

Voices from the Field: Making Reading Fun for Communication Skills Development

*Nanako Ando**

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

Teaching Context

The teaching context is a private high school in central Japan which is founded on the teachings of Buddhism. Each grade has 13 to 19 classes. The number of students in each class is also large, with about 40 students. The students are in 10th grade with low-intermediate to high-intermediate proficiency levels. There are three 50-minute lessons a week. The textbook utilized is called *Blue Marble English Communication 1* from Suken Shuppan. As per school policy, students are encouraged to enter universities, preferably national, prestigious ones.

Problems

From my teaching experience, Japanese students are generally more comfortable with English reading and writing than daily conversations. One reason is that they are studying English to achieve good scores on their university entrance exams, which emphasize grammar rules and vocabulary. Here in Japan, these entrance exams are of great significance to many students due to a popular myth: getting into a top-notch university will guarantee one's happiness for life.

To prepare students for these high-stake exams, Japanese teachers often rely on the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM). However, these methods have not been effective for our students' lifelong language learning. What we need is a way to engage students with the target language in meaningful ways.

Solution

Instead of lecturing students on the textbook's content and grammar points, I decided to practice Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the classroom. CLT is based on the idea that language should be learned through interaction and meaningful conversation. In other words, students learn English for communication rather than memorization.

First, I wanted reading to be more meaningful, fun, and effective for the students. Following Sato and Hirano's (2014) example, I used a three-part framework for integrated skills: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. Before reading the textbook, I showed my students pictures from the text and ran a True/False activity (see Appendix A). This warmup turned out



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Website: Hawaii Pacific University <http://www.hpu.edu>

*Email: n-ando0516@aichi-h.ed.jp. Address: 57 Takenoyama, Iwasaki, Nisshin Aichi 470-0197, Japan

to be a great way for students to build excitement and make predictions about the reading. To my surprise, one student who had always been reluctant to read even asked, “Can we read now?” during this pre-reading stage.

For the while-reading stage, I gave students time to silently read the text for the main idea. Then, they read the text a second time, focusing on new vocabulary and answering the True/False questions from the pre-reading activity (see Appendix B). Students also marked meaningful chunks in sentences as they read. Marking meaningful chunks helps them process meaning and pay attention to sentence structures.

Finally, for the post-reading, I invited students to retell the main points of the reading using 1-2 PowerPoint slides. In class, they selected keywords from the text and shared their list with a partner. For homework, students individually created a slideshow using the main ideas and keywords they learned from the text (see Appendix C). By the next class, they used their slides to retell the main points of the reading in pairs or small groups. Appendix D shows two examples of students’ slides.

To further build upon students’ understanding of the reading, I also prepared follow-up activities. For instance, when they read about effective social plans used to solve social issues, I invited students to come up with their own plans to help society. From there, each student would then make a poster about their original plan with pictures and explanations. The culmination activity would involve a poster group session.

Conclusion

By making the changes above, I realized that my job as a teacher is to provide as many opportunities as possible for my students to practice the language in enjoyable ways. Although some low-level students are still struggling, I believe, in the long run, this solution will help students embrace the target language more.

Reading in another language is never easy. However, I realized that it is important to be creative and get students to join the class actively. Although there remain problems yet to be solved, there seem to be more students who enjoy reading in English compared to when I was teaching in traditional ways.

References

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- Sato, K., & Hirano, M. (2014). School-wide collaborative action research for curriculum development. In N. Sonoda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

About the author

Nanako Ando is an MA TESOL candidate at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. She is currently teaching English at a private high school in Aichi prefecture. She aims to assess how languages are acquired and enhanced in the communicative language teaching method while integrating other language skills.

Appendix A

Pre-Reading

What do you think this story is about? Talk with a partner.



Answer T (true) or F (false) before reading.

1. The focus of Expos has not changed since they began.
2. Through the 17 Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs), the United Nations hopes to make the world better.
3. Expos can be helpful for achieving our global goals.

Appendix B

While-Reading

⑧ ¹As we have seen, Expos provide many wonderful opportunities. ²However, the focus of Expos has been changing these days.

⑨ ³Today, the world is facing many problems: poverty, wars, environmental issues, and so on.

⁴To deal with these problems, the United Nations set the 17 Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) in 2015. ⁵With these goals, the United Nations hope to improve the world by 2030

through global cooperation. ⁶Expos can be opportunities to make positive change happen. ⁷We

can solve social problems together with knowledge from around the world.

⑩ ⁸Expos offer great opportunities for collaboration between countries. ⁹Therefore, every

country plays a crucial role in achieving our global goals. ¹⁰What kind of future will you design at the next Expo?

1. Share what you read with your partner. Try to use English as much as you can.

2. Try answering the T or F questions (Pre-Reading questions) again.

Check your answers with your partner in English. Use the dialogue below.

A: Let's talk about No.1. The answer is ~. What do you think?

B: I think so, too. / I don't think so. I think it is ~.

A: Then how about No.2? I think it is~. What do you think?

B: I think it is...

3. Answer the following questions. Check your answers with a partner.

- (1) What has been changing about Expos these days?
- (2) What problems is the world facing today?
- (3) When did the United Nations set the 17 SDGs?
- (4) What do Expos offer?



4. Vocabulary Input

Match the underlined English words with the Japanese translation.

- (1) We have to deal with environmental problems.
- (2) Some people are living in poverty.
- (3) This is a democratic nation.
- (4) The company provides good service.
- (5) There should be more cooperation.

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Play janken-pon (Japanese version of rock, paper, scissors). Winners read the English sentences, and losers say the underlined words in English and Japanese. When you have finished, change the role. Try to memorize all words and phrases!

5. Let's practice reading!

The 1st time read the story with the teacher. Check your pronunciation of difficult words. For the 2nd time, read the sentences with your partner by taking turns. The 3rd time, shadowing practice; first practice with the CD. Then play jyak-en-pon. Winners read first and losers shadow after the winner. Switch roles in each paragraph.

6. Speed Reading

On your own, read silently while timing. (_____ seconds)



Appendix C

Post-Reading

Write a brief summary of the text you have read. Write at least **3** sentences. Try to include at least **1** thing from each paragraph.

Summary Slide

It needs to include...

- Key points
- Pictures related to the topic
- 1~2 slides



Appendix D

Student A's work:

What wii Expos role in our future ?



The world has many problems.

→poverty,wars,environmental issue.

↓ To solve

17 Sustainable Development Goals.

(SDGs) in 2015

It hope to make the world better by2030

What's important from now on

1. Expos offer great opportunities for collaboration among countries.
2. They can play a role in realizing our global goals.



Student B's work:

SDG's And future



Expo has been changing.
For the world.



Many countries protect the green for the future.

SDG's efforts hundreds.
These days many people can't eat enough meal.

Now people must stop to make a war.