

## A Student's Complaint about English Teaching at Hirosaki University—How Shall We Answer?

### 弘前大学における英語教育に対する、ある学生からの 苦情—私たちはどう答えるか

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#### Abstract

In a survey conducted by Hirosaki University, a student complained about an English course s/he<sup>1</sup> attended. He claims that, although he attended a speaking class, there was hardly any speaking practice. His complaint suggests the contradiction between the given course syllabus and the actual lessons themselves. It also points at the possible self-delusion on the part of those who wrote the syllabus. Thus his complaint suggests some important issues we need to address. Most significantly, it involves the differences between the Grammar Translation Method and communicative language teaching, and the necessity of genuine interaction in speaking practice. By implementing interaction, we can even teach speaking to the beginners. However, speaking is, in fact, a very complex engagement, and in order to teach it, we first have to improve our own communicative and interactive skills.

**Keywords:** complaint; Grammar Translation Method; communicative language teaching; interaction; speaking for beginners; self-delusion

#### A student's complaint

Every four years our university conducts a survey of students' opinions about university life. As I was browsing through the student responses to the latest questionnaire, conducted in October 2006<sup>2</sup>, I happened to notice the following response from a student. In it, he complains about one first-year introductory English course he attended.

#### 学部学生の自由記載欄のまとめ

##### (1) 大学の組織や教員・職員に関するもの

• 英語のAってスピーキングじゃなかった？ 確かそうだよな？ 何？ あの先公、コッチは英語を話した記憶が1つもないんだけど？ 何？ あの授業？ 高校英語の延長みたいな？ つか授業内容モロBっぽいじゃん。あの先公は英語の教師だよな？ 何？ speak と write の

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区別もできないワケ？ もっかい勉強しなおしたら？ ちなみにその先公の名は、〇〇って名字の人だったと思います。マジアレ何とかして下さい。(2)

[Translated by the author]

## Candid Opinions from Undergraduate Students

### (1) About the University Organization and its Staff

- Isn't *English A* a speaking course? I'm sure it is. What's going on? I have no memory whatsoever of having spoken any English [in this class]! What was taught? His<sup>3</sup> lessons were just like those in my senior high school! Or they were exactly like *English B* [i.e., the Reading and/or Writing Course]. The teacher is an English teacher, isn't he? Then, why? Doesn't he know the difference between speaking and writing? I think he should study again! By the way, the teacher's surname is . . . Please do something about him. (2)

#### Problems pointed out by the respondent

The respondent's opinion about the course he attended was expressed in a rather coarse, childish language, but behind that coarseness and childishness, he points out some serious problems of the curriculum. He attended an *English A* course, which is a speaking course, or at least it is, according to the syllabus<sup>4</sup>. However, he felt that it was not like that at all. It was very much like one of the *English B* courses, which are reading and/or writing courses.

Some of the main problems pointed out by the respondent are:

1. The English course he attended was a speaking, or oral-interaction-oriented class, but there was hardly any speaking practice or interactive activity.
2. The respondent complained that there was no significant difference between the university English lessons he had taken and the ones he had at his senior high school. It is well known that most of the teaching of English in senior high schools in Japan is still done in the Grammar Translation Method. Therefore, we can fairly safely assume that the respondent's *English A* course was also taught using that method. *English A* is officially a speaking class, so he and other students in the same class may naturally have expected to have lots of speaking practice, interaction with the teacher in English, and also interaction in English with other students. Without such interaction, students lose their motivation to learn speaking. Demotivating students can very often be 'the teachers' responsibility' and 'negative teacher behaviours were perceived as central to students' demotivation' (Dörnyei 2001: 145).
3. Writing seemed to be the main focus of the respondent's class. In his case, the teacher completely ignored, intentionally or unintentionally, the purpose of the class. As the respondent wrote, speaking and writing are quite different. Hughes (2002) points out that 'language which is spoken to be heard is (or should be) quite different from texts created to be read' (12), and that 'speakers "package" their information differently from writers whether at the level of the clause or through vocabulary choices' (13). One cannot really learn speaking by learning writing, partly because of these linguistic differences. Furthermore, in writing, taught in the Grammar Translation Method, the focus is usually on language itself, whereas 'speaking is not naturally language focused, rather

it is people focused'; unlike writing, 'interlocutor (sic) do not focus on the mechanics of their interaction but on the ideas/emotions/information being conveyed' (77).

4. As the respondent touches upon rather sarcastically towards the end of his comment, the teacher might need to improve his own communicative and interactive skills if the syllabus can continue to stand as it does now.

### **The Grammar Translation Method and communicative language teaching**

There are three levels of *English A* in our university curriculum. We do not really know which level the respondent was taking. However, whatever the level was, all *English A* courses aim at making students capable of 'expressing themselves orally' in English, or 'expressing their opinions, etc. orally' in English (英語の「音声で自己表現」、「自分の意見などを[英語の]音声で表現」) (「平成18年度(2006)21世紀教育科目 授業計画解説(シラバス)」[2006 21c. *Education Syllabus*] 9). In other words, we aim at equipping our students with the ability to interact orally with others in English. But the respondent's complaint expresses in a very striking way that we have disappointed him. We may still be disappointing many other students. Brown (2001) says that 'the best way to learn interaction is through interaction itself' (165). Language learning is, in fact, as simple as that! Speaking is best learned through speaking itself, and if the teacher does not speak English nor does he offer any speaking opportunities to his students, how can we expect them to learn speaking?

The Grammar Translation Method does little to help students become capable of speaking the language they are learning. Being taught with that method, they may be able to know, i.e., understand, the language, but 'knowing a language and being able to speak it are not synonymous' (Thornbury 2005: iv). Very often, however, 'the teaching of second or other languages has [been] carried on as if knowing and speaking were the same thing' (iv). English teachers used to assume that 'the ability to speak fluently followed naturally from the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, with a bit of pronunciation thrown in' (1). I fear that this kind of assumption may still exist among many English teachers in Japan.

As we know well enough from experience, we cannot learn to interact orally through the learning of a language with the Grammar Translation Method. This is partly because there is 'little if any consideration of the spoken language' (Harmer 2007: 63) in that method. Focusing on the general characteristics of both speaking and writing, McCarthy (2001) notes an important difference between the two by saying that

speech is most typically created 'on the hoof' and received in real time. Writing is most typically created at one time and place and read at another time and place, and there is usually time for reflection and revision [. . .]. (93)

As a result, McCarthy continues, 'written discourses tend to display greater tightness and organization or integration; talk can appear rather fragmented and disorganized' (93).

Brown describes an English class in a Bangkok high school, which can easily be applied to many English classes here in Japan:

The quiet buzz of voices from the classroom echoes down the hallway. The thirty-some-odd students in an intermediate English class in a Bangkok high school are telling stories,

joking, gossiping, and talking about the latest popular songs. As the teacher walks in, the students fall silent, face forward, and open their textbooks in anticipation of another English lesson, another day of reciting, repeating, copying, reading aloud, translating sentences, and answering multiple-choice questions. (164)

This is a typical English class of ‘recitation and mechanical output’ (Brown 165). Such dry, mechanical kind of teaching is not what we should do in a speaking class because there is hardly any noticeable interaction between students and teacher, nor among students. Asking students to repeat the sentences spoken first by the teacher, for example, is hardly a speaking practice. It is just parroting, but by no means interactive.

By contrast, there developed what we now call a communicative approach to language teaching, or more specifically, communicative language teaching, in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Brown 42). McCarthy (1998) called this ‘the communicative revolution that overtook’ the teaching of English as a foreign language (18). This new approach ‘characterized by authenticity, real-world simulation, and meaningful tasks’ (Brown 42), developed further in the late 1980s and 1990s. The main aims of this approach are: to bring in “real-life” communication in the classroom’, to give students ‘tools for generating unrehearsed language performance “out there” when they leave the womb of our classrooms’, and ‘to facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task’ (Brown 42). Brown goes on to say that ‘In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about’ (165). Basing his argument on the nature of spoken language, Shumin (2002) considers ‘learner-learner interaction as the key’ to language teaching:

The functions of spoken language are interactional and transactional. [. . .] In fact, much of our daily communication remains interactional. Being able to interact in a language is essential. Therefore, language instructors should provide learners with opportunities for meaningful communicative behavior about relevant topics by using learner-learner interaction as the key to teaching language for communication. (208)

### **The importance of interaction in language teaching and learning**

In a properly organized speaking class, there should naturally be ample opportunity of interaction. Burton and Clennell (2003) say that ‘Interaction is the pivot on which language learning turns’ (1). Paraphrasing what Mercer says about Vygotsky’s concept of *zone of proximal development*, Sun (2003) reiterates the importance of ‘language development through learners’ interaction with more competent interlocutors in meaningful activities’ (35). In interactive speaking lessons, students may find more competent classmates than themselves from whom they can learn English. Indeed, the teacher himself can, and should, be more competent than students, and his ‘support and intervention in learning’ is vital (35). Interaction is not just for improving students’ communication skills. It goes far beyond that. Brown says, ‘Interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other’ (165). The true value of interaction as seen here is that it creates a human dynamism in the classroom, which is truly educational. Furthermore, interaction is not simply ‘a language teaching tool’ (Burton and Clennell 3), but it is, in fact, the *purpose* of language teaching and learning.

Brown compares the role played by teachers in traditional educational institutions with the one assumed by teachers who try to bring interaction into the classroom. The role of the former is

that of “master” controller, always in charge of every moment in the classroom. Master controllers determine what the students do, when they should speak, and what language forms they should use. They can often predict many student responses because everything is mapped out ahead of time, with no leeway for divergent paths. (Brown 167)

This depicts a very familiar type of teacher who assumes a so-called ‘jug and mug’ teaching style<sup>5</sup>, a very authoritarian teaching. By contrast, teachers who think that interaction is vital in language learning assume a quite different role:

[They] create a climate in which spontaneity can thrive, in which unrehearsed language can be performed, and in which the freedom of expression given over to students makes it impossible to predict everything that they will say and do. (Brown 167)

We should pay special attention to a string of expressions in this quotation such as ‘spontaneity’, ‘unrehearsed language’, ‘freedom of expression’, and ‘impossible to predict’. All these, very dynamic and exciting, go against the traditional ‘jug and mug’ teaching, often mundane and unimaginative. In the interactive speaking class, the teacher’s role should be as ‘non-directive’ as possible (Brown 168), or that of a ‘facilitator’ (e.g., Brown 167; Scharle and Szabó 5; Benson 171). Indeed, the teacher should maintain ‘some control’ as ‘an important element of successfully carrying out interactive techniques’, but his control should be used sparingly ‘simply to organize the class hour’ (Brown 167) so that he can capitalize ‘on the principle of intrinsic motivation by allowing students to discover language through using it pragmatically, rather than by telling them about language’ (168). Such approach to language teaching will ‘enable students eventually to engage in the real-life drama of improvisation as each communicative event brings its own uniqueness’ (167). In other words, trained in such a way, students will become more autonomous in their learning and start to ‘take charge of their learning’ (Scharle and Szabó 5).

### **What speaking really involves**

I wrote above that speaking is best learned through speaking itself, and that is indeed true. However, learning to speak a second or foreign language is not quite that simple: ‘The ability to speak a second or foreign language well is a very complex task’ (Richards and Renandya 2002: 201). Shumin says, ‘Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammar and semantic rules’ (204). Harmer describes what speaking really involves:

If students want to be able to speak fluently in English, they need to be able [to] pronounce phonemes correctly, use appropriate stress and intonation patterns and speak in connected speech [. . .]. But there is more to it than that. Speakers of English—especially where it is a second language<sup>6</sup>—will have to be able to speak in a range of different genres and situations, and they will have to be able to use a range of conversational and conversational repair strategies. They will need to be able to survive in typical functional exchanges, too.

(343)

Hadfield and Hadfield (2008) also comment on the complexity of interaction that ‘involves a wide range of skills’:

Interaction involves more than just putting a message together; it involves responding to other people. This means choosing language that is appropriate for the person you are talking to. It means responding to what they say, taking turns in a conversation, encouraging them to speak, expressing interest, changing the topic, asking them to repeat or explain what they are saying, and so on. (105)

Thornbury is another who notes the complexity of speaking, and claims that there are two categories of knowledge that are necessary for someone to speak: one is ‘knowledge of features of language’ or ‘linguistic knowledge’; the other is ‘knowledge that is independent of language’ or ‘extralinguistic knowledge’ (11). In the former, he includes: genre knowledge, discourse knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, grammar, vocabulary, and phonology (13–25); in the latter, he includes ‘topic and cultural knowledge, knowledge of the context, and familiarity with the other speakers’ (11). Thus speaking is a very complex engagement and involves many different kinds of knowledge and abilities, and ‘as such needs to be developed and practiced independently of the grammar curriculum’ (iv).

#### **Teaching speaking to beginners and the teacher’s communicative/interactive competence**

I am aware of the fairly strong reluctance on the part of many Japanese teachers of English to teach speaking to lower levels of students. They often say that it is too difficult for such students to learn speaking. Although they express their concern by questioning the students’ abilities, one can sometimes smell in it an excuse for their own communicative shortcomings. Whatever the case may be, Brown categorically denies such a negative attitude towards teaching speaking to lower levels of students. He says, ‘From the very beginning of language study, classrooms should be interactive’ (165). To teachers, he says that ‘even at the lowest levels, some genuine interaction can take place, and your role must be one that releases your students to try things for themselves’ (168). Brown quotes Wilga Rivers, who says:

Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language—all they have learned or casually absorbed—in real-life exchanges. ...Even at an elementary stage, they learn in this way to exploit the elasticity of language. (qtd. in Brown: 165)

I do hope that the kind of reluctance I am talking about here on the part of teachers does not come from their desire to camouflage their own incompetence. If they indeed have such negative desire, they should change their mind and endeavour to improve their interactive skills if they were to teach speaking.



**Conclusion: no self-delusion?**

We English teachers here at Hirosaki University all mean to provide good English teaching to our students. We mean to give them real command of English, spoken as well as written, so that some of them, or even many of them, will be able to use English in their futures. That is very clear from the content of our syllabus, which is as good as that of any other university in Japan. The pitfall, however, is that while we mean well, there is some danger of self-delusion sneaking in unawares. What the respondent to the 2006 questionnaire really points out to us is this danger of self-delusion. Are we not deceiving ourselves? Are we not claiming to offer officially on paper what we are not really ready to provide? If that is the case, we first have to take a hard look at our syllabus, to see whether what is stated in it is really being implemented, and whether we are really capable of doing what we claim we can do. If we find that we are doing what the syllabus states, fine! We can continue what we are doing, maintaining our current syllabus. But if not, we must revise the syllabus immediately, and write up a new honest one that leaves no room for self-delusion.

**Notes**

1. The language and its tone of the complaint by the student seems to suggest that the respondent is a male student, so we shall address the person as 'he' and 'him' in this paper.
2. The survey results were published in March 2007 as 'Opinions from Hirosaki-University Students' (「弘大生の声」), and you can read them on the university website:  
<http://www.hirosaki-u.ac.jp/jimu/gakumu/gakunai/voice06.pdf>
3. Again, we do not know whether the student's teacher was a man or woman. Just for convenience sake, we shall consider the teacher to be a man in this paper.
4. The following is the Syllabus of *English A* courses. There are three levels, Elementary Level (Level I), Intermediate Level (Level II), Advanced Level (Level III). Whatever the level may be, the aim of all these courses is to make students capable of 'expressing themselves in English'. The Syllabus has not been revised since 2006, and we still have the same Syllabus for the 2009 academic year.

**【各授業ごとの達成目標】**

英語 I A : 英語発音の基礎を学び、基本的な会話などを聴き取り[、]音声で自己表現できることを目指します。

英語 II A : 英語らしい発音を学び、多様な会話などを聴き取り[、]音声で自己表現できることを目指します。

英語 III A : 適切な英語を用いて[、]自分の意見などを音声で表現できることを目指します。

[Translated by the author]

**[Course Goals]**

English I A: Students will learn the basics of English pronunciation, and become capable of understanding simple conversations, etc., and expressing themselves orally in English.

English II A: Students will learn proper English pronunciation, and become capable of understanding various kinds of conversations, etc., and expressing themselves

orally in English.

English III A: Using appropriate English expressions, students will learn to be capable of expressing their opinions, etc. orally in English.

5. In the 'jug and mug' teaching, the teacher is a jug which holds lots of water (i.e., knowledge) and students are *empty* mugs which should be filled with the water from the teacher's jug. In this kind of teaching, the teacher is regarded as the authority, whereas students are often passive in their learning and wait for their brains to be filled with the teacher's knowledge.
6. Some teachers, indeed some of our colleagues, may raise objections and say that we are not teaching English as a second language as such. But the goals as written in the syllabus, making students capable of 'expressing themselves orally in English', and 'expressing their opinions, etc. orally in English', are very similar to those of second language teaching. A second language is often defined as 'a language that plays a major role in a particular country or region though it may not be the first language of many people who use it', and nowadays it is a language 'necessary for survival' in an international context ('Second language.' *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*).

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「平成 18 年度 (2006) 21 世紀教育科目 授業計画解説 (シラバス) = 21 世紀を生きるうえで必要となる基本的な力を養う =」弘前大学 21 世紀教育センター, 2006.