Teaching English as a Sociologist

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This essay provides a general overview of English I and English II, which I have taught since spring semester 2010. I have been fortunate to teach English as well as Sociology at the Sociology Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Teikyo University. Teaching English as a second language is a new and exciting project for me since I don’t have a degree in TESOL or previous experience teaching English. However, I greatly appreciate this opportunity to use my own assets. During sociology lectures, I often introduce Peter F. Drucker’s quote, “build on your own strength (Drucker, 2002[1966]).” I applied this strategy to my new project and found my own strengths: 1) doctorate study and research in the U.S.; 2) a background in teaching in English; 3) work experience in the U.S.; and 4) various cultural experiences. I obtained M.A. and Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Hawaii, which gives me strong academic grounding. Furthermore, as a non-native speaker, I know what it is like to have to work to develop speaking and writing in English. Thus, I am able to conduct English class using sociological knowledge alongside my own personal experiences. In addition, I worked at a not-for-profit venture for one year in the state of Hawaii and acquired a decent level of business English. I am happy to share my stories about working experiences and introduce effective business English, as well as my experiences in community service and social activities. In this essay, I will describe my lesson plans, in-class exercises, and homework in
English I and English II.

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1. Lesson Plans for Academic Year 2010

English I and English II are required classes for freshmen in the Sociology Department. Students take a placement test before enrollment and are assigned to classes according to their levels of proficiency in English. Instructors are able to select the textbook based on class proficiency level. The Sociology Department provides a common syllabus for all English I classes, but contents are somewhat different from class to class. The syllabus defines the objectives of English I and English II as follows:

- English I (Spring semester 2010): Get more familiar with English and discover the joy of learning English. Students are required to review basic grammar and communication through dialogue sentences.
- English II (Fall semester 2010): Develop skills in English proficiency. Students are required to understand and express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in English.

For my students in the 2010 academic year, I selected a text entitled English Edge—Basic English Practice for College Students, published by KINSEIDO. I believe this is one of the most suitable textbooks because it provides effective practice to enhance the understanding of vocabulary, grammar, reading, and listening. In addition, I selected supplemental exercises to prepare the students for the TOEIC and EIKEN tests, since obtaining high scores on these tests is supposed to be a strong motivator for many students. In general, scores on the TOEIC test and levels on the EIKEN test are an important element in building an attractive CV for job hunting in Japan. In addition, there is a growing tendency for high scores on the TOEIC test to be important for promotion in Japan. In light of these
circumstances, I reserved time for preparing for the TOEIC and EIKEN tests.

Getting familiar with songs and movies in English also helps to drive students’ motivation to study English. In fact, many students enjoy watching movies and dramas in English. To select the songs and movies, I conducted a survey of the students and took their preferences into consideration as much as possible. As a result, for songs, I chose “Over the Rainbow,” “Blue Hawaii,” and “Yesterday Once More.” On the other hand, for movies, I selected short clips of The Sound of Music, Mary Poppins, and Breakfast at Tiffany’s, and showed the entire length of Shrek and High School Musical. High School Musical was selected because some students requested it. Movies do not always reflect real life, but I have found that some movies provide great opportunities to learn how people communicate with parents, teachers, and friends and how we learn from interactions. Moreover, movies provide great material for sociological analysis.

Beyond the test preparation and audiovisual materials, I also used supplemental materials to teach basic business etiquette tips. As a part of this training, I shared my experiences working at a not-for-profit venture in the state of Hawaii. Basic business etiquette topics included: 1) differences between office professional and office casual, 2) what to wear for job interviews, and 3) how to behave during job interviews.

In sum, the materials that I employed for English I and II and their objectives were:
1) Textbook: review and develop basic vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening, and speaking
2) Supplemental exercises: prepare for the TOEIC test and EIKEN test
3) Movies: learn idioms and dialogue; increase cultural knowledge
4) Music: enjoy listening and learn pronunciation, vocabulary, and
Supplemental materials: learn basic business etiquette tips. Because I used a variety of materials in each class, time management was essential. This was always dependent upon students' reactions; however, the typical schedule was as follows:

4:30–4:35 Take attendance and do an icebreaker
4:35–4:45 Listen to songs and review selected sentences and idioms/Learn basic business etiquette tips/Talk dialogue
4:45–5:15 Watch movies and review selected dialogues
5:15–6:00 Question-and-answer session using the textbook

2. In-class Exercises

On the first day of class, I asked students in Japanese if they knew what to say when a teacher was taking attendance in English. They did not know, since their former teachers had taken attendance in Japanese. Thus, I introduced students to raising their hands and answering “here” or “present” when I was taking attendance. Taking attendance in English is a very effective icebreaker.

As the syllabi indicate, I explain to students the need to prepare for each class and to review their materials after class. I encourage students to study with their classmates because this provides a great opportunity to make friends, exchange their ideas, and achieve in-depth understanding. In my personal experience as a student at the University of Hawaii, both undergraduate and graduate students would commonly set up informal study groups for each class. I actively participated in such groups, through which I made friends and learned a lot.

First, during class, I paid attention to myself: I try to maintain positive and encouraging perceptions, expectations, reactions, and behaviors
towards the students. This is a chicken-and-egg situation; that is, the teacher’s positive reactions enhance students’ academic performance, and students’ good performance leads the teacher to have positive reactions. However, early research showed that teachers’ perceptions, expectations, reactions, and behaviors correlate with students’ achievement (Alvidrez and Weinstein, 1999). As a sociologist, I believe that teachers’ verbal and non-verbal communications have a strong impact on students’ academic performance and that this constitutes a self-fulfilling prophecy. American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1968) described the notion of self-fulfilling prophecy as follows: The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the original false conception come “true”. This spurious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning. (p. 477)

Based on Merton’s theory, it is crucial for teachers to send the message, both verbally and non-verbally, of “you can develop your English proficiency more and more” to students. This helps to depict a positive prophecy and, in the long-run, brings about high academic performance. Whenever a student chooses the wrong answer, I never say things such as, “That was an easy question. You did not prepare for today’s class, did you?” or “How can you make a mistake on such an easy question?” Instead, I repeatedly mention that it is important not to worry about making mistakes, such as incorrect pronunciation, grammatical errors, wrong answers, etc. I shared many stories with them about my Ph.D. studies at the University of Hawaii. I would tell them about how I would misunderstand what my advisor would say or how I would speak out in English inappropriately during in-class discussion. Then I would tell them how such experiences improved my English proficiency. I
repeatedly sent the message that these episodes were not shameful experiences, but positive and fruitful experiences from which I learned a lot. Also, these kinds of stories are supposed to encourage students to not hesitate to speak English and to actively progress in learning English.

On the other hand, I also shared a sad story with them: Mr. Yoshihiro Hattori, a Japanese exchange student in the State of Louisiana, visited the wrong house and, unfortunately, got shot by the house owner on Halloween night. The house owner yelled “Freeze!” before shooting Mr. Hattori (Talley, 1993). However, this sad story is not only meant to show the possible consequences that can stem from poor skills in English, but it also promotes an understanding of American cultural elements, such as gun culture, safety, and risk management. In order to broaden my students’ skills in intercultural communications and cultural knowledge, I bring both my experiences and empirical research findings into the classroom.

In order to encourage my students, I am willing to share time with them before and after class. I always go to the classroom early and talk to students. This is an effective technique for remembering their names and learning their preferences. Also, it is effective in creating a comfortable atmosphere where students can maintain and/or enhance their aspirations. For example, one student opened her textbook and briefly reviewed it before my class. I noticed that her textbook was highlighted in several colors and comments had been added. I praised such diligent work. Also, I noted that another student had written down new idioms to remember before class. I encouraged him to keep up the good work and suggested that he might try to remember idioms by reading and speaking as well.
3. Homework

I gave students homework during winter break. The homework was to complete a CV. Before the winter break, I showed several sample CVs. I also shared my experiences in completing my CV and applying for several positions. Most students are planning on working in Japan after graduation. At this point, CVs in English do not seem to be necessary for their job searches. However, the completion of a CV is sociologically important in terms of its manifest function and its latent function. Its manifest function is to broaden their CV writing skills. Its latent function is to send them a message: “you can go anywhere once you develop your English proficiency.” “You can go anywhere” is one the messages that made a deep impression on me during my commencement ceremony at the University of Hawaii. Such latent function is also related to the self-fulfilling prophecy.

4. Plan-Do-Check-Act Circle (PDCA) for Academic Year 2011

In order to provide the class with high quality instruction, it is essential to revise lesson plans based on the PDCA circle. Generally, I received a favorable evaluation, which was formally conducted by Teikyo University. Also, I got similarly favorable comments and reactions directly from students. In order to make it easier for them to set goals for studying English, I decided to choose a different textbook: Essential Reading for the TOEIC Test, published by KINSEIDO. This textbook specifically provides an effective opportunity to prepare for the reading section on the TOEIC test. However, while using it, students are also able to review basic vocabulary, grammar, and reading and increase their cultural knowledge. In addition, this textbook provides vocabulary lists for each section, which helps students to review. Regarding listening materials, I used movies. Since TOEIC test scores are one of the necessary elements
of job hunting in Japan, it is never too early to start to prepare for the TOEIC test. In order to strengthen vocabulary, I conducted one quiz per chapter.

During class, I found that several students tended to hesitate regarding speaking and listening in English. Thus, I decided to use movies for the listening and speaking sections. For the spring semester 2011, I provided American movies and pop music. I showed High School Musical (full length) and The Sound of Music (short clips). In terms of music, I played “Right here waiting” by Richard Marx and “Take your sweet time” by Jesse McCartney. For the fall semester 2011, I am showing UK movies and music, such as Pride and Prejudice (full length). Pride and Prejudice is quite interesting materials for sociological analysis in terms of gender inequality, dating policy, romantic love ideology, and so on. For example, students are able to learn about and discuss the fact that, in early 19th-century England, gentry-class sons were able to succeed to a fortune whereas daughters did not have such a right.

5. Conclusion

This essay provides my teaching strategy, experiences, and PDCA Circle for English I and II. As noted earlier, teaching English as a second language is a new project for me. However, I believe that I have provided enjoyable and effective English classes by using my strengths, experiences, and sociological knowledge. As of spring 2011, I have received favorable evaluations from students, which has further encouraged me to provide a high-quality class. I plan to continue doing my best for future semesters. Finally, I am grateful to Teikyo University for having provided me with such a great opportunity.

References
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