

## Designing Tasks for Learner-Centered Teaching: Suggestions for Meaningful Tasks

OHASHI Jun\* and OHASHI Hiroko\*\*

Key words: **communicative, meaningful, communicative strategies, learner-centered, process**

Based on two surveys implemented in English-speaking countries (U.K. and New Zealand) concerning teaching materials, the authors point out that there is a great demand for supplementary materials which enable the teacher to further his/her personal teaching techniques.

First, activities and tasks of some popular textbooks are observed and a comparison is made of what teachers need with what the textbooks offer, and how the gap can be narrowed is discussed.

Secondly, the importance of “process” as the central priority, which should be taken into consideration when designing activities, in teaching/learning the language, is stressed.

Then, four criteria are established in order to evaluate activities. These are:

1. Do the learners have a real need to act their roles?
2. Are the learners practically solving their problems or merely taking their assigned parts?
3. Do they use the language because they need to or just because they are assigned the role?
4. How likely is it that they will become policemen, hotel receptionist, attendants at rental shops and so forth?

And also two types of tasks are presented comparatively to uncover problematic features.

The definitions of “meaningfulness” and “communicative” are discussed. Meaningful tasks and learner-centered teaching, where the learner’s decision-making and experience are primarily taken into account, are sought.

Finally, it is pointed out that formal teaching which aims at the learner’s conscious learning cannot be ignored in order to consolidate what the learner has learned and to increase the efficiency in language teaching and learning.

---

\* 大橋 純: Lector, The Scottish Centre for Japanese Studies, The University of Stirling, United Kingdom.

\*\* 大橋裕子: Lector, The Scottish Centre for Japanese Studies, The University of Stirling, United Kingdom.

According to two surveys of Japanese textbooks in English-speaking countries (Nuibe, 1992: 23–34) (JLA, 1987: 9.10), there are several common features which may affect both the learner and the teacher who are engaged in Japanese language learning and teaching. The two surveys show that: 1) a wide variety of materials are chosen by teachers; 2) there is a demand for supplementary materials; and 3) teachers are interested in furthering personal teaching techniques (this is especially true of the JLA survey). As these surveys show, there appears to be a great demand for a textbook which provides the teacher with a substantial set of examples of classroom activities which include role-play, simulation, task-based, problem solving and information-gap activities involving the negotiation of meaning.<sup>1</sup> The term, “activity,” here, does not only mean something that is done or is being done, but also means a process of doing things where the learner takes the initiative, is allowed to express what he/she wants, finds it necessary to use the language, and is preoccupied with the meaning of the language. In activity, the learner does not merely rehearse or recite the usage of the language but actually uses the language. It is not simply a matter of performing various kinds of drills. Lists of practices and exercises in Japanese textbooks are often designed to provide the learner with many samples of target expressions, and the learner is instructed to commit them to memory regardless of his/her needs and the context/occasion in which these expressions are used. In many cases, there is no real reason/purpose in asking and answering the questions. What is needed is a way of teaching (with appropriate teaching materials) by means of “activities” based upon the conviction that “the most important condition for learners’ abstraction of grammatical structure from relevant language samples was not so much encounter with many samples of the same kind in quick succession but rather an intensive preoccupation with the meaning of language samples—i.e., an effort to make sense of the language encountered, or to get meaning across in language adequately for given, and immediate, purposes” (Prabhu 1987: 15). First, we would like to look at a range of textbooks to compare on the one hand what teachers’ needs are, and on the other hand, what the textbooks offer, and to discuss how the gap can be narrowed.

### Observation of Textbooks

*Japanese for Busy People* (AJLT, 1984)<sup>2</sup> and *An Introduction to Modern Japanese* (Mizu-

<sup>1</sup> Ellis (1985: 301) explains the negotiation of meaning clearly: “When learners interact with native speakers or other learners, they often experience considerable difficulty in communicating. This leads to substantial interactional efforts by the conventional partners to secure mutual understanding. This work is often called the ‘negotiation of meaning.’”

<sup>2</sup> *Japanese for Busy People* is the recommended textbook for the candidates for the “Cambridge Certificate in Japanese and Japanese Studies.” Two hundred fifty thousand copies have been published. One hundred twenty thousand copies of *An Introduction to Modern Japanese* have been issued (Nihongo: 12–13 July, 1992).

tani, 1977), both of which are widely used in the U.K., and *Japanese: The Spoken Language* (Jordan, 1987), which is widely used in the United States, are taken as examples. Our purpose is not to identify or classify the underlying theories and teaching approaches taken in these textbooks; rather we would like to focus on the activities used, and how these are supposed to be carried out after the presentation stage (where the target language materials to be learned are presented).

#### ***Japanese for Busy People I* (AJLT, 1984)**

Exercises and quizzes are presented to consolidate the learner's grammatical knowledge, new expressions and words with such instructions as "Memorise—," "Practice the following patterns by changing the underlined part as in the examples given" (p. 105), "Put the appropriate particles in the parentheses" (p. 112), and "Translate into Japanese." If we roughly divide the textbook into three phases, what follows after the presentation phase are the practice and reinforcement phases. These exercises and quizzes give the learner clues to help him/her produce accurate language, and also provide examples of usage to help him/her accomplish various tasks, but the teacher makes his/her own materials in order to provide the learner with opportunities to use the language. As the title of the textbook suggests, this shortens the course for people with limited study time.

#### ***Japanese: The Spoken Language* (Jordan, 1987)**

In this textbook, the *application exercises* which come at the end of each section may provide the teacher with some ideas for activities. These exercises give situations where learners can produce target expressions with the vocabulary they have learned through drills and memorization. There are instructions as to how the *application exercises* should be conducted, e.g., "Practice asking and answering questions about future activities and locations of other members of your group or any persons known by the group, using *deshō* patterns to indicate probability. Include newly acquired time expressions (*konban*, *raishū*, etc.)," and "Using appropriate objects or pictures, ask and answer questions using the pattern  $|X \text{ kara} \dots \text{ made no } Y|$ , i.e., *Dare kara no tegami desu ka*; *Doko made no basu desu ka*; *Nan'ji made no kaigi desu ka*" (Jordan, 1987: 234). After the stimulus-response type *Drill* section, which aims at the mastery of target grammar, expressions and vocabulary, what the learners are required to do is again to respond to stimuli with "reality—provided by either visual aids or your general knowledge" (ibid: xix). The instructions for the *application exercises* simply indicate the area and situation where target language materials are likely to be used, so the teacher has to contextualize the exercises by making visual aids and choosing common topics in which the learners are interested.

#### ***An Introduction to Modern Japanese* (Mizutani, 1977)**

As this textbook is designed "for both classroom and independent study" (ibid: ii), *explanation* sections give detailed information about vocabulary, grammar, and usage. The teacher, if there is one, is expected to produce supplementary materials to make

the learner's language study more enjoyable and meaningful. Recently, *24 Tasks for Basic Modern Japanese* (Motohashi, 1989, 1990) has been published to provide this textbook with supplementary materials. This could be seen as a reflection of the current needs of the learner and the teacher.

These three textbooks show their own objectives and attitudes through the type and sequence of their contents. What is missing in all three textbooks, however, in terms of the teacher's needs indicated in the surveys mentioned above, is a list of activities. We would like to also raise the view of teaching, where the "process" of learning the language is the central priority.

### Awareness of "Process": Where the Activity Can Be Used in the Classroom

Communicative approaches to language teaching, in which the learner is encouraged to test his/her hypotheses on the use of the language, to internalize the rules through experience accumulated through language activities, and to use communicative strategies<sup>3</sup> accordingly, stress the importance of the "process" of doing things while focusing on the meaning of the language. This "process" involves interaction and negotiation where the learner takes the initiative to solve tasks which have been designed pedagogically with his/her present ability in mind. The teacher should be conscious of the target grammar and expressions which the learner is to master, whereas the learner is concerned with the meaning of the language. In formal textbooks, it is common to see 1) dialogues where the target language material is presented; 2) a list of drills where the target materials are practiced; and 3) some closed-ended questions to check and reinforce the understanding of a target grammar. From the result of the survey, it can be seen that teachers devise supplementary activities to allow the students more time and opportunities to use the language rather than following the rigid procedure of the textbooks. It is often taken for granted that it is a teacher's duty to produce tailor-made handouts and activities, and the ability to produce them well is the one of the characteristics of a good teacher. However, if we look at this from a different angle, can we not say that there is still a lack of good integrated textbooks?

The type of textbook or resource book which provides the teacher with the activities and teaching techniques is what is required. There is a tendency to relegate activities to the reinforcement phase, whereas in fact the application of the activities should not be so restricted. They can be used in the presentation phase to give the learner the context where he/she can guess and hypothesize rules of the language, and also to make the learner feel that he/she has to use Japanese to fulfill his/her needs. The activity can make the learner think, "What can I say if I want to . . . ?" In this way, the

<sup>3</sup> In order to express what the learner thinks and to avoid communication break-down, he/she often uses particular strategies, for example:

—using intonational clues to guess and convey emphasis and meaning;—guessing from the context and anticipating what will follow in a sentence or utterance;—"circumlocution, approximation, literal translation, miming . . ." (Tarone and Yule, 1989)

activity creates certain needs, motivates the learner, and at the same time, enables the learner to equip him/herself with communicative strategies. What is required is a sufficient number and variety of such resource books to allow the teacher to choose from them materials depending on the learners' needs and their level of Japanese. However, it is worth looking at some of these kinds of activities and tasks in current textbooks while searching for better activities.

### Comparative Analysis of Activity Types

We look first at *24 Tasks for Basic Modern Japanese* (Motohashi, 1989, 1990), as it is full of attractive pictures/charts and it appears to address a new tendency in the field towards a more communicative or practical use of Japanese. This activity resource is designed as supplementary material to *Basic Modern Japanese*, and accordingly, the sequence of the language structures to be taught is well-ordered and accumulative. The wide variety of topics and given situations are well-organized, which enables the teacher to control the activity and the language to be used by the learner. It is, therefore, relatively easy for the teacher to assess the learner's achievement. The brevity of each activity makes them easy to fit into most teaching schedules. The attached teacher's manual is also useful and can help the teacher to extend the activity and to know what language can be expected from the student. If we examine the activities thoroughly, however, there are some things which perhaps need to be reconsidered.

Each activity has its own goal, and consists of two different texts for pair-work, each containing different information required to enact role plays (i.e., information-gap activity). Take the following activity.

#### Lesson 16 (Motohashi, 1990: 16–17)

Linguistic purpose: *te-shimau*

Functional purpose: explaining problems, describing things (presented in lessons 5, 11, . . .)

Activity: role-play (pair-work)

Situation: Part A

A is in trouble: dropped keys; lost a purse and camera; became separated from his/her friend and child at the World Dolls Exhibition. A has to go to the information desk and ask for help.

Part B

Working at the information desk, B is to help people who come to B with their problems, making sure lost items are the property of that person.

Expected language:

*Kagi o otoshite shimaimashita.*

*Saifu/kamera o nakushite shimaimashita.*

If we compare the linguistic purpose with the expected language, it is clear that the teacher can control the language rigidly and that the learner automatically follows the structure he/she is learning.

A few questions arise:

1. Do A and B really need (or want) to be his/her role?
2. Are they practically solving their problems or merely taking their assigned parts?
3. Do they use the language because they need to or just because they are assigned the role?
4. If you see this activity as a rehearsal for the real-life future of the learners, how likely is it that they will become policemen, hotel receptionists, attendants at rental shops, and so forth?

A resource book like this no doubt contributes to the teaching and learning of Japanese in that it focuses on the meaning as well as the form of the language, and contextualizes the situation where the language is used. However, if questions such as the four given above are unresolved, it is no more than a conventional role-play where the learners are not using Japanese to learn Japanese but are instead learning to use Japanese. In order to answer the four questions above, what we have to consider is the interpretation of the term 'meaningfulness,' i.e., how meaningful is the activity to the learner? Before we go further, let us study two types of information gap activities.

### Two Types of Information-gap Activities

Linguistic purpose: *ima nan-ji desuka.*

Functional purpose: asking time

Activity: role-play (pair-work, information-gap)

#### Type 1

Instruction:

You want to know the time in different cities. By asking your partner, find out what time it is in the cities below. And give the information you have to him/her.

#### Role Card A: Time differences

London	(+0)		
Los Angeles	(-8)	New York	(?)
Calcutta	(+5)	Sydney	(?)
Tokyo	(+9)	Brussels	(?)
Sao Paulo	(-3)	Fiji	(?)

#### Role Card B: Time differences

London	(+0)		
Los Angeles	(?)	New York	(-5)
Calcutta	(?)	Sydney	(+10)
Tokyo	(?)	Brussels	(+1)
Sao Paulo	(?)	Fiji	(+12)

#### Type 2

Instruction:

You are going to make international telephone calls to the cities below. With your

partner, study the information given (i.e., charge rate periods / time differences). Discuss whether you could phone now, and if not, find out the best time to phone.

Note: Before the activity, the learner should have prepared for it. Therefore the teacher should ask the entire class some questions such as:

*Rondon wa ima nan-ji desu ka.*

*Rosanzerusu ni ima denwa shimasu ka.*

*Nan-ji ni denwa shimasu ka.*

Charge Rate Periods (British Telecom 1991) (The times stated refer to calls from the U.K.)

Charge Bands 1, 2, 3, 9, 10								
Time in U.K.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	
8:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M.	Cheap Rate							
8:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.	Standard Rate						Cheap Rate	
Charge Bands 4, 5								
Time in U.K.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	
8:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M.	Cheap Rate							
8:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.	Standard Rate						Cheap Rate	
3:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M.	Peak Rate						Cheap Rate	
5:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M.	Standard Rate						Cheap Rate	
Charge Bands 7, 8, 11, 12, 13								
Time in U.K.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	
8:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M.	Cheap Rate							
8:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.	Standard Rate							
Charge Bands 6								
Time in U.K.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	
Midnight to 7:00 A.M.	Cheap Rate							
7:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M.	Standard Rate							
2:30 P.M. to 7:30 P.M.	Cheap Rate							
7:30 P.M. to Midnight	Standard Rate							

#### Charge Bands

Belgium	1	U.S.A.	4
Australia	6	Brazil	10
Japan	11	India	12
Fiji	13		

## Role Card A: Time differences

London	(+0)		
Los Angeles	(-8)	New York	(?)
Calcutta	(+5)	Sydney	(?)
Tokyo	(+9)	Brussels	(?)
Sao Paulo	(-3)	Fiji	(?)

## Role Card B: Time differences

London	(+0)		
Los Angeles	(?)	New York	(-5)
Calcutta	(?)	Sydney	(+10)
Tokyo	(?)	Brussels	(+1)
Sao Paulo	(?)	Fiji	(+12)

## Work Sheet

	<i>Ima denwa shimasu ka</i>	<i>Nan-ji ni denwa shimasu ka</i>
Los Angeles		
New York		
Calcutta		
Sydney		
Tokyo		
Brussels		
Sao Paulo		
Fiji		

Type 1 is to a great extent focusing on the language materials which the teacher wants the learners to use to achieve their linguistic purpose, “—*wa ima nan-ji desuka?*” and time expressions. However, it has no goals other than linguistic ones, which are not very motivating for the learner. Type 1 can be seen as a very controlled activity where the teacher knows exactly what language the learner will use, and thus no interaction can be expected during the activity. Type 1 ignores the learner’s decision making and personal preferences and therefore the learner is not allowed to attempt to extend the activity as he/she would like in order to achieve the final goal of the activity. Type 2, on the other hand, with the same linguistic purpose, allows the learner’s personal view to enter into the activity. The real goal of this activity is to find out the best time to phone somebody. It is necessary to consider both cost and convenience. The cheapest period of time may not necessarily be convenient for you or the person receiving the call.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> As the linguistic material is for beginners, information can be given in the learner’s native language, so that it will not confuse him/her and the teaching/learning purpose will remain clear.



Information-gap activity is one of the most popular activities and a favorite with both teacher and learner. However, as in Type 1, it can be a mere drill, where there is no room for the learner to create his/her own language or opinion. This kind of activity is often used in teaching/learning the function of "Asking location/direction." Usually, the learners work in pairs and have the same map giving the location of different buildings. But one partner's map is incomplete in one way, and the other's in a different way. By asking questions of his/her partner, the learner can make a complete map. Let us look at another example to suggest a more satisfactory type of information-gap activity.

Instruction:

The learners work in groups of three. The teacher provides each of the three with a map,<sup>5</sup> (the same but each with different and complementary information on location and names of buildings: a set of three makes one complete map) and a piece of paper on which the learner can note the things he/she needs. The teacher gives the learner a few minutes to think what he/she actually wants to buy now and to make a list of them. The learner's task is to buy things on the list.

Activity 1: The learner has to find shops they can buy the things, find out where the shops are, and buy the things for him/herself.

Linguistic purpose: (e.g.) *-wa doko ni arimasu ka*; or *-wa doko desu ka*; or *-wa doko ni utte imasu ka*; or *-ni aruto omoimasu*.

Functional purpose: (e.g.) asking/giving location

Activity 2: The learner can decide where he/she is now on the map. He/she says where he/she is and is going and asks whether the other members want him to buy things on the way.

Linguistic purpose: (e.g.) *-made ikimasu kedo nanika arimasu ka*; or *-made ittekimasu kedo nanika arimasuka*; or *-o katte kite kudasai*.

Functional purpose: (e.g.) asking someone to buy something

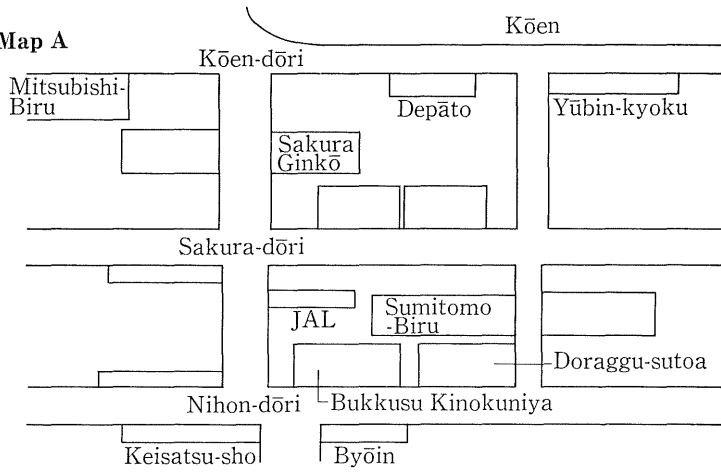
For more integrated activity:

1. The teacher divides the whole class into three groups.
2. The teacher gives each group a cassette tape (Someone is talking about the town and locations of various buildings. Each tape contains a part of the total information and it is different from the other two.) and some comprehension questions.
3. While listening to the tape and answering the questions, the learner is getting information about locations in the town and taking notes.
4. The teacher recombines the learners to make new groups containing at least one member of each of the preceding groups.
5. With the information which each one in the group has, the learners help each other plan to buy things they want.

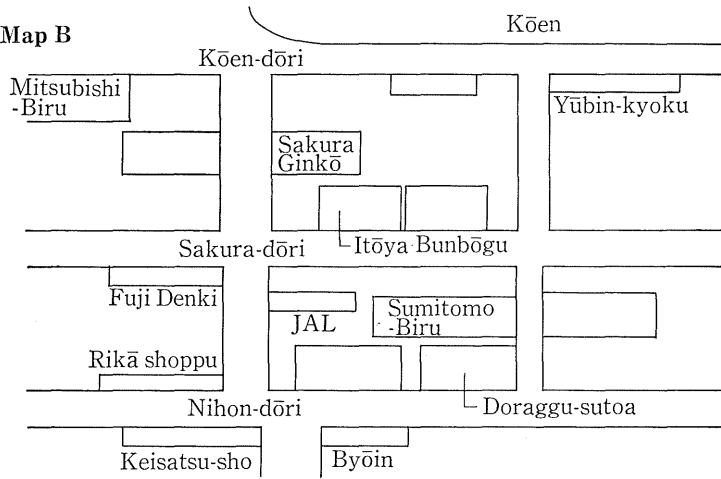
In this activity, the learner with his/her individual needs decides what he/she wants to buy and finds out where the right shops are. Increasing the learner's responsibility by allowing him/her to make decisions leads both the teacher and the learner out of an

<sup>5</sup> For actual classroom implementation, it is best to use an authentic map of a town which the learner has heard of but does not know well.

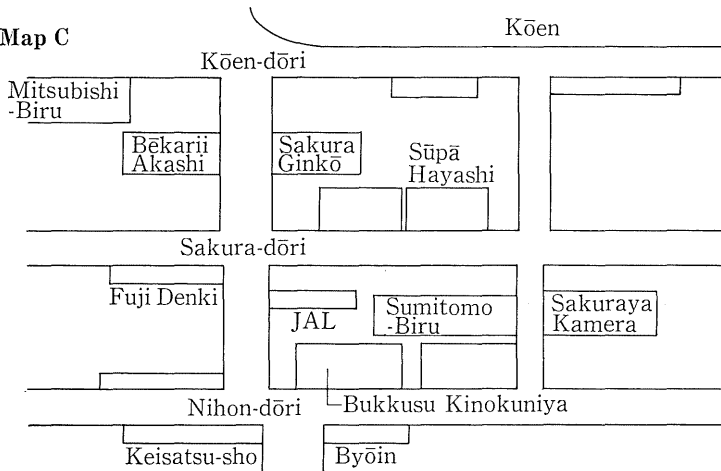
Map A



Map B



Map C



awkward make-believe situation. Both the teacher and the learner do not know what will come next; they interact, seeking new information.

### The Concept of Meaningfulness

Let us go back to the questions raised above (p. 54). In order to answer all the four questions, we should like to clarify the term “meaningfulness” thoroughly. The term “meaningful” is parallel to the term “communicative.” However, the term “communicative” is interpreted in widely, indeed wildly different ways, in the field of teaching Japanese. It is sometimes misinterpreted, for example, as teaching for the sake of conversation. But “communicative,” here, means that a discourse is meaningful. Take the question, “*Toire wa doko desuka?*” for instance. No one can really tell whether it is communicative or not unless a context is provided. If there is a reason for asking, or the speaker really wants to know where the toilet is, it is communicative. If the speaker, on the other hand, does not expect an answer but is trying to learn and practise the language, the utterance is not relevant in terms of communication.

Meaningfulness, then, can be defined as the reason for exchanging information in communication. As in real communication, we speak and listen, because we want to, have to, or need to. This is how communicative and meaningful should be interpreted in Japanese language teaching.

What is indispensable and should not be overlooked, in addition to the communicative nature of the task, is that the task should involve the learner as much as possible. In the task, the information to be exchanged should be initiated by the learner and be about the learner.

### CONCLUSION

The function of activity resource books in facilitating teaching skills and providing the learner with meaning-focused activity has been considered. Since each learner has his/her own learning preference/style, these kinds of activities are not necessarily appropriate to all types of learners. Some like testing their hypotheses. Some prefer being receptive. However, we believe that there are real advantages in teaching/learning the Japanese language with communicative and meaningful activities. The more an activity involves the learner, the more he/she is likely to be motivated and encouraged to use his/her own communicative strategies, one of the most important elements of communicative competence.

Although the focus has been on the speaking skill, we do not mean that the other skills can be ignored. Communicative teaching which provides the learner with interactions (negotiation, reasoning, conflict, information transfer, and so on) based on his/her needs aims at the integration of skills. Depending on the learner’s needs, reading and writing can be as important as speaking and listening.

Since meaning-focused activity is the central issue of this paper, attention has not been directed to formal teaching. However, in a teaching procedure, formal teaching

and conscious learning, as distinct from natural/unconscious language acquisition, is an indispensable link in the chain of teaching/learning. Thus the teaching of the rules of the language as well as drills which focus on the form of the language (i.e., accuracy of the language) play an important role in speeding up the learning process. Moreover, the learner keeps making mistakes, while testing his/her hypotheses. In communicative teaching, the learner's errors are considered as evidence that he/she is learning something. Therefore, the teacher should judge when to correct errors or when not to. During the activity, it is not always appropriate to correct errors, since it might inhibit the learner from saying what he/she thinks. In this sense, too, conscious/formal teaching/learning, as a method and opportunity for systematic correction of errors, should not be underestimated.

### Appendix

#### Activities: Some Examples

What's in your pocket? / *-teoku*

Get the learners to take out things which they have in their pocket. It is always the case that the contents can be divided into two kinds, one which they are aware of having put in their pocket, the other which they must have put there but have forgotten about. A linguistic objective which can be introduced is the auxiliary verb '*-teoku*' meaning "do something in advance and leave the resultant state as it is for future convenience" (Jorden, 1987). The learner may say either:

"*kono saifu o iretekimashita.*" (I put/keep the purse in my pocket for convenience.)

or "*jūen dama ga haitteimashita.*" (10 yen happened to be in my pocket.)

Then the teacher asks "Why?" to expand the teaching/learning setting by allowing the learner to explain the reason.

T: "*Dōshite ireteoitān desuka?*"

S: "*Ohirugohan o kau tame desu.*"

This activity requires no preparation, and gives excitement and unexpectedness. In my own experience, one student in a class actually had a wine cork and a receipt for a bottle of wine in his pocket. Apparently, he had no recollection of having put them there, but the other students were not willing to let him get away with just saying "*Koruku to reshiito ga haitte imashita,*" and insisted on further communication.

Going to Japan *-tewaikenai|-nakutewaikenai|-hōgai*

As the undergraduate course in Stirling University sends third-year students to Japanese universities for a semester, this activity is topical and meaningful.

Get students to discuss things they should take or should not take to Japan. It totally depends on the teacher and students what language area is to be focused on. If the teacher says, "*pasupōto wa?*" they know a passport is indispensable. So this question does not allow the students much variety in reply. It is, however, an effective question to elicit the target grammar. The teacher's intention, together with the students' needs,

are the decisive elements. So the teacher should be conscious, with an eye to the underlying objectives, about the students' potential replies to the questions. "Is it the repetition of target expressions, or the students' personal opinion, which should be elicited?" is a question constantly to be borne in mind in the teacher's decision-making process. Things which some students may take and some may not can prompt some disagreement and thus expand the field of discussion.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AJLT. 1984. *Japanese for busy people I*. Association for Japanese-Language Teaching.
- British Telecom. 1991. *The Phone Book*.
- JLA. 1987. *Survey on Japanese Textbooks*. Japan Language Association, Bath College of Higher Education.
- Jorden, Eleanor H. 1987. *Japanese: The spoken language*. New Haven: Yale University.
- Mizutani, Osamu and Nobuko. 1977. *An introduction to modern Japanese*. Tokyo: The Japan Times.
- Motohashi, Fujiko and Hayashi, Satoko. 1989. *24 tasks for basic modern Japanese*, vol. I. Tokyo: The Japan Times.
- Motohashi, Fujiko. 1990. *24 tasks for basic modern Japanese*, vol. II. Tokyo: The Japan Times.
- Prabhu, N. S. 1987. *Second language pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tarone, Elaine and Yule, George. 1989. *Focus on the language learner*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

日本語 (1992) 「日本語教科書の条件」(pp. 3-17), 『アルク』7月号。

縫部義憲 (1992) 「ニュージーランドの日本語教育 (1)——現状と課題」(pp. 23-34), 『広島大学教育学部日本語教育学科紀要』。