外国語言語教室で柔軟性のある思考の奨励法
Promoting Flexible Thinking in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract : The foreign language student can make better use of personal language skills through the use of flexible thinking. This paper presents practical methods for promoting flexible thinking through task- centered activities in the foreign language class.

1. Introduction

Thinking flexibly is the ability to look at things from a different angle and often in a completely new way. Anyone can apply flexible thinking once they are familiar with the approach (for a description of this approach see the following paper: "Flexible Thinking in Foreign Language Learning" Offner 2001). Teachers of a foreign language can promote the use of flexible thinking in their classes to enhance the learning process.

2. Basis of Flexible Thinking

To apply flexible thinking in the foreign language classroom in Japan, it is necessary to begin with the premise that English should not be taught for the sole purpose of passing entrance examinations or to separate the good student from the poor student. The basis for the learning of a foreign language should be orientated toward some other goal, such as use in the work place, travel, research of topics in the target language, etc., rather than simply language acquisition itself. Latent knowledge needs to be converted into use through understanding enhanced by flexible thinking.

Students of a foreign language often complain that they have learned the grammar and completed the series of textbooks from beginner to advanced, that they can pass the exams showing that they "know" the language, but still they cannot use it: they do not know how to communicate with it. This is because they have had very little opportunity to do so. From the start, students need to be given task-centered and goal-oriented practice so they can see how the language can be put to use to accomplish other things, other goals, rather than merely repeating the language out loud.

The process of learning, and teaching, a foreign language should therefore be goal-oriented through the use of such activities as discussion of a topic of interest, the solving of a problem, the acting out of roles, songs, guessing games, etc. which one reaches through the medium of the foreign language. Upon completion of the activity, one has the feeling of accomplishment—of having actually achieved something and learned something in the process. The abstract idea of having in one's possession knowledge of the language is substituted for actually having done something useful with the language. Few people wish to have something merely for the sake of having it. The desire for ownership stems from the potential it provides to the owner: the ability to do something which without it being in one's possession one could not otherwise do.

3. Using Flexible Thinking

In the following exercises, it needs to be made clear to the student that there is no one right way to say something. There are many ways to express the same thought

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or opinion. The students should be aware that English is not an exact science based on hard, indisputable grammatical facts and rules. It does not necessarily conform to specific patterns. It is versatile. The students need to be provided with the opportunity to exercise their imaginations and guessing ability. Also, the students need the chance to take a general idea and put it into different forms using a variety of sentence structures, words, expressions, etc. Flexibility is of the greatest importance here. Possibly a few exercises in the students' native language will make this clear and open them up to the wide range of possibilities.

To reinforce this concept in English, or the target language, students could be given simple tasks such as the chance to write in notebooks with the emphasis on communicability and not on spelling or grammar. Another good warm-up exercise is to show a picture to the class and have each student say something in the target language about the picture, no matter how simple or obvious. This allows students to hear how others would express the same thought and to expose them to the vocabulary others would choose and the unique order in which the words could be arranged when applied to that same thought or idea. In this case, comprehensibility is the measure.

The process can be further developed, when working with the students, by pointing out a few of the common words which arise and go over the many possible ways to use the word to elucidate the idea of many ways in flexible thinking. An added advantage is that the word chosen becomes a more useful word as it gains flexibility in meaning expanded from the fixed usage in the text or lesson. Take, for example, the word "work," which could be used in the following ways: "It doesn't work," "I work on Sunday," "Work for something," "Work at something," "Work around something," "Work out a problem," "Work the machine," "Work out (body building)," etc. Antonyms and synonyms could also be provided.

3.1 Visual Activities

Let's look now at a few exercises or activities to see how flexible thinking can be promoted in the language classroom. The most obvious exercises, in terms of relevancy, are visual describing activities. The first is "Drawings."[1] Students pair up (or pairs could pair up)

with one side having a picture, a design, a map or some visual cluster given to them which they must describe to the other side using English. Hand-drawn abstract drawings (with shapes and lines), carefully made ink blots (which allow for more open interpretation leading to lively discussion), or simple figures could be used. Students may ask questions of each other, but no looking at the pictures is allowed until the activity is over. Before the students begin the activity, it is important to clarify exactly what level of detail is desired in duplicating the original picture. The point here, of course, is first and foremost, communication. The activity also provides excellent hearing, comprehension, and guessing practice. It has less to do with correct grammar or flawless English than simply, was the English understandable? It is a useful way of practicing English with a specific objective in mind.

Another similar activity is "Find the Difference" (Yorkey 1985, Picture Differences p. 11). This can be done on an OHP, or by distributing copies of two similar pictures with a number of differences. The students are given a few minutes to spot the differences and make a note of them. The teacher, then, asks around having each student point out or explain one difference in English. This again is a good way for the students to see how the same idea may be expressed in a variety of ways as their classmates may express a visual difference in a completely different way from how they themselves would have. Depending on the level of the students, full sentences or single words or adjectives could be required to explain a difference. A more difficult version of Find the Difference is to give pairs, or small groups of students, a picture and they must find the differences without looking at the other group's picture by describing and asking questions about the pictures. It is a good idea to use very simple pictures with obvious differences for this exercise.

"Eye Witness" (Granger 1980, Memory 5 p. 37) is another visual game. This one entails the showing to the class a scene, for example people on a busy street, and then hiding it from view after a few minutes. The object is for the students to describe what they saw in as much detail as possible. Again, comprehensibility is the only criterion. The teacher can help by prompting, questioning, and cross-checking. A large picture, OHP, or a scene from a video can be used. It is beneficial for

other students to note the different things which each individual notices and to hear the unique ways they choose to, or are able to, express them. If the student-generated sentences are written on the board and combined, the students will further be able to see different ways of viewing the same subject and this will open them up to a variety of interpretations and broaden their outlook.

The final visual exercise is "Odd One Out." In the traditional version, individual or groups of students are given a list of words and they must choose which word, or words, do not fit. To encourage discussion, lists with no obvious odd one out are distributed requiring students to justify their selection. However, an advanced version of this exercise can be done using pictures which requires more imagination and open discussion (Hill 1990, Odd Man Out p. 41). Groups of six to eight students are given pictures which are different, but similar. As the students talk about the pictures, they must come to a decision as to which is the odd one out. The student who has the picture which is being singled out should try to argue to stay in the group. To provide further variety, especially if the exercise is done more than once, is to make the goal for each student to try to argue in favor of their picture to be chosen as the odd one out.

3.2 Grouping and Guessing Activities

Guessing games are also useful for presenting the idea of flexibility and variety. One such game is "Sets" (Clark 1985, Categories p. 47). Students are divided into groups of about four. Each group is given an abstract quality such as a color, shape, texture, function, etc. and the group must think of all the things which posses that quality. Then, taking turns, each group reads their set of words to the rest of the class and the class guesses the quality which all the things in the set have in common. For example, a set might include the following words: letter, door, can, gift, box, window, bottle, store and suitcase. The quality is one of function: things that are opened. If the quality were "red," concepts could also be allowed so that along with common names for things such as fire truck, apple, stop sign, tomato, etc., words expressing an idea such as "communism" could be included.

A slightly more difficult version of Sets is "Connections" (Ur 1981, Associations p. 36). Instead of listing things (or ideas) which actually posses a given quality, the list can be comprised of things or concepts simply associated with the central theme. For example, if the theme were "wood," the list could include: paper, pencil, tree, book, letter, fire, cabin, grain, saw, carving, etc. Groups may need to explain the connections for some of their more difficult ideas providing further communicative practice.

Another similar game is "Sorting" (Ur 1981, Rating p. 68). This activity also allows for a variety of possibilities and encourages unique and flexible thinking. The students are divided into groups and each group is provided with the same list of ten or more words. The groups sort the list into categories of their own choice. The groups then inform the class of the number of categories and read the words in each category. The class must try to guess the criteria. For example, the list distributed to the students may be composed of the following words: bear, man, cat, baby, eagle, boy, butterfly, tiger, ant, fox, hen, frog, etc. Possible criteria for sorting the list into categories could be: human/non-human, two/four/six legs, tails/no tails, animal/bird/ insect, threatening/non-threatening, etc. The use of dictionaries could be encouraged. Often groups will think of using the same criterion for sorting their list, but place the same word in different categories, again revealing different ways of thinking and providing chances for further explanation and discussion making "real" and purposeful use of the language.

A fourth kind of guessing game is "Ranking" (Klippel 1984, Rank order and Qualities p. 60). Groups of students are given the same list of words and asked to rank the words from most to least according to a criterion of their own choosing. They then read their list to the class which must guess the criterion. For example, the theme could be sports and the list could include: basketball, soccer, jogging, swimming, cycling, mountain climbing, football, aerobic dance, fishing, F-1 racing, hang gliding, etc. Possible criteria used to rank these sports could be healthy, interesting to do or watch, dangerous, expensive, etc.

Another way to make this activity more communicative, is to provide each group with the same criterion to use in ranking. Few groups will rank items in exactly the same order and thus opens the activity up for discussion or at least provides a chance to hear differing viewpoints as each group gives a reason for their choices. For advanced students, this activity could be made into a more

visual exercise with the use of sets of pictures which are circulated in each group of four to six students (Lindstromberg 1990, Theme ranking p. 49). Each student decides what they believe to be the main theme (or themes) of each picture and the group proceeds to discuss the themes ranking them in order of most important or interesting. These exercises are a natural for initiating discussion and clearly emphasize the differences in thinking and ways of looking at things as they have disagreement built into the process.

3.3 Survival Activities

The "NASA game" (Klippel 1984, p. 64) is another well known game similar to the previous activities as it requires the ranking of items followed by discussion. In this activity, students are given an imaginary, but realistic, situation where their survival is at stake and given a list of items to rank in the order of most useful to their survival to the least. The NASA game setting has the group of students stranded on the moon a few hundred kilometers away from their space station or spaceship and they must choose which items from a predetermined list are the most useful for their survival and for reaching their destination.

A common variation of NASA is to have the students stranded on a desert island and they must choose what items they would need for survival (Rooks 1981, What Articles Do I Take? p. 27). In setting up the situation, the teacher can decide what amenities are available such as solar power, ample vegetation for food, a good natural source of potable water, etc. The situations can be infinitely varied, but it is very important that the situation is well thought out and specified and that the students are very clear on what they are facing and what is expected of them. Students could be encouraged to make their own situations and rank a list of items of their own choosing. Very simple situations can be used such as: what items are most useful when going shopping downtown, going to a friend's house, going on a short trip, going for a drive, etc. These type of activities have a high level of interest requiring flexible thinking as students draw upon their personal experiences and, as reasons for their choices are given, students move easily into discussion which naturally present a variety of viewpoints.

4. Encouraging Discussion

Often students find it difficult to form an opinion and give a reason for it on short notice, and the pressure of talking to a group makes the exercise all the more stressful. To "ease" the student into any one of the above activities where a choice and reason is required, the following approach is recommended.

First, have the students make pairs—preferably a partner they are familiar or comfortable with, usually some one they sit next to—and give each student their own list. Give them a few minutes to go over the list individually and make some choices and think of some reasons. Allow them to consult with their partner for meaning and clarifications at this time, but they should make their own choices. It is not necessary for them to make all choices at this time—they simply need time to think it through once on their own and familiarize themselves with the information. Second, have students discuss the choices with their partner and draw up one list that both agree on. They should also try to provide reasons for their choices. More time should be spent on this part, but again, it is not necessary that they finish the entire list. Third, have each pair join another pair making a group of four. At this time they should discuss the choices more fully and try to come to an agreement on a single list of choices, including reasons. Finally, if time permits, each group could be asked to state their choice and give a reason for it to the class. Other groups could then be asked to agree or disagree with the choice, giving their own reasons for supporting or rejecting it.

This method makes the selection process non-threatening and takes the pressure off individual students so they will not need to take sole responsibility for potentially "foolish" choices or "faulty" reasoning since the list becomes a group effort which necessarily includes compromises. The focus shifts from a competitive search for the most "intelligent" choices accompanied by insightful and profound reasons to one of open discussion and cooperation to create a list everyone is comfortable with as a joint group effort.

5. Conclusion

Throughout these exercises, teachers make good use of their single most unique asset: their students. The class is a great pool of minds offering a wealth of variety, with each student adding his or her individual and singular

way of looking at and explaining things. These activities are interesting to do not only for the student, but for the teacher as well, since there are no single correct answers: each class is free to come up with fresh ideas and viewpoints. Lists of words, and themes pertaining to them, can easily be changed to further add variety. In the end, these activities encourage the students to look at things from different angles and to "play" with the language as they are required to think flexibly while using the language for goal-oriented communication rather than for unthinking repetition.

Notes

1 These activities are not original. Although they may not be presented in their original form, similar activities or variations of them may be found in numerous ESL activity game or pairwork books. When first presented, the activity or idea is often followed by an author, date, alternate name of activity and page number (books are referenced at the end of this paper) where more information for that particular type of activity can be found.

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