

# Innovate locally, contribute globally: Engineering foreign language pedagogy for the international liberal arts

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## Introduction

This study explores an approach to foreign language pedagogy at university, drawing inspiration from the 2011 Hayabusa project where engineers, rather than purchase technology ‘off the shelf’, developed their own through collaborative arrangements and utilizing local know-how. Thus completely familiar with their probe, they managed problems encountered along the way and successfully brought it home. As the saying goes, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Similarly, English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogy is approached as a collaboration between teacher and students.

## Fitting EFL with the college curriculum in Japan

Speakers of English as a second language now outnumber native English speakers, with implications for the nature of communication in English at the international level. Research of talk among speakers of English as a second language (ESL) cautions us against modeling the language of the ‘native speaker’ (NS) as *the goal* of EFL pedagogy. Gardner & Wagner (2004) found that “no interactional phenomena have been found exclusively in second language talk.” Furthermore, in talk between non-native speakers, errors and mistakes were “inconsequential”, interlocutors put to use a “wide range of interactional resources” (*Ibid*:15-16). We can assume that basic principles of spoken human communication apply whether that communication takes place on the global stage, in the research lab, or EFL classroom.

## The evolution of second language acquisition (SLA), theory & practice

Meanwhile, SLA has become a transdisciplinary project, gaining theoretical support from scholarship in various fields and lines of thinking (Atkinson, 2011) including Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), ecological perspectives (Kramsch, 2002; van Lier, 2004), complexity (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and neuroscience (Schumann et. al., 2004).

As for practical studies of classroom talk, a number of researchers utilize Conversation Analysis to examine speech exchanges. The present study takes a somewhat different approach by examining *texts*, oral and written, including classroom materials to see how communication is mediated. Here, classroom activity is framed as acts of communication and its inquiry is meant to involve everyone.

## Language teaching as research

The study is undertaken in the spirit of Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003) as a means of conducting the lesson as *inquiry into practices of communication*. Four key principles of seven from the article cited above are: Put quality of life first, work primarily to understand classroom life (and not to directly solve problems), integrate the work of understanding with classroom practice...look for our tools in our investigative practice (rather than outsourcing it or getting it ‘off the shelf’!), and, finally, make the work a continuous enterprise (as the classroom is a dynamic social situation).

## Text samples & observations [ S = student, T = teacher ]

Case 1: First-year mechanical engineering department, Reading & Discussion class

S1: Please explain!

S2: ...?... (silence)

S1: Please explain! Please explain!!

S2: ..?... (silence + perplexed expression)

A conversation strategy for ensuring mutuality in talk, such as “Please explain what you mean by [word]”, might have given S2 something to work with in formulating a response.

Case 2a: First-year mechanical engineering department, Reading & Discussion class

S1 (written): ...blood type AB is genius skin.

T (oral): blood type AB is...genius skin?!

Case 2b: Same class a week later.

T: (Comments on S2's work.)

S2: I'm genius skin too!

A glance at the A5 worksheet, a reading-response activity supplemental to the textbook, let T initiate talk with S1. Considering rather than correcting the nonce phrase led to S1 relating (the now spoken) text to personal experience. To borrow from Bauman (2004), the text was assimilated into the genre of narrative. In Case 2b, S2's utterance shows how texts span and connect in time. New information is created in both exchanges (Fogel, 1993): Opportunity provided for elaboration of own experience and culture, texts are legitimized (Hey, jokes are OK!), participant structure (Who says what to whom) is established as flexible.

Case 3: 2nd & 3rd year Environment & Human Science department, Communicative English class

S1: You know, the early bird catches the worm.

S2: But I don't want a worm... (^\_^\v)

Utterances came as part of class discussion. No textbook was used. Lessons were organized around small group discussion and presentation. Communication strategies were introduced regularly as content (Note S1's comment initiator, "You know") and included the use of proverbs, jokes, and backchannel or 'aizuchi'.

## Conclusion

In the scheme of things, language errors don't matter all that much. In fact, they're an integral part of the daily negotiations of life through talk (called 'repair' in CA terms). They can lead on to new knowledge, new understanding, maybe even a nice, well-timed joke, and possibly, deeper relationships. The future shape of EFL in globalization must account for cross-cultural communication and engage students in such practices. Genre provides a useful way to organize such talk in the classroom. Allowing for innovation in talk is crucial.

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