

Using cards to facilitate cultural learning styles and motivate students in large university EFL classes

by Stephen B. Ryan, Yamagata University

The large university foreign language (EFL) classroom can be a challenging and even frustrating experience for the unaccustomed practitioner. This is no more true than in reserved Asian cultures such as Japan. With relatively passive students and large classes, it is no wonder that some learners (and teachers) become frustrated or just turned off to “communication” in English. Given these circumstances, what are some classroom management techniques that can facilitate learning, motivate students, and account for specific cultural learning styles? One way is by simply trying new techniques in our classrooms that are valued by the learners outside of it. This seems especially true if the learners are in their home country and surrounded by their own native culture (C1). In this article, two different techniques are presented to aid classroom management and account for cultural influences and learning styles to help facilitate the language learning process. It is written with the Japanese university EFL classroom in mind.

Pair cards

Pair cards are really just simple slips of used paper cut into rectangles with a number on the back. Students use these cards to match with a new partner each class. For example, if you have 64 students in your class, such as the case in many first year Japanese university EFL classes, then you need 32 cards pairs numbered from 1a – 32a and 1b – 32b. For my own class, the cards were made with recycled paper using a thick black magic marker for the “A students” and a blue marker for the “B students”.

Simply mix these cards before class and give them to your students at the beginning of every class throughout the term. While you are checking attendance, students will be “choosing their card” by passing them around so it really takes no extra class time. When roll call is finished, have them “make a pair” and find their “new exciting partner”. While students are occupied holding up their cards and locating their partner (using English), the teacher can take advantage of this time to write the necessary days notes on the blackboard or prepare necessary seating arrangements.

One caveat should be mentioned here. Some students undoubtedly will try to match with their best friends every time by going through the cards as they are being passed back. The good way to prevent this pre-matching is by giving all the “A” cards to one side of the room and all the “Bs” to the other. Students will then be unable to match with a person on their same side of the room and thus have to find a new randomly chosen person every time.

Now that students are in pairs and are either “A student” or “B student” according to their card, the teacher is not only ready to start teaching but also has a good idea of the class mood before starting to teach. Why take notice of

what mood the class is in? By being aware of the overall class disposition, you can adjust your approach to make the class more meaningful for students. For example, during the 2002 World Cup held in Japan, I could just sense the excitement of the class and was able to harness this energy by trying some different communication tasks that required the students to be more outgoing, which normally may not have been met with much enthusiasm.

With students now regularly in pairs, it is also a good opportunity to teach self-introductions since learners will be matched with a different person each time. Asking students to do a self-introduction seems to break the ice for many of them and for the class as a whole. In addition, the random assignment of pairs creates interest and even a little apprehension that seems to benefit the overall atmosphere by not allowing students to feel too comfortable with the same person. Another advantage of this pair matching technique is that it helps create empathy between learners. The more adept students inevitably will be able to identify with their weaker partner one week because they may have been the weaker partner the week before.

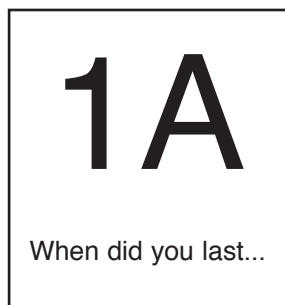
Now that students are already in pairs, it is also much easier to do any pair-work tasks for the remainder of the class because students already have an assigned role. For instance, you can now say something like, “Student B turn to page 110” and it is clear who student B is. Most EFL teachers know how easy it is to lose valuable class time and create confusion when students are unsure of their role or, in a true EFL setting like Japan, don’t understand their teacher’s English instructions at all.

One of the main advantages of using pair cards to assign a different partner every week is that it breaks up cliques of talkative friends. This also promotes a more supportive learning atmosphere because students are more likely to take a chance to speak English with someone outside their peer group of close friends. After reading numerous student journals on this technique, I found that students not only looked forward to meeting and talking with a different person each class, but that it made them more relaxed to do so. It seems the atmosphere of the class as a whole was more cohesive and had lost much of the negative “peer tension” as learners became increasingly comfortable with everyone since their peer group was continually expanding as the course progressed.

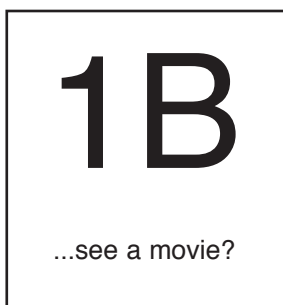
Hints for further success:

- Before class double check to make sure that you have the correct number of card-student matches, there are no missing cards and that they are properly separated into “A” and “B” stacks to avoid students from easily matching with their best friend.

- Write an uncompleted phrase on card “A” to be matched with card “B” at the bottom. Have “A student” answer the question. Have “B student” ask a follow up question. For example,



Card A



Card B

A: I saw a movie last month. (answer)
 B: Which movie did you see? (follow-up)

- Self-introductions: So much of learning a foreign language well involves getting enough repetition, not only so that you remember how you said something, but to feel comfortable and confident doing it. Because one of the purposes of the pair cards is to build a supportive, relaxed atmosphere, students need to have the language and cultural know-how to meet each other in the L2. This is also a perfect opportunity for the teacher to discuss relevant cultural issues (bowing, firm handshake, eye contact, gender issues etc.) by having them repeatedly practice their self-introductions on their new partner at the beginning of every class.

Index test cards

Now that a more cohesive class atmosphere has been established, there comes the difficulty of assessing each student. The traditional method of assessment is by giving students a written test based on the course content. However, because speaking a language is much more an art than a quantifiable subject like mathematics, we need to account for different learning styles. As university teachers, we are usually required to quantify our learners in some way in order to compare them. Here is another “card method” to help even the playing field for students who are better at speaking than taking written tests and vice versa. This technique assumes you have some kind of coherent content that students are being taught via a textbook or a series of lectures so learners will have something to write on their cards.

Give index cards

For this technique, a written test of three pages was administered. The test covered previously studied material from the course textbook. There were two listening sections where students were required to listen to questions and write an appropriate answer. For the listening sections of the test, students were asked questions that pertained to material covered in the classroom such as how to use a particular grammar tense.

The week before your test, give each student a (7.5 cm X 12.5 cm) lined index card. Tell them that they can write anything at all on this card, front and back, as long as it is

in English. Next, tell students that this card will be attached to their test via a stapler as soon as they are finished. Here are three simple rules to write on the blackboard when you give them out.

1. Use only English.
2. You must turn in a card with your test.
3. If your card is identical to another, both students will be penalized.

In my own class, for example, students are told that the failure to meet any of these three requirements will result in 5 points being deducted from their overall test score.

Since using this index card technique, I have noticed that learners spend a large amount of time making their cards (i.e. studying). Some print extremely small in order to pack as much information in as possible. Others divide their card into logical categories with the use of color and diagrams. What learners usually do not realize is that they are, in fact, studying for the test. It also helps those with low confidence by being able to take this “crutch” into the exam. Students seem more confident as the course seems less foreboding and clinical. (Teaching in an EFL context as foreign nationals, we have to remind ourselves that these are only 18-19 year olds, most of whom have never conversed with a native English speaker, much less been taught by one).

What affect does this technique have on test scores? When comparing scores with that card and without it (see Table 1), I have also noticed that the lowest scores are higher and the highest scores are essentially the same. The technique seems to benefit those students who have below average speaking skills but above average spelling or grammar skills.

Table 1 – Raw Empirical Data

Class A		Class B	
Test 1 No cards N=53	Test 2 Cards N=53	Test 1 No cards N=62	Test 2 Cards N=62
Mean 55.73%	Mean 75.13%	Mean 54.31%	Mean 77.01%
SD 18.81	SD 9.14	SD 19.00	SD 8.21
Top 10 scores avg. 82.9%	Top 10 scores avg. 88.5%	Top 10 scores avg. 82.6%	Top 5 scores avg. 88.9%
Bottom 10 scores avg: 28.9%	Bottom 10 scores avg: 59.5%	Bottom 10 scores avg: 25.3%	Bottom 10 scores avg: 63.5%

The index card technique was done with two separate classes of unique learners (Class A and Class B) using the same tests. It should be mentioned that students usually score higher on the second exam because they have more of an idea of what to expect. However, the empirical data in the above table and graph give support to two hypothesis.

- 1) Index study cards primarily benefited the lower tier students as their scores rose an average of nearly 30%.
- 2) The mean and standard deviation scores of the index card method suggest that most of the students were able to understand what was being asked and were able to make a

good effort to complete each question (i.e. show their actual L2 knowledge).

It could be argued here that the purpose of testing at the university level in particular is to differentiate the excellent, good, average and poor students. That it is not necessary to level the playing field, so to speak, as we want to see these differences. However, this argument is counter-productive to most EFL courses in the Japanese context. One of the main purposes for university EFL classes in Japan is to serve as an introduction to the language and culture with less emphasis on raw scores at the end of the term. Thus, at least for the Japanese educational context, the cards seem to help fulfill this purpose by allowing the weaker students to gain confidence, knowledge and interest in English.

One final advantage to using the index card technique that is worth mentioning is that it allows the teacher to see who has indeed put a lot of effort into studying or “making their study card” and who has not. This helps greatly when it comes time to deciding if a borderline student deserves to pass or fail at the semester’s end.

Further hints for success:

- Give students exactly the same size index cards with ruled lines.
- Give the cards out only one week before the test so they will not lose them.
- Be clear and firm on the three rules.
- Don’t forget to bring a pack of extra staples with your stapler to class on test day!

Further discussion

Teaching a large class of quiet Japanese first-year college

students is more challenging than most people realize. Is it possible to keep large “communication” classes interesting and offer high feedback to our learners? And how can we be consistent and fair in assessing them when some students’ language strengths lie in areas not tested? Although these two techniques do not provide a complete answer, they do offer some relief for the EFL teacher in an Asian context like Japan as they build upon the Japanese concepts of harmonious interdependent relationships (Davies and Ikeno 2002) and consensus building. These two cultural values are just as important outside the classroom as inside it. Further, by establishing interpersonal relationships of the classroom group as a whole, learners who are less interested in learning will be at a minimum interested in maintaining a good relationship with their partner every week. And, in Japan one is often judged based upon the process and not simply on “the product” of their performance. With the test card approach, this cultural value is inherently transferred into the EFL classroom and, rather than being a disadvantage, can be used to facilitate learning. Finally, by using index cards to facilitate learning, learners are empowered to offer a clearer reflection of their actual English knowledge – for good or for worse – to their teacher making classroom management and assessment more explicit and objective.

Reference

Davies, R. J. and Osamu, I. (Eds.) (2002). *The Japanese Mind. Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing.

Steve Ryan is an Assistant Professor at Yamagata University. He teaches Intercultural Communication and has lived in Japan for the past 14 years.

