

**Back to School:
Mature University Students Rediscover English**

Kathleen Yamane
Nara University

Introduction

Ancient burial mounds. World heritage sites. Buddhist sculpture. These are some of the topics that the students in my most recent English I class were researching for their graduation theses for the correspondence course (通信教育部) run by our university. Like many private Japanese universities, the school was looking for creative ways to maintain a healthy intake in the wake of an ever-shrinking pool of traditional younger students. Currently in its tenth year, the program leads to a four-year B.A. degree combining History and Cultural Properties with an optional museum curator's license. A master's degree program has also been established for students wishing to pursue further studies. The correspondence course attracts highly motivated students from all parts of Japan, ranging in age range from the twenties up to the 80s and beyond.

The students in this program focus on Japanese history, archeology and cultural preservation. The program is experiential in focus, with visits to museums, shrines, local world heritage sites and other historical destinations an integral part of the program of study. The courses are divided into "text" and "schooling" components, the former referring to the actual correspondence classes in which students are sent materials and assignments to be completed and assessed by the professor in charge. Several times a year students are required to be on campus for "schooling"—three-day intensive courses that are normally run over long weekends and the summer and spring breaks.

For the B.A. degree, students are required to take a total of 124 credits, of which a minimum of 60 credits must be in their major field. The menu includes courses such as "Silk Road Studies", "Buddhist Archeology" and "Edo Culture". A further 30 credits must be taken from the offerings in Liberal Arts. Taught primarily by the faculty of our College of Liberal Arts, this includes a wide range of classes in international relations, philosophy, sciences, sports, and foreign languages. Students can choose between three English courses and two Chinese courses. They must take (and pass) a minimum of two in order to get their degree. The remainder of this article discusses my experiences creating and implementing a language course in this unique context.

Getting Started

Although I had over 30 years of language teaching experience under my belt when I moved to this school three years ago, I realized that teaching English to mature students in the correspondence course would be in many ways different from working with younger undergraduates. First, the language courses are for many of these Japanese history and culture buffs the most intimidating part of the program, so much so that it is not unusual to wait until the fourth or fifth year to register for one. Many of the older students have been away from English for decades. Some even claim to have never had any English at all along the way. Furthermore, this is a far more significant investment for them than a three-month class at the Culture Center across from the station. English may not be their thing, but they *need* to get those language credits in order to get their hard-earned degree. Add to these factors the fact that the classes are run three consecutive days from 10 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., and you can begin to appreciate why many students fret over the language requirement.

I was assigned my first Schooling session in August, 2013. Although I was excited to be working with mature students for the first time, I also took very seriously the challenges posed by the program. Colleagues who had already taught in the program stressed that we could do anything we liked in terms of focus and selection of materials, but to be sure to set it up in such a way that everyone who participated would pass. They also advised making extra large copies of everything, which was a helpful tip.

Where to begin? With the average age of the 18 students in my first group hovering around 60, I assumed that the English classes they had had along the way probably involved a lot of reading, writing and grammar translation work. My second assumption (which turned out to be right on the mark) was that this was apt to be their very first experience with a native instructor. And no matter how strongly they might insist that they didn't know any English, experience with elderly neighbors and relatives led me to believe otherwise. Their last English class may have been 40 or 50 years ago but back in the day, students were really expected to hit the books. Surely some of what they had learned was still there, and could be reactivated with the right prompts.

For these reasons, I decided to give them something new and different: communicative English. I started out by introducing myself in simple, controlled English, similar to what I had used with first year junior high school students and Kids'

English classes over the years. “ Hello!” (big smile) “My name is Kathleen Yamane. Kathleen Yamane. “(big smile and gesture)” I come from the U.S.A.—from New York” (big smile with right arm held up in imitation of the Statue of Liberty). By the end of my self-introduction about two-thirds of the group was visibly excited. Another four or five looked nervous. One woman left to use the bathroom and never returned. From there we went on to an interview and introduction activity, read through and practiced some sample self-introductions followed by a listening task (way too difficult) and ended the day with a writing assignment. For homework they were to check and recopy their compositions, which were to be handed in the following morning. (I hadn’t realized that there was a walking tour through the old section of town scheduled for that evening—which several students skipped because of my assignment.) Because all of the course materials had been copied and distributed in advance, it was too late to go back and set up a new course, so the second and third days proceeded in similar fashion, although I tried to provide as much additional support as possible.

How many mistakes did I make in that first session? Lots, mostly stemming from the fact that although I knew the students had been away from English for a long time, I underestimated how critical it was for mature learners to have ample written support prior to attempting communication activities. When the opportunity arose to set up a new three-day course six months later, I reworked the program from scratch. I had learned a few things. First and foremost, I needed to create a better balance of reading, writing, speaking and listening activities over each of the three days, using reading and writing activities as stepping-stones to communicative activities. I had also come to realize that because we were close in age, the students were very interested in ME. In the first round we focused on materials from a writing text I had used successfully with my undergraduate writing class, *Can’t Stop Writing*, through which they learned about Sanae (“18 years and one month old”), her hometown, her family and hobbies. They were far more interested in hearing about my hometown, my family and my hobbies, so that’s how I set things up in round two, with power point slides to introduce my world to them.

The reverse, however, proved not to be the case. I learned to be careful about who was in the room and sensitive about certain issues. Most of the older males in the class were retired, often from prestigious jobs at prestigious companies, but some were there because they had been victims of restructuring (fired) and were looking for meaningful ways to fill their time. Many of the women had never married but some were widowed or divorced, or married but childless. I had somehow expected the smattering of younger students to be the shining stars in this communication-based

class but in fact, most were there because they had not been successful in more traditional programs. Although personal questions are often a good way to build a relationship with younger undergraduate students, I learned the hard way that questions about families and work were best avoided with mature learners.

What they **did** enjoy immensely was teaching me about what they know and love: Japanese culture—so much so that I decided to make that a focus in the next course. Furthermore, a few of the stronger students in the class indicated on their evaluations that they would have liked some practical tips for ways to study English using film clips and television. That gave me a long list of changes to implement in February of 2014.

Round Two: A Fresh Start

I set up my second round as a theme-based course, with the focus on Day One “About Me, About You, About Us”; Day Two, “About Our Hometowns” and Day Three, “Our Hobbies and Interests”. Although some of the activities were retained, sequencing was changed to provide the support they needed. Also, the difficult listening activities were simplified to ensure a higher success rate, and several DVD listening tasks were added to the mix. A collaborative project was also set up for the third day, in which the students prepared presentations introducing Japanese culture.

We opened Day One by making names cards (first names only, even for the 82-year-old) and walking around to exchange greetings. “Good morning! I’m Kathleen. I come from New York.” I then distributed a written self-introduction which they could choose to look at or not as I introduced myself with a short power point presentation. Following that, we practiced the self-introduction and answered comprehension questions. The students then answered similar questions about themselves. I provided vocabulary to enable them to talk about their program of study: *freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, correspondence course, cultural properties, archeology, research focus*. They incorporated this information into their self-introductions, which were written out on note cards and then checked by me. After practicing a few times, they circulated around the room and shared their information with five or six classmates. Students were encouraged to ask at least one question after hearing a classmate’s self-introduction and in most cases, were able to do so.

I should mention here that the writing activities, whether answering a list of questions or turning those answers into a short composition, took considerably more time than I had planned. Even though the students all had dictionaries and I walked around the room to offer assistance as needed, each writing task took about twice as long as I had expected. This was time well spent, however, as a critical stepping-

stone into the communication activities. These included a variety of speaking and listening tasks in pairs, small and large groups or the whole class, sometimes standing up and mingling, and sometimes seated. The variety of activities and regularly changing the flow of energy in the classroom was stimulating, and a big change from the teacher-centered English lessons most of the students had had in the past. As most of their course work was done individually, they enjoyed this opportunity to communicate with and learn about their classmates.

As an expansion activity, the students worked in pairs on a DVD task in which they were asked to predict where people were from and what they did before watching the DVD with sound. Many of the more popular English conversation texts have an optional DVD component that gives the students the chance to see people from around the world using English and to hear a variety of different English accents, both native and non-native. The exercise was designed for success and the students had a lot of fun working together in pairs. Building gradually to speaking and listening activities following reading and writing practice proved to be an important key to success.

The focus on the second day was places and hometowns. The same basic formula was retained: read something (in this case, a paragraph about my hometown in upstate New York), then listen to a power point presentation on the same topic, answer comprehension questions and finally, answer questions about their own hometowns. The answers were used to formulate a short composition, following a template provided by me. The main activity of the day was a short speech based on that composition. They were to write out their speech on note cards and also prepare some kind of visual aid (usually a simple picture or map which was on the board while they spoke.) The students were encouraged to ask questions following their classmates' speeches, but only a handful did so. Following the speeches, we did a communicative group exercise on places in Japan they would like to visit or live and then another DVD listening task. At the end of the day we enjoyed a music listening exercise based on Mariya Takeuchi's *Let's Get Married*. My goal with that exercise was to give them some tips on how to study with music, such as attention to semantic and grammatical clues and working with rhymes.

The first activity on the morning of the third day was to write three interesting things they had done the previous evening on a note card and to then circulate around the room and hear about their classmates' experiences. They were allowed to use their note cards for the first two "chats" but encouraged not to read them with the third and fourth partners. Although in some cases the short conversations drifted into

Japanese, the students were clearly more comfortable communicating in English than during the first two days of the program. Following that activity, the students were given a short list of questions about their hobbies and interests. They were given time to work out their answers and then broke into small groups to share their answers. One member of each group volunteered to report back to the class. Having activated the necessary vocabulary, we went on to a DVD listening exercise in which eight young English speakers discussed their hobbies. The first time they listened with no written support and were encouraged to pick out any familiar words. A worksheet was then distributed to each pair of students and they were asked to work together to complete a cloze exercise. We listened a third time to check their answers, this time with subtitles on the screen. One of the take-homes of the course was how to use AV materials to enhance their English skills, and several students noted in their evaluations that these short exercises gave them ideas about how to use short DVD clips to continue their study of English.

The final activity, the cultural presentation project, was a big hit. By the afternoon of the third day the students had identified common interests, and broke into groups of four or five to prepare their posters and scripts. A few general guidelines were explained in advance, such as the importance of opening and closing comments and good eye contact. I provided the paper and markers, and they were allowed to go to the library or use the computer and printer in my office. The topics selected included such things as "Japanese Noodles", "Festivals in Kyoto", "Japanese Castles" and "Japanese Bathing Customs". I learned a lot! The project turned out to be a great equalizer, in that students with limited English ability often turned out to be great at drawing castles, knowledgeable about noodles, or do an amazing rendition of the *Koinobori Song*. The quality of the presentations was excellent, and the program participants obviously enjoyed working together on these projects. We videotaped each presentation and those students who did not have to rush off to catch a train enjoyed watching them together after class. It was a great way to end the course.

Concluding Comments

There were hugs, warm handshakes and even some tears at the close of the program. The course evaluations and students' comments confirmed what I already knew: that the students enjoyed jumping back into English, that they were excited about having the opportunity to communicate with me and with their classmates in English, and that they had built up confidence over the three-day program. Several said they intended to continue working on English on their own.

Mature students have been away from English for a long time and most have rarely been expected to actually speak or to develop listening skills in English. They do, however, have excellent study habits and so much to share. Far from being a negative or even a traumatic experience, rediscovering English in an intensive three-day course with an American teacher can become a positive part of their personal narrative. Certainly for me, at this stage in my career and in my life, creating these *Schooling* courses and having the opportunity to work with these interesting mature students is an important part of my own narrative.

Materials Cited

Stavoy, Joseph and Minoru Miyata. *Can't Stop Writing*. Tokyo: Sanshusya Press. 2014.
Stempleski, Susan. *World Link 1 Classroom DVD*. Tokyo: Heinle Cengage Learning. 2011.
Wilson, Ken. *Smart Choice 1* (2nd Edition) DVD. Oxford: OUP. 2013.