

Coaching for Communication

コーチング・フォー・コミュニケーション

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本稿の両著者は長年英語教育にたずさわってきたと同時に長年体育競技にもたずさわってきた。体育競技のコーチが使う革新的な指導方法ESLの授業に応用できないかを考察することが本稿の目的である。このコーチ法は¹⁾選手の意識を高めることと²⁾選手に自己責任を負わせることで選手の業績を上げるという方法である。

TESOLの先行研究、学習者の調査、それに著者の経験を通して、上記の意識向上、責任負担の2点を増す事によってESLクラスにおける学習者のコミュニケーション能力を向上する事ができることを論証すると同時に体育競技のコーチ法をどのようにしてESL授業に応用できるかを論じる。

All teachers strive to improve their students' performance. The authors of this paper recently came upon a book which presents an innovative understanding of the role of the coach in the business world. With years of experience in both teaching and coaching, we felt this new insight into coaching was very suitable for the ESL classroom. This paper will explain this new approach to coaching and offer some practical applications for the classroom. In order to provide some insight into the motivation, goals and impressions of Japanese university students we questioned 247 of our pupils.

Upon hearing the word coaching, some might conjure the image of a boisterous cheerleader, encouraging the students to give a greater effort, barking out orders like a drill sergeant. The reader might wonder what applications coaching might have for the classroom, except for the occasional injection of high powered energy. The view of coaching that is presented by John Whitmore in "Coaching for Performance," differs completely from popular notions of the traditional coach. This new type of coach is one who is a facilitator, "a back-stage prompter" (McGown, 2001, p.4), one who through empathy can unlock the student's full potential. The keys to tapping into all the latent knowledge the students have stored in six years of English study are elevating the students' awareness and their responsibility. The teacher as coach will change from one who instructs to one who is attentive, patient, detached, supportive and aware; one who allows the students to take responsibility, to make mistakes, and to be aware of their goals.

To make students and teachers aware of the learning process, it is necessary to know what the students feel are their most difficult problems. We gave a survey to 247 college students in Japan. One question asked, “What difficulties do you have in studying English?” The five most common answers were: listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, speaking and not enough time to study. Teachers in the role of coach encourage students to brainstorm solutions to the problem they face. When students find solutions they will gradually feel more empowered as they solve what once appeared to be insurmountable problems. The coach always allows the students to discover their own answers. And if there is difficulty in finding an answer to a certain problem, the teacher can suggest some ideas, but allow the student to decide which one is best for him or her.

Another characteristic of a good coach, which can be used for great benefit by the teacher, is to see the full potential of the student. This is quite important in the classroom. Often teachers focus on the performance of the students and equate that with their potential. Even students recognize that they rarely use their full potential in the classroom. Students were asked, “What percentage of effort do you give to your English study?” Our survey revealed that students believe that they use merely 58% of their potential effort. Students are clearly not pushing themselves to even what they perceive they are capable of. One of the coach’s goals is to maximize the effort of the trainee. The teacher must also encourage students to use their full potential and create an environment in which the students can give their best performance.

One way a teacher can do this is by challenging commonly held perceptions. English is often seen as difficult and in some way as an “opponent”. Many Japanese students feel a certain phobia or frustration about English. They have been studying it for so long and can still not communicate effectively. If the teacher can challenge their students to see that English can be an aid in helping them to deepen and broaden their minds, it may provide a new image or perception of English for students. Ideally, the teacher would have the students discover this on their own. Another deeply held perception is that mistakes are to be avoided. Students have been trained for years to see mistakes as “bad” and correct answers as “good”. This creates perfectionists who are hesitant to utter any words out of fear of making mistakes. It is imperative for the teacher to show that mistakes are a necessary important part of learning, and that no one can improve without making mistakes. So, mistakes should be celebrated in class and the students’ efforts recognized.

One of the fundamental tasks of the teacher is to help students improve their self-esteem. All classroom and homework tasks should be achievable, and upon completing them, the student should be sincerely commended. The basic formula of a) clear tasks with b) student commitment and c) removal of any obstacles to completing the task should be repeated over and over to allow the student to feel confident, secure and successful. Success breeds success. Teachers must release their desire to control students. They must slowly allow students to make decisions and take ownership and greater responsibility for their learning. In such an environment students will begin to realize their full potential.

This approach to coaching can best be understood not as a technique, nor as some specific information to pass onto students, but rather as a way of being, a way of interacting with students. Students have always experienced being told or instructed what to do. This is especially true in English class in Japanese high schools where the translation-grammar style is common. Students often listen to the teacher explain and translate texts. There is no real responsibility on the part of the students. They are only responsible for memorizing some words for the test. Clearly, when one does something by oneself, rather than just being shown, the retention is higher. This can begin in the class with greater levels of responsibility and awareness.

One of the two central tenets of the coach as teacher is awareness. How can heightened awareness improve a student's performance? According to Krashen's input hypothesis, input is a central part of the L2 acquisition process. We acquire more language only when exposed to comprehensible input (1982). A higher level of awareness coexists with a greater degree of discernment. When the student is more "present" in the classroom they are more activated and receptive to input. How can the teacher coach the student to a higher level of awareness?

Awareness is knowing what is happening around you. Self-awareness is knowing what is happening to you. By bringing students' attention to bear on what they are doing, we increase their awareness. One example can be seen in our survey question which asked students to tell us about their nervousness while speaking. Were they most nervous before, during or after speaking? They were to evaluate their level for each time phase. Most students' nervousness decreased as they progressed through the stages of speaking. (See Figure 1) The key point is to make students' aware of how they feel. As John Whitmore explains, "Body awareness brings with it automatic self-correction... Internal awareness increases body efficiency, which in turn results in improved technique" (2004, p.71).

Nervousness Involved with Communication

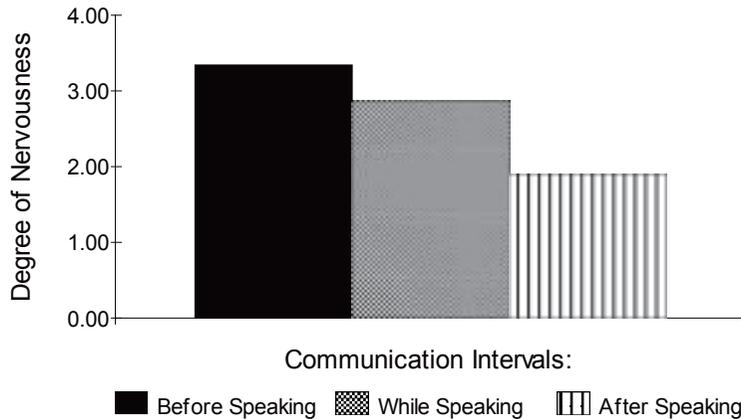


Figure 1

In a dramatic example from “Coaching for Performance”, we can see how a coach helps one runner to focus on how his body is feeling.

Joe: My calves feel stiff.

Mike: Just place your attention on your calves and tell me exactly what you feel in them?

Joe: A tightness down the back.

Mike: When do you feel it? All the time in both calves or what?

Joe: No, just when I push off, and it is more on my right than on my left.

Mike: Give your right calf a tightness rating on a scale of one to ten, with ten being as tight as you can imagine.

Joe: Actually it is less now, but it's about five and the left leg is three.

Mike: What is it now?

Joe: It's down to a three (Whitmore, 2004, p.78).

If a student brings attention to a problem, it improves function and increases efficiency. Using writing journals and asking descriptive questions can help the students to focus on their communication. Some examples of questions might be: How did you feel when...? What was the most difficult part of the assignment for you?

Responsibility is the second tenet around which this new coaching style is centered. Very simply put, when students take greater responsibility for any action their level of commitment increases.

When their level of commitment is greater in any activity their level of performance also increases. Students who are continually told what to do will tend not to take a high level of responsibility for their learning. Our survey showed that students felt they were more responsible for their learning (56%) than were their teachers (44%). The higher the percentage on the student's side, the higher level of commitment that student will exhibit towards learning. In fact, when importance of becoming a good English speaker was compared to the responsibility shared between student and teacher, a positive correlation was found. Students who chose the value 1-3 (learning to speak English was very important) measured their personal responsibility at 57.2% while the students who chose values 4-7 (learning to speak English was less important) had a personal responsibility level of 49.3%.

This finding was also supported by comparing other data from the student questionnaire. We compared the effort students felt they gave in class to how responsible they believed they were for learning English. (See Figure 2) Those students who measured their effort from 73.5% to 100% believed that their level of responsibility was 59.5%. Those students whose effort fell in the range from 60% to 70% reported their responsibility as 56.0%. The students whose stated effort was 50% or less felt they were 53.6% responsible. These results indicate a correlation between student effort and how responsible they feel for their own learning. Students who give less effort believe the teacher is increasingly responsible for their learning.

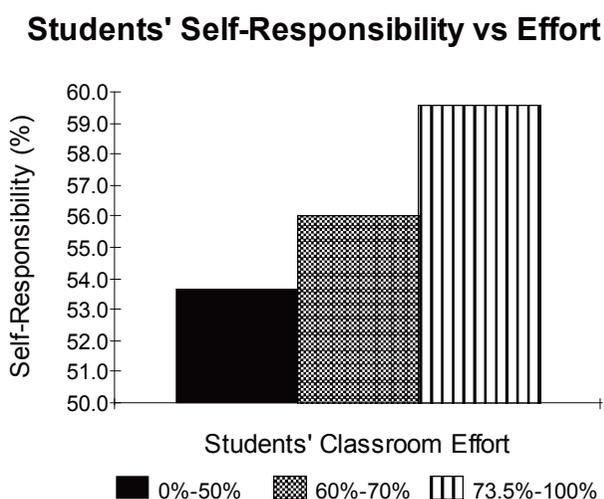


Figure 2

A particular study shows that students who rely more on formal instruction tend to take less initiative in the language classroom. Those students who feel the teacher should take charge of the class are less likely to search out speaking partners, and will generate less input in classroom interactions. Those students who more actively seek interactions with the target language will clearly increase their input and be able to “test more hypotheses about the shape and use of the L2 thus accounting for increased success” (Richard-Amato, 1988, p.35). From these findings, we can see how important it is for students to understand the significance of accepting greater responsibility for their own learning. For those students who feel they are an empty vessel waiting for the teacher to pour some knowledge directly into the brain, it may be time to start a new cycle. How can we attempt to change some old habits?

In the English classroom the best way to improve responsibility is to increase choices. It may seem counter-intuitive to some educators to suggest that students can make decisions which may alter the direction of the class. In fact, students might suspect the teacher is unsure of himself. It is important that teachers explain what they are attempting to do before offering the students such choices. Students should understand that accepting responsibility for their learning will lead to higher levels of success.

A common problem in the English classroom is the difficulty that the instructor faces in reducing the amount of Japanese that is spoken. While some teachers institute point-penalty systems or other forms of negative reinforcement, others ineffectively implore their students to speak only in the target language. In keeping with the spirit of empowering the students to accept greater responsibility for their learning, the authors offer a possible solution.

After being put in pairs or groups at the beginning of class, but prior to the primary language activity, students will be asked to put their names on a pair/group contract as well as write the percentage of English they plan on using during the day's class. The target percentage is chosen solely by the student without any criticism or praise on the part of the teacher. At the conclusion of the class, the students will write the percentage of English that they felt they actually used. These contracts will be collected by the teacher and can be used as data to chart students' progress as well as an assessment of the students' perceived difficulty or ease of the class. Later in the term, the contract can also be modified to represent an agreed upon pair/group percentage as a way of sharing the responsibility and fostering a team-like learning environment.

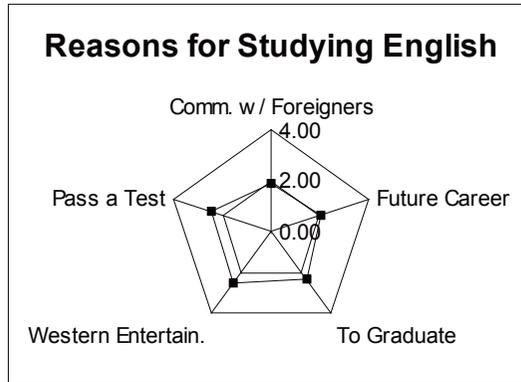


Figure 3

Setting goals in the classroom is another method to increase the choices that students may make in class. In fact, setting goals also increases awareness as it helps student focus on why they are in the classroom, and on the purpose and reason for the effort they will give. At the start of the term, teachers can assess their students as to their goals for that semester. We asked our students what their goals were for the English class and the results were rather interesting. (See Figure 3) The top reason our students chose was to communicate with foreigners. This was closely followed by the chance to use English in a future career. Coming in third was to graduate from college. The last two reasons “to pass a test” and “to understand western music, TV programs or movies” were statistically even. Goals can, of course, be set for various time periods: each class, each month, etc.

As important as goals are in helping students focus, they need a process to achieve them. Teachers can help students to realistically match their aspirations with a plan to reach their goal. If a student feels it is very important to become a good English speaker, it should be made clear that a certain number of hours must also be spent on extracurricular study. Students can generate various options as to how they can practice English. It is critical to have the students generate ideas, to empower them with the sense that they are taking control of their education process. They will be much more likely to work harder and realize the goals if they have chosen the goals themselves. Of course, the teacher can make suggestions as to how to work on English outside of the class.

Once students have made a plan they must realistically assess how likely they are to follow it. They should choose a number from 1 to 10 with 1 representing the greatest likelihood of

completing the plan. If the student does not choose a number in the 1 to 3 range, it suggests that their schedule is unrealistic. They should modify their plan until they can confidently state that they are likely to complete it. Of course this is not set in stone. If the students find it too difficult or too easy, they can change it. The important point is that their goals are based on some realistic plan of action. Many students earnestly state that they want to speak to foreigners. It is the role of the teacher to clearly demonstrate that it requires an effort beyond the classroom. It is also the role of the teacher to help them realize their full potential as students. This can only be done when the students take the responsibility upon themselves.

To review, to increase the commitment of students in the classroom, the students need a sense of empowerment. This occurs when they accept a greater deal of responsibility for their learning. Of course, this is only possible if their self-awareness arises as well. The teacher's role needs to shift from that of a traditional educator to that of a facilitator and guide. It is the abdication of a degree of power on the part of the teacher that will lead to greater empowerment for all classroom participants.

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