “be used to doing something”. He also analyzed the important grammar items in the other four sentences in similar ways. His explanations were thorough and very helpful for students. After finishing those exercises, the students were required to exchange their answers with their neighbors for grading them.

Then it was time to study the new words of Lesson 15. Some students were asked to read them. If the instructor found that some words were not pronounced correctly, he corrected them immediately. For example, when a student could not pronounce the word “fee” correctly, he demonstrated how to pronounce it and explained the key points of pronouncing this word. He then went on analyzing the differences between fee, money and tax by mainly using Japanese and a little English. Some English teachers speak more Japanese than English, which is not good for developing students’ integrated ability. “The comprehensible input hypothesis is that acquisition occurs when one is exposed to language that is comprehensible and contains $i+1$ ” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013: 106). Teachers’ less use of English cannot give students enough input, let alone comprehensible input. The instructor also taught some other key words or phrases in the way mentioned above. The next part of this class was listening. The students were required to listen to the tape carefully and choose the best answer first. Before listening, the instructor also carefully reminded the students of some listening skills such as grasping the key words. After answering the questions about the listening passage, the students listened to the same passage again with its script and then read the script together for once. Then some students were invited to repeat sentences with the tape. He also picked out some sentences and told students how to read them. One of the sentences was “Is this the invoice that you were looking for?”. He explained in detail how to pronounce “that you were” as a whole.

Basically, the instructor still used GTM in his class. But he also paid much attention to listening and pronunciation, so it was not a typical GTM. In fact, if GTM can be used together with some other methods, the teaching effects will be better. For example, when teaching new words, the teacher can become “the Human Computer”, and students may use the teacher to “practice the pronunciation of any English word or phrase”. (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011: 89). In this way, the class atmosphere will be greatly improved. Similarly, some part of other teaching methods can also be borrowed and used together with GTM.

3. An interactive teaching method

In the first semester, 2013, Fang attended “English Teaching Methodology I”, a content course taught in English by Hayase, who started each class by asking the students a question “Are you waiting for my present?” Here the present referred to a true or false quiz. It was a humorous expression since those students who hadn’t read the textbook carefully would not have waited surely for the present. In fact this was just one example to show that he was good at using humor to activate the class atmosphere. Then the instructor read ten important statements selected from the textbook one after another. The students had to make their judgment and mark True or False as quickly as possible. In order to get good marks, the students had to read the textbook carefully at home. However, those students whose listening was not good might have obtained lower scores even if they had read the textbook meticulously. When the test was over, each student was asked to exchange their quiz paper with one of their neighbors and correct the paper when the instructor

read the correct answers. Then some students were invited to read the statements one by one loudly and tell the class why they marked True or False. The instructor made comments on each statement and students wrote them down. It was a good way to conduct a class because on the one hand, in this way all of the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing were practiced, and on the other hand, students were able to know the key points of the chapter they were going to learn. Then, the instructor usually asked if students had any questions. If students had no questions, he asked questions and invited students to answer them or asked students to discuss them with their neighbors first and then shared their discussion in class. “The language teacher must develop strategies for maximizing the amount of student talking time. Well-organized pair work is one of the most important ways of achieving this,” say Lewis and Hill (2002: 46).

The instructor used different ways to invite students to speak. Sometimes he called some student’s name directly and such invitation was more like an order. Sometimes he asked for volunteers, and in this way those students who were positive in participating in class activities would get more chances to speak in class. And sometimes he asked those who hadn’t read or spoken. So all of the students in his class could get relatively even chances to speak in class and those active students could get more chances. In order to make sure that students were able to understand the difficult parts, the instructor would usually write key points and examples on the whiteboard or handed out to students relevant materials he had prepared carefully beforehand. After his detailed analysis, the students were usually invited to read words or sentences on the whiteboard clearly, loudly and chorally. In this class, the instructor led the class, but students had many chances to participate in class activities. In fact, students had to be ready for answering questions or expressing themselves at any time because so many class activities were used and most of these class activities needed students’ positive participation.

Fang also learned a few techniques from his class. Firstly, he can motivate students to learn English by making his own class varied and enjoyable. “So, whose responsibility is it to motivate learners? My guess is that it is every teacher’s who thinks of the long-term development of his/her students” (Dornyei, 2001:27). A teacher should bear the responsibility to motivate students. Secondly, in his class, the instructor handled the relationship with the students rather well. On the one hand, he used humorous jokes and stories to make the class atmosphere relaxing; on the other hand, he was strict with students so that they had to concentrate on the class activities. Thirdly, he taught more than what the textbook offered. He usually prepared extra materials and handed them out to students. Last but not least, the reasonable use of pair work made students have more chances to speak in his class.

On the whole, the instructor did a rather good job in organizing and controlling the class, although there were some points that are worth reconsidering. Firstly, starting a class by a true or false quiz is effective in examining how well the students have prepared for the class. However, this constant routine may make students feel dull sometimes. After all, “if the teacher always does the same things in the same way, the students will be bored!” say Lewis and Hill (2002: 15). Therefore, an alternative use of other techniques to start some classes is expected to arouse students’ interest. Secondly, to increase students’ talking time, not only pair work but also some group work can be adopted. Instructors should “introduce alternative activities from time to time - games, pair work, group work, problem solving, project work, etc.” (Lewis and Hill, 2002: 15). The reason why he always required students to do pair work rather than group work might have been that moving desks and chairs, a necessary process for doing group work, was a waste of precious class time. But as long as students are used to moving desks and chairs efficiently based on the teacher’s instruction, it won’t waste too much time. Finally, since there are only sixteen students in this class and most of them will become English teachers after their graduation, it is desirable for the instructor to invite one student in each class to give a presentation on a certain topic, which will be an improvement of their confidence in using English and an accumulation of their teaching experience.

4. Conclusion

In Japan, it can be said that English education in elementary school is mainly taught with the use of a

CLT method. Usually English is taught from Grade 5 mostly by foreign teachers and Japanese homeroom teachers as activities rather than a subject. However, some elementary schools that pay special attention to English education start teaching English from Grade 1; the school Fang visited is an example. Teachers' good pronunciation will have a positive influence on students' pronunciation and confidence in speaking English from the very beginning.

CLT is popular in junior high schools too in Japan. Compared with GTM, CLT is more effective in improving students' speaking and listening ability. In the English class we observed in the junior high school, the teacher used presentation to teach English, as a good CLT technique.

In university, GTM is still popular, but the room for pure GTM is becoming less and less, so it is better to make full use of the advantages of different teaching methods. An interactive teaching method is a good model that can be learned and spread in the future.

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