

【寄稿】

Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies for Japanese Postsecondary Foreign Language Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

In August of 2004, nearing the end of a one-year position as a visiting foreign professor of English language at Shimane University, I found myself invited to give a faculty development lecture based on my experiences over the previous year. I felt a bit embarrassed to be put in the position of masquerading as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) specialist. In my audience were people who had spent years, or even decades, teaching English in various contexts in Japan. I, on the other hand, had always thought of myself as a linguist of Japanese, a teacher of Japanese, and the director of a Japanese language program—but not as a teacher of English, despite various occasions over the years when I had worked in that capacity to support myself while in Japan for language study or research.

On the other hand, many of my students at my home institution, the University of Arizona, are international students, and a relatively large number of those international students are Japanese. Because of this, part of my job has always entailed helping nonnative speakers learn how to participate in class discussions in English, answering their questions about English vocabulary and grammatical structures in class readings, and working with them on their English writing skills. Through these teaching activities, as well as through previous English teaching experiences in Japan, I have learned something about what aspects of both spoken and written English are likely to prove difficult for my students, and for Japanese students in particular.

It is also true that in many ways teaching language is teaching language, regardless of the language being taught. The skills needed for teaching one language can be transferred to teaching another. Nevertheless, teaching a native language brings with it both advantages and disadvantages. Of course, with our own language, we rarely worry about whether we are using the language correctly. On the other hand, it is harder to view our own language from an outsider's perspective, as our students do, in order to know what is likely to prove difficult and what sorts of explanations are likely to make sense. And although we may have an intuitive feel

for the nuances of our own language, that intuitive knowledge is generally implicit, rather than something that is easily accessible to conscious introspection. As a sociolinguist who analyzes naturally occurring discourse in both Japanese and English, I know that native speakers' intuitions and statements about how their language is used are often incorrect.

My own belief has always been that for students, the best experience is to have both native and nonnative teachers of the language they are learning. This gives them the experience of communicating with and learning from both native speakers and teachers who have learned the language as a foreign or second language. Teachers who have learned the target language well, but are not native speakers, can be a source of inspiration to students, proving to them that it is possible to become a competent user of the language without having spoken it from childhood. Students at Shimane University are lucky in having access to both native and nonnative teachers of the various foreign languages that are taught there.

They also come to their experiences as university-level learners of a foreign language with a number of advantages, some of which I will discuss below. Nevertheless, as in true of any language teaching and learning situation, foreign language teaching at Japanese universities also faces certain challenges. My observations of university-level EFL education in Japan are based primarily on one year at a particular Japanese university, and my perspective is thus doubtless a limited one. Nevertheless, I discuss below what I see as the challenges and opportunities facing English language education in Japanese universities and offer some suggestions for how the challenges might be overcome and the opportunities embraced.

2. Challenges and opportunities

2.1. Students' prior experiences with English

Compared to the language teaching context which I know best, that of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) instruction in the United States, university-level EFL instructors in Japan have the advantage of teaching students with prior background in the target language. JFL teachers at U.S. universities generally find that entering students have little or no previous background in Japanese language study, while EFL teachers in the Japanese university context have classes filled with students who have often been exposed to English from an early age and have continued to encounter English frequently, both in and outside of school. Although English language

education used to begin in the first year of middle school, or seventh grade, these days there is at least some English instruction (often taking the form of learning vocabulary through games, songs, etc.) at the elementary level. I even found it a common experience to encounter preschoolers who knew quite a number of English words, having been exposed to English through such media as children's books and games, television shows such as NHK's educational channel program *Eigo de asobo!* 'Let's play in English!', or private English conversation classes. Of course, some students' prior experiences learning English may not have not been positive, or despite prior experience, they may nonetheless have failed to acquire a solid English base on which they can build in their university classes. Still, because of a university exam system that emphasizes, among other subjects, English, in general university-level EFL teachers can assume at least a basic knowledge of English on the part of their students. This means that they do not need to start from the beginning, but can instead build on their students' prior knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, which is often quite extensive.

On the other hand, the prior exposure that in many ways is a benefit can also be a disadvantage in at least one respect. In most Japanese programs in the United States, the first-year students start off together, with either no prior exposure to Japanese or, at best, a relatively limited exposure based on high school Japanese language classes. Even two or three years of high school study typically results in a proficiency level equivalent to finishing the first semester of Japanese at a university. Placement testing further ensures that each Japanese class is a relatively homogeneous group. Of course, as students move up through the levels of a particular Japanese program, the diversity of proficiency levels between students in a single class increases as the students with greater motivation and aptitude pull farther and farther ahead. This is true even when a certain grade is prerequisite for continuing on to the next level. At the University of Arizona, students in the first two years of Japanese study must have a minimum grade of C to continue without repeating a previous class. Students at a higher level are required to finish the previous class with a grade of A or B before being allowed to continue. However, the difference between the A students in a class and the C students, or even between A students and B students, is quite dramatic.

This problem can be far more pronounced, however, at a Japanese university, where there is often a tremendous range of abilities between students in the same class because the more motivated students have had years to improve their

proficiency and pull ahead of less motivated students. What is overwhelmingly difficult for some students is too easy for others. Pushing for a happy medium inevitably means failing to satisfy some students. Faced with great discrepancies in ability, a teacher can only try to take students from where they are and encourage improvement. On the administrative level, however, it would be beneficial if more could be done to insure that students are placed in classes appropriate to their level. The problem is intensified by the fact that a student proficient in some areas of English may not necessarily be proficient in others. The stereotypical example is a student who is good at grammar and can handle reading, writing, and translating but cannot understand or speak oral English. Certainly I encountered a number of such students in my Japanese university classes. I also encountered the opposite type of student, however, albeit less frequently—students who were relatively fluent speakers, but whose speech was full of grammatical errors.

One way in which this problem has been dealt with at Shimane University is through the development of a variety of skill-specific classes. There are classes that focus primarily on speaking, listening, writing, and so on. Because of the variety of options provided by the curriculum, students who are weak in a particular area can choose to take classes that will help them improve their proficiency in that area. For example, a student who feels that he or she has an adequate knowledge of written English but is weak in spoken English can choose to take a conversation class. Conversely, students can also choose to follow their strengths and further develop their skills in the areas they feel will be most useful for them. A student in the sciences who understands that it will be necessary in the future to be able to write papers and communicate with international colleagues in English might choose to take a course focusing on English writing skills. The development of these specialized courses has made it possible to meet the needs of a larger number of students with diverse skills and interests.

The institution of some placement policies designed to get students into classes appropriate to their individual ability levels is another strategy devised recently by the Center for Foreign Language Education to deal with the disparity in individual students' proficiency levels. For example, students taking the sophomore level, "English II", conversation classes, which are offered at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels, are now placed into those classes based on their scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). These guidelines for enrollment help ensure that students do not enroll in a class that is too difficult or too easy for

them to benefit from. Good placement policies also mean that students who need lower-level classes are less likely to find that some of their classmates are at a level far beyond them—something which can be a demoralizing experience and make it difficult for the less proficient students to feel comfortable participating in class activities. In this way the Center is helping to insure that the prior experience that students bring to the university classroom can be built upon to help students develop their proficiency effectively.

2.2 Frequency of instruction

Some of the challenges of teaching a foreign language in the Japanese university context seem firmly entrenched in the system. Students typically attend each class only once a week, and it is likely to be only one of perhaps fifteen or so classes that they are taking. It is difficult to find quantitative research on whether there is an advantage to more frequent instruction in foreign language programs, and if so, the extent of that advantage. Nonetheless, Curtain and Dahlberg (2000:2-3) cite a number of foreign language professionals involved in implementing foreign language instruction programs at lower levels who argue for the importance of meeting several times per week. Most teachers of language would probably also agree that once-a-week instruction is less than ideal for a language class.

It seems likely that if improving foreign language proficiency is our goal, shorter, more frequent exposure is preferable to longer but less frequent classes. At my home university, we often have students transfer to us after completing a couple of years at a local community college. When they take our Japanese language placement test, students who have taken two semesters of Japanese at the community college almost invariably place into our second semester class. That is, during their two semesters at the community college, they have gained a proficiency equivalent to students who have studied one semester at the university. This is despite the fact that each institution enrolls students with a wide range of academic ability, that the Japanese language classes at both institutions meet for approximately the same number of hours per week and per semester, and that the instructors at the community college are often current or previous university graduate students or instructors who have substantial experience teaching Japanese language at the university. One major difference between the classes at the two institutions, however, is that the community college Japanese classes meet only twice a week—albeit for a longer period of time per class meeting—while the university classes meet for shorter classes five times a week.

Shorter, but more frequent, classes seem to promote language acquisition more effectively.

Similarly, if Japanese university EFL classes were able to meet more often than once a week, we might find increased improvement in the development of the students' English skills, even if the total number of contact hours did not change. This could perhaps be accomplished by offering courses that meet twice a week and provide more than the usual amount of credit. Or a regular course could meet twice a week for half the regular class time. (This admittedly makes it more difficult for students to arrange their schedules, as it increases the likelihood that the course meeting times will conflict with other courses they plan to take.) Another possible solution would be to have pairs or groups of courses that must be taken concurrently, ideally with the faculty instructing those courses collaborating to achieve some coordination of what would be covered by the various classes. This solution would not be as ideal as meeting with the same teacher and same group of students multiple times a week. Not only would the additional degree of coordination required result in an increased burden on the faculty instructing the courses, but with classes that meet only once a week, it is harder to develop the sense of community and trust between students and teachers that is conducive to good language learning. However, this solution would at least insure that the students' attention was focused on English for more than one 90-minute period per week.

2.3 Attitudes towards classes

It must be admitted that overall, classes did not seem to rank too high on the list of activities that my Japanese university students were engaged in. This was not only the view of the students, for the institution as a whole seemed to assume that other types of events took precedence. Student teaching, university events, special classes and lectures, club activities, and exams and interviews related to a student's job hunt were some of the reasons it was deemed reasonable to miss class. Indeed, special classes or lectures were sometimes scheduled to conflict with regular classes, and the student teaching system was set up in such a way that student teaching, which occupied virtually all of the student teachers' waking hours, happened in the middle of a normal semester. It did not seem to be viewed as a problem that student teachers would be absent from up to four consecutive weeks of classes.

When students missed class, especially when they were gone for several weeks during the middle of a semester, it was sometimes difficult to help them make up the

class content that they missed. This was particularly true in classes such as conversation classes, in which the primary focus was on the development of skills through in-class practice, rather than on content that could be studied from books or lecture notes obtained from a friend. In the end, I generally settled for having students prepare a written report of whatever special activity had kept them out of class, then having them come in during one of my office hours to discuss the activity and the report with me in English. They often seemed startled to be asked to make any attempt to make up for the time they had missed in my class, but they were generally willing to do as requested. The ensuing discussions were often fruitful language learning opportunities because the student teaching experience was typically one that the students had found to be extremely memorable, simultaneously difficult and rewarding. They were highly motivated to explain their experiences to me. Nevertheless, although one stimulating office-hour discussion might be a very significant experience for an individual student, it is unclear whether it could adequately compensate for several weeks of missed classes.

The undervaluing of class time is an aspect of the institutional context in Japanese university-level EFL teaching that seems unlikely to change. Thus, it is up to the individual instructor to find ways to insure that students take his or her class more seriously and to make up for missed classes. Some possible strategies are: 1) Let students know at the beginning of the course that the class evaluation policy emphasizes attendance and active participation at least as much as a midterm and/or final exams. 2) Have relatively frequent short quizzes. Such quizzes need not take much time away from class activities, but students know that if they are absent they will miss the quiz. One option is to let students know that unannounced "pop quizzes" will be given occasionally. 3) If the class being taught emphasizes spoken English, consider making the midterm and/or final exams "oral interview" style exams in which the students' oral proficiency can be tested. These can be individual interviews, but small group interviews can also be effective. Group interviews of course take less time, an important consideration when a faculty member may easily have over a hundred students in a given semester. They also have the advantage of possibly helping students feel less "on the spot" than one-on-one interviews. 4) Insist on make-up work for classes that are missed for officially acceptable reasons.

It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the evaluation-based strategies mentioned in the previous paragraph. In general, my Japanese students did not seem to be particularly concerned about their grades. Thus, they were not working for the

purpose of doing the minimum necessary to get a good grade in the class. Those students who did work hard in my classes generally did so because they genuinely wanted to improve their English skills. Of course, the lack of focus on grades meant that some students who were simply taking the course to meet a requirement failed to come to class prepared or to complete assignments. Such students, however, were relatively rare. Whether because of a desire to improve their English or simply because of the idea that it would be somehow inappropriate or disrespectful to fail to follow their professor's instructions, the majority of the students were usually at least minimally prepared for classes. They were also unlikely to present discipline problems in classes, and the occasional exceptions to that rule did nothing worse than to fail to pay attention or stay on task during class activities. Overall, my impression was that even though students seemed relatively unworried about their grades, it was helpful to have grading policies that demonstrated the instructor's belief that class time was important.

2.4 Extracurricular contact with the target language

In addition to being a way to show students that class time was considered important, oral interviews and make-up assignments were also a way I was able to convince students to come to my office. In general, most students were hesitant to make use of their professors as a resource. This may be particularly the case with a foreign teacher, of course, and especially with one who was only visiting for a year. For the most part, students simply assumed that I must not speak Japanese, which was an advantage in some ways, as when they wanted to communicate with me, they assumed they needed to speak English. On the other hand, to the extent that it made them reluctant to approach me and talk to me outside of class hours, this assumption on their part may have also been a disadvantage.

An initial oral interview held early in the semester at least insured that students knew where to find me, and my hope was that it would also help them feel more comfortable about coming to my office. Before these initial interviews, I gave the students a short passage to read in order to have something concrete to discuss in the interview. I also gave them specific instructions ahead of time about the format of the interview, the types of questions I would ask, and how they would be evaluated. After that first interview, I gave them written feedback about what they had done well, recommendations about what to focus on in their studies, and specific strategies for doing so. I particularly encouraged them to stop by just to talk now and then. I then

followed up with later interviews, typically one in the middle of the semester and one at the end. After each interview, I gave the students written comments, especially trying to focus on areas where I could let them know that they were improving. Increases in proficiency can be so incremental that students do not realize that they are improving, so when they are working hard and making progress, even slow progress, it is important to be sure they realize their efforts are having an effect.

Similarly, with a class of writing students, I had relatively brief, mandatory meetings in my office to work on their writing. Together we would review a brief essay they had written, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses and discussing how they might develop it into a somewhat longer and more substantial piece. This was part of the process of developing a portfolio of their writing and talking about how their writing developed over the course of one semester.

Another idea for encouraging extracurricular opportunities to communicate in English that I never quite found the time to implement was the development of a "language table." This has proven quite effective with the JFL students at the University of Arizona. The Japanese language table is held twice a week at lunchtime. Typically, as many as three dozen people drop by to speak Japanese together. The participants are a combination of JFL students, international students from Japan, graduate students from the department of East Asian Studies, and Japanese instructors and teaching assistants. Meeting in an informal situation to chat with others, both native and nonnative speakers, lets language learners see that their target language is truly a vehicle for communication and not just an academic subject. Interacting in a relaxed situation can also help students and teachers get to know each other better.

2.5 The physical learning environment

Among the more minor obstacles to learning were the physical conditions in my classrooms. Teachers need to be able to rearrange their language classrooms to meet the needs of a variety of different types of activities. Immoveable desks that are bolted to the floors, or rooms that are so full of desks that there is no way to rearrange them, sometimes made it impossible to reorganize the classroom, however. At times it was difficult or even impossible to move around to comment on student work, to gather the entire class in a circle, to move chairs into small clusters for group work or pair work, or to make a large open space for role-play activities, such as circulating and making small talk at a party. When I had disabled students who used wheelchairs in my

classes, it was especially difficult and awkward for them, as there was no way they could move around to engage in interactions with a variety of classmates. Instead, they had to wait for others to come to them.

Classrooms were physically uncomfortable at times too, being either too cold or overheated in the winter, and hot and muggy during the months before summer vacation. While not arguing for the wastefulness of central heating and air conditioning that is the norm in U.S. university buildings, I confess that I did wonder if a fan or two would be such an extravagant waste of resources. When the physical environment left something to be desired, I was impressed that most of the students did manage to overcome their discomfort and stay focused on class activities, but it was impossible not to sympathize with those who were unable to do so. Doubtless teachers and students should be able to rise above such mundane considerations! Nevertheless, I would have preferred to be able to offer my students better physical conditions under which to work on building their English skills.

3. Student needs

3.1 Discourse-level competence

In recent decades, foreign and second language scholars have become aware of the fact that learning to communicate in another language involves more than learning grammar and vocabulary. The move towards an emphasis on communicative competence entails an understanding that sociocultural and pragmatic aspects of language use are also of vital importance. With this comes a recognition that language teaching must move beyond the level of the sentence or simple adjacency pairs such as questions and answers. At least two journals have recently published special issues on the connections between discourse and pedagogy (Magnan 2004, Jones and Ono 2005a).

Researchers working in this area have pointed out a number of ways in which discourse studies can inform language pedagogy. On the one hand, the observation and analysis of naturally occurring spoken and written discourse can increase our understanding of how specific languages are used in real-life contexts. This makes it possible for both teachers and developers of pedagogical materials to present those languages more accurately to students. A knowledge of discourse studies can also help teachers encourage the use of more natural language in their classrooms, by both themselves and their students. But it is not only teachers and materials designers who benefit from knowing more about discourse. Students, too, can learn from the

opportunity to observe and analyze natural discourse. (Fujii 2005, Jones and Ono 2005b, Mori 2005, Yotsukura 2005)

Despite their typically extensive prior study of English vocabulary and grammar, I found that for the most part, my students in Japan were not yet able to handle English at the discourse level. Many of them had been exposed to relatively complicated written discourse, and some were capable of reading and understanding complex written texts in English. Most, however, still found it extremely difficult to comprehend typical texts such as magazine and newspaper articles, web pages, and essays. Writing more than a few sentences of connected discourse was still a challenge for almost all of the students. The compositions they produced were generally quite simple in terms of both sentence-level grammar and overall organization, and they had not yet acquired the rhetorical conventions of written English. As for spoken discourse, students were generally unaccustomed to listening to English spoken at a natural speed, and it was a struggle for them to participate in exchanges beyond the level of basic question-answer routines. It was clear that they needed more exposure to authentic discourse, both spoken and written, and also that they needed as many opportunities as possible to practice producing written texts and engaging in conversation.

3.2 Foreign language anxiety

A second area which needed to be addressed was the discomfort many of my students felt at the idea of communicating in English, especially in spoken English. The effect of anxiety on foreign language learning has been mentioned in the literature for decades, and serious study in this area has intensified since the 1980s. Gardner (1985, cited in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994) and Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) were perhaps the first to propose that anxiety related to foreign language learning was a distinct form of anxiety.

Because individual communication attempts will be evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards, second-language communication entails risk taking and is necessarily problematic....any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic. (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986:128)

Studies in this area have led to contradictory claims about whether anxiety is correlated with foreign language achievement and whether it has a negative effect on foreign language learning. Some researchers have found a correlation but have proposed that the causal relationship is the reverse: poor language learning causes anxiety in foreign language learning situations. One line of research argues that general problems in learning language, including L1 learning problems, result in anxiety: "difficulties in speaking and listening skills and poor memories for language may contribute to the anxiety that students experience in FL classes" (Sparks and Ganschow 1991:5; see also Ganschow et al. 1994, Sparks and Ganschow 1996, and Sparks, Ganschow, and Javorsky 2000).

Nevertheless, the majority of researchers in this area have argued that anxiety does indeed have a negative effect on language learning. Recently, some scholars have also focused on looking for evidence of skill-specific foreign language anxiety, such as reading anxiety (Saito, Horwitz, and Garza 1999, Matsuda and Gobel 2001), writing anxiety (Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert 1999), and listening anxiety (Elkhafaifi 2005). Horwitz (2001) reports on research associating anxiety with other variables as well, such as type of classroom activity (for example, work in pairs or small groups may produce less anxiety than having to speak up in front of the whole class), individual differences, cultural differences, and students' perceptions of how supportive their teacher is. (For other reviews of studies on the role of anxiety in language learning, see Young [1991], MacIntyre [1995], and Elkhafaifi [2005].)

Because many of my students did seem to exhibit foreign language anxiety to varying degrees, I wanted my classroom to be a supportive non-threatening environment that would offer them plenty of opportunities to be successful at communicating in English.

4. Strategies to address student needs

Students, then, need to have models of authentic discourse and to have ample opportunities to practice producing discourse. It is also important to minimize student anxiety. To accomplish these goals in my own classes, I decided to develop a series of activities designed around various authentic materials that were themselves examples of English discourse. I tried to select materials that the students would be interested in discussing.

The activities described below were all designed for a particular sophomore-level "English II" class. This section of English II was an advanced conversation class that

focused on American popular culture. I also used some of these activities in my beginning and intermediate English II classes, and simplified versions could be used for lower-level classes as well. The materials for the class were of various types: newspaper and magazine articles, web pages, movies, restaurant menus, and items such as food and drink containers. I was gratified, and also a bit surprised, at just how exotic the students found the materials. Of course, the experience of watching subtitled English movies was a familiar one, but virtually none of the students had ever watched an English movie without subtitles, held an English magazine or newspaper in their hands, or looked at an English web page.

Faced with items as unfamiliar as a restaurant menu written entirely in English or a box of cornbread or brownie mix, some of my students did indeed show signs of "reading anxiety." At first they were overwhelmed by the sea of print that faced them. I began slowly by having them work in groups of three or four to find specific information in a written text. I primarily developed activities for to be done in pairs and small groups, in order to encourage participation, to reduce student anxiety, and to insure that they would have more opportunities to talk than in teacher-centered, whole-class activities. Students vary in how well they stay "on-task" during pair and group work, of course, and students who were not used to being asked to do such work needed very clear and explicit instructions about what they were expected to accomplish. In order to focus their reading and discussion, I always gave them a set of questions that they were to answer. I then moved around the classroom asking questions, helping groups that were having trouble locating information, commenting on their answers, and trying to provide a model of spoken discourse by engaging in more general conversation. Because I made a point of using natural English and speaking at a normal speed, they had models of authentic English discourse in the texts themselves and in my conversation. The list of questions that I provided, their discussions of the text, and the answers they provided were all in English as well. At the early stages, however, their production of English was still largely limited to questions and answers, and they did not often move on to more sustained discussion.

The first activity for the class was designed around a menu and some reviews that I took from a restaurant website (<<http://www.rumrunnertucson.com/thedish/index.html>>). I handed out copies of those materials and a set of questions (Appendix 1) for the students to work on in small groups. The activity began with very basic questions covering information they would need were they actually to go to the restaurant. What is the restaurant called? Where is it located? Do you need

reservations? What number do you call for reservations? How is the menu organized and what would you like to order? I also included questions that might lead to more general discussions about food and culture and encouraged them to come up with their own questions. Very few of the students had ever traveled abroad, and for most of them this was the first time they had seen an English restaurant menu. Although daunted at first, they gradually made their way through the menu and the reviews and, with considerable prompting from me, managed to find the information they were seeking.

For the menu activity, the entire class worked on the same menu at once. After this introductory activity however, I generally used "information gap" activities in which students had to exchange information with each other. For example, one day I had them divide into small groups, then passed out boxes of different food products. Each group was given a form with a list of questions down one side and several empty columns in which they could supply answers to the questions for each product. Their first task was to read their own box and talk together to determine the answers to the list of questions, finding information such as the name of the product, the name of the company that produced it, and how to prepare the product. They also looked for additional practical information such as the ingredients, the "sell by" date, and nutritional information. Other questions were more speculative or open-ended, such as how much they thought the product might cost and whether they would like to try the product. One row of the table was simply labeled "other interesting information" to give the students a chance to comment on what they found unusual or interesting about the box they were working with. After filling in information about their own product in the first column of the form, their next task was to move around the classroom and talk with each of the other groups to exchange information about the products. Again, the students had generally not seen items such as these food boxes. They seemed to enjoy being able to handle them and learn more about the products. The high point of the class, though, came near the end when I brought out plates of cornbread and brownies for them to sample!

At a still later point in the semester, I developed activities that I hoped would push the students not only to read longer written texts, but also to attempt to engage in more sustained spoken interactions. For example, during one class I brought copies of about half a dozen magazine articles to class and had each student select their favorite. The students also had the opportunity to leaf through the magazines the articles came from, magazines from fields as diverse as popular culture, science,

current events, sports, and fashion. As homework, I then assigned the students to read the article they had chosen and to come to our next class prepared to summarize the article (without using a memorized speech) and to lead a very brief discussion about it. Back in class the next week, we divided into small groups for the presentations and discussions. The groups were comprised of students who had each read a different article. In addition to the reading task, then, the students had to engage in two different types of spoken discourse: the monologues summarizing their article and the subsequent discussions of the articles. The results of this activity were mixed. Most of the groups did well, but for one or two, the task proved too difficult and/or too many students were unprepared.

Finally, at the end of the semester, I held one class meeting in a computer lab so that we could engage in an Internet-based activity. This activity was designed to expose the students to yet another type of written discourse and to give them the experience of navigating a set of English web pages and finding information they might need if they were considering studying abroad in their major field. Given the nature of the Internet, and the variety of the majors they represented, this activity was far more open-ended than any of the previous ones. I designed a set of questions (Appendix 2) around my home university's website, as I was familiar with its organization and could help the students find the information they needed when they had difficulty. All of the students were quite used to browsing the Internet and moving between different web pages, so although reading the pages in English (or at least, skimming them for the relevant information) was a challenge, they were all able to manage the task with only occasional assistance.

Activities such as these used authentic materials to introduce American popular culture from a variety of different media, to give the students confidence that they could pick up English texts of various sorts and locate specific information within it, and to give them practice talking about texts such as these. The activities were easy to develop, and the students seemed to find them interesting. One limitation of the class was that I did not have examples of natural spoken discourse to base class activities on. We did spend some time watching and discussing a movie that I selected because it contained relatively natural dialogues. The speech also contained a minimum of slang and idioms and was quite slow and clear for the most part. The students found the language in the movie almost impossible to understand, however, despite the preview I gave them and the handouts I made to explain the characters and the plot. For students just beginning to make the leap to understanding and

producing longer spoken discourse, it would have been better to use shorter segments of the movie and intersperse them with discussion. And of course, the scripted dialogues found in movies or television shows, while more natural than the typical textbook dialogue, are not naturally occurring talk. Were I to teach this course again, I would work to incorporate natural spoken discourse from a variety of sources, such as conversations recorded in various situations, lectures, and television news.

5. Conclusion

Despite the various challenges facing Japanese postsecondary foreign language pedagogy, I am optimistic, especially when I think about the children I encounter. Japanese children today are more likely than ever before to have encountered foreigners and to have had the experience of seeing other languages as tools for communication, rather than merely as academic subjects to be studied in school. Many of today's students have even had the experience of seeing that they can have fun trying to communicate with foreign speakers. The Japanese government's JET program brings thousands of foreign teachers to Japan each year to teach English and other foreign languages. Not only junior high and high school students, but also elementary school students are being exposed to English at their schools.

Children often show evidence of being interested in and enjoying English. The five- and six-year-old children at my sons' preschool enjoyed sitting with my older son and working their way through a picture book with English vocabulary. When I picked him up in the afternoon, his teachers would frequently mention that he had taught his class some words or a song in English that day. The older children would run over to me to show off their knowledge of English vocabulary, to ask how to say words that they had not yet learned, and to listen to me speaking English to my children. At my daughter's elementary school, too, children would invariably come up to introduce themselves to me in English. They were always delighted when they found that they were able to communicate successfully.

Once these same children get farther along in the educational system, of course, English often becomes less fun as it becomes a subject to be studied for high school or university entrance exams. Nevertheless, my experiences with younger children have convinced me that many of the students in university classes surely have memories of English being fun, and of successful communication in a foreign language being an exhilarating and empowering experience. Perhaps the single most important thing we can do for our students is to revive some of those old memories by giving them

opportunities to add to their experiences of engaging in successful, interesting, and even fun communication in English.

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Appendix 1

Name: _____

Food as Culture: "Nouveau Southwestern" and "Fusion" Cuisines

First, read all the questions so you know what information you are looking for. Then skim through the restaurant's menu and the reviews from the restaurant's web page in order to find the information to answer the questions.

1. What is the full name of the restaurant?
2. What do you think people call it "for short"?
3. Where is the restaurant located?
4. Should you make reservations before going to the restaurant? Why do you say so?
5. What number would you call to make reservations?
6. What is the name of the wine shop the restaurant is associated with?
7. What three major categories of food are on the menu?
8. Whose reviews of the restaurant are featured on its web page?
9. After looking at the menu, do you have any ideas about what "nouveau Southwestern" or "fusion" cuisines might be?
10. What would you like to order if you were eating at this restaurant tonight?
11. Write any other questions or comments you have about these materials.

Appendix 2

Name: _____

Internet Activity

Using the Internet to find out about studying at an American university:

1. Go to the University of Arizona (UA) home page: www.arizona.edu. What links do you see on that page that might be helpful to you?

2. UA offers both undergraduate and graduate programs. Suppose you want to study at UA as a "non-degree student" for one semester or one year. Follow these links:

Future Students→International Students→International Undergraduate Student Information→Frequently Asked Questions

Find out information about undergraduate study at UA. What are the three ways you can apply for admission?

3. What level of English proficiency do you need to enter UA as an international graduate student?

4. Find a UA department in your favorite field of study. Try to answer the following questions:

a. How many faculty members are there?

b. Does the department offer graduate programs (graduate degrees)?

c. Is there financial aid available?

d. Write three more questions you would like to find the answers to, then write the answers.