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A publication of ETJ • English Teachers in Japan

Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2002

classroom management

A Technique for Keeping the Teacher and Students Organized and Empowered in Communication Classrooms

by *Kim Bradford-Watts*
*Osaka Gakuin University and
Osaka International Women's University.*

Classroom management in Japanese university speaking classes can be challenging due to factors including: student motivation, attendance patterns, and expectations and prioritization of conversation classes; class sizes; number of contact hours; materials used; and the number of classes taught by any one teacher (especially part-time staff working at several institutions).

In this article I will outline the issues I have encountered in managing university and college conversation classes over a number of years, and describe in detail the system for organizing student work, encouraging student responsibility and self-reflection, collecting feedback, and enabling cross-checking of attendance records. Many thanks go to Mark Hovane, with whom this system has been jointly developed, and also to our colleagues who have assisted us in testing various elements in their classrooms over the last few years and whose feedback continues to inspire us. However, I alone am completely responsible for any errors or inaccuracies in this paper.

Classroom Management Problems

1. Costs to the student—textbooks are expensive and our students are often very busy studying other subjects and working part-time. One of the many reasons why I prefer to use materials I have developed is that students do not need to spend a lot of money on a book they will use for such a short period of time. I also wish to avoid any undue burden on their time. Any alternative system needs to be cheap to set up and very easy to maintain.

2. Teacher-produced materials—Many communication teachers have opted to use materials they themselves have developed. Sometimes the students keep the prints or materials, but at other times the materials are collected for use with other classes. Students in speaking classes may well walk out of the room with no tangible evidence of what they have done during class time, or they may have a piece of paper, poster, tape, or picture which is quickly consigned to a larger pile of papers and other miscellaneous junk in a locker or at home, or, more realistically, to the garbage can. Even if the materials are filed, they are simply lumped into a folder and lack any context of the learning situation experienced by the students. Through class and self-evaluations administered at the end of each semester, it was clear that, although few and relatively unimportant to final grades, students tended to recall and evaluate themselves and the class on presentations or projects—not all the other work done during class time. They simply forgot all the activities! We realized that students need an efficient system for organizing class materials they have received or created, and for recording the theme, content, vocabulary, and activities encountered in preparation for or during class time, as well as a way to express their feelings or impressions of the lesson.

3. Student responsibility—Teachers are assumed to be the ones responsible for student learning in Japan. However, university and college students need to be trained to be responsi-

ble for: collecting and caring for their materials; negotiating with learning partners about what questions or topics to discuss or how to present topics to peers; recording decisions made and actions taken in class; noting new vocabulary encountered or perceived to be necessary in that learning context; and reflecting on their learning. This needed to be an easy, formatted system that could accommodate any number of levels and activity types.

4. Student empowerment—One of the advantages of using teacher-produced materials is that they can be very flexible, giving students options about what specific topics of interest to pursue under an umbrella theme selected by the teacher. The topics selected by students can be used in various ways, and each student will develop their own “textbook” differing from that of any other member of the class. This textbook format needs to be flexible enough to hold papers, posters, pictures and photographs, as well as cassette tapes, floppy disks and, occasionally, videos. This collection of materials is empowering to the student reviewing their learning as they acknowledge the range of activities they have been involved in. Since some students are also studying for a teaching qualification, a format providing them with ideas for their own teaching is also empowering.

5. Student attendance records—I admit it. I call the role in the last 10 minutes of every class (while the students are working on their “Reflections” sheet or I am checking their clear files). There are numerous ways to keep track of attendance, but, after much trial and error, I have found that it is the best way for me. However, the occasional mistake is made. Additionally, many students do not keep a record of their absences and often need to ask about their attendance record. This, of course, always seems to occur at the conclusion of the class as I am hurrying to the next room, or worse still, the next school or job. I realized that students need to have a reliable record of their own attendance. This can be checked against teacher records to ensure that errors in teacher record-keeping can be found and corrected as quickly as possible. In this way the attendance requisite is transparent to both teacher and student.

6. Feedback—I always ask students to write a class evaluation at the conclusion of each semester. Although written anonymously, these have always been very positive. Imagine my shock and distress a couple of years ago when I was called to my supervisor’s room to be told that there had been a complaint registered about my teaching! At that time (it was the end of semester), I was able to produce the evaluations from the class in question and the

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supervisor acknowledged that there was no hint of trouble registered directly with me. I realized at that time that I needed a means of soliciting feedback after each and every class.

The System

In the first class, I tell the students briefly what to expect of the course, the class rules, and the system of evaluation that I will employ in assigning grades. The last thing on the assessment list is “Clear File”. I tell the students that they will need to buy a Clear File to store their work for this class. Clear Files can be obtained from any 100-yen shop. They should have at least two pockets available for each class, although more is better (i.e., 30 pockets for a one semester course). I show the students an example so that everybody understands exactly what I mean by the terms Clear File and “pocket”. I then explain that everything produced in class or as preparation for class should be placed in the file. I stress that the Clear File is for this subject only. Nothing else should be stored in it. I explain that I will be checking the Clear Files a couple of times during the semester (the first check is at the end of the following lesson), and will do a final check in the last class of the semester. I will

decide on the Clear File grade at that time, based on completeness and presentation.

After the students do a “getting to know you” treasure hunt, I introduce the “Reflections” sheet (explained below). I tell the students that they will be completing one of these each class and that these must also be kept in their clear files. I then explain the various sections and allow students time to complete their sheets, which are shown to me. I point out any blanks or challenge any reflections that are either off-topic or too short. I remind the students to put their Reflections sheets and other notes from the first class into the clear file in preparation for the following class.

As the students finish their Reflections sheet at the conclusion of the second lesson, they bring their clear files to the front of the room while I read and initial their reflections and, using a highlighter pen, make a mark next to their name in my role book to indicate that they have, in fact, bought and are using their Clear File. I use a different highlighter each time I check their files so I can easily identify anyone who has not shown me their clear file.

In the following classes, I quickly look at the Reflections sheets and initial them as

An example of a “Reflections” sheet used by the author.

students finish writing. I can see how the students responded to each activity through the feedback section of the sheet, and this allows me to revamp my lessons very quickly if the feedback is not positive. It also allows me to encourage the students to use the “New Vocabulary” section.

Each time I check the clear files during the semester, I can double-check any absences I have recorded against a name. Since the Reflections sheet records the date of the class, it is a very efficient method of checking.

For these reasons, I have found that the clear files kept by students also assist me in my classroom management.

Explaining the Reflections sheet

At the top of the Reflections sheet is a space for the date. I encourage the students to write the date in full (e.g., *November 20th, 2001*).

To the right of that is the feedback box. The contents of the feedback box vary from week to week and from class to class. Sometimes the students just write an adjective (*Today’s class was _____*). At other times they give the lesson a score out of 10, and a reason for the score. They may be asked to complete a face and comment about their feelings about the lesson, or they might have to write a sentence about what they thought about the lesson and why.

Students note any new vocabulary and a brief English definition in the New Vocabulary box below the date and feedback sections, and also note in Japanese any words that they would have found helpful to know during the class. They then look these words up in a dictionary after class and write a sentence using that word. They have access to these words during the following lessons, and often refer to their clear files during activities. I don’t allow the use of a dictionary during speaking activities since part of developing fluency in a language is being able to explain what you mean in simple terms. Dictionary use tends to disrupt speaking activities and inhibit the development of communication strategies for explaining and checking meaning. However, since the students themselves decide which vocabulary items would have been useful to know during an activity or class and then look them up and write a sentence using the new word on the Reflections sheet, they seem to continue to associate the word to that particular lesson and Reflections sheet on which they wrote it, and can access them very quickly when they wish to use them again. When they use the word, I often see the other students writing it in their New Vocabulary section for that lesson. In this way, students

teach other students vocabulary.

The Reflections section of the sheet lies beneath the New Vocabulary box. In this section, students should describe what they actually did during the class time, what they talked about, and the names of their learning partners. Students differ in their approach to this section. Some write lists (similar to a lesson plan) and others write descriptions and draw pictures. Low-level students must write at least 30 words, and higher-level students must use at least 50 words to describe the events in the class. Some students also record the email addresses or phone numbers of new learning partners.

Coming next year

Since this is an ongoing classroom management project, next year I will be adding three new sections to the Reflections sheet as well as one new requirement.

The first thing I will be adding is a space for the student’s name. I have had some students show me folders liberally padded with materials borrowed from their friend’s folders. This usually only happens in the final class of the semester, and I initial or stamp every piece of paper in the file as I check them, which dissuades such practices, but can be a shock to the kind friends. If the name is written on each reflections sheet, it will make it more difficult for the students to borrow their friend’s papers.

The second addition will be a space for students to record the focus of the lesson. I always write this on the board prior to beginning the class and some students write it into their reflections. However, I would like the students to have a place to record the focus so they can refer to it more easily in the future. The focus varies with the level, and could include targeted points such as “Communication Strategy—checking understanding”; grammatical points such as “Conditionals”; a theme such as “Fashion”; or an outcome such as “Taking and Reporting on the Results of a Survey”.

The third thing I will be adding is a space for the students to record how much of class time they actually spoke English (as a percentage value). This will encourage higher level students to speak more often, and lower level students to notice the improvement in their speaking times.

The new requirement to be introduced next year is for the students to complete their Reflections sheets in pen. This will ensure that one student’s name cannot be replaced by another person’s name, and that students cannot easily erase their sheets and make copies to use at a later date. It will also make the sheets easier for me to read quickly. **ETJ**