

## **Utilizing Modern Vernacular - A Simulation Approach**

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### **Abstract**

This research focuses on using popular native language expressions in the L2 or foreign language classroom. Determining if students have a higher retention rate of more trendy idiomatic expressions than other words used in standard communicative English language classes is explored through weekly in-class quizzes. A main objective of the study is to point out to students that modern vernacular exists in all languages. Therefore, they must learn to develop a more natural feel to their second language skills.

### **Keywords**

“Are you serious?” you’re joking,” role play, retention rates.

### **Introduction**

In many communication-based foreign language classes, students follow along with a textbook and fulfill unit goals week after week. Depending on the material and educator’s approach, this methodology has shown formidable results in foreign language acquisition at the university level. While teaching English to education majors over the past few years at Gifu Shoutoku University, I chose to supplement the aforementioned methodology with everyday words and phrases common in the student’s native language. In addition, foreign loan words and current events were incorporated into the curriculum to encourage students to speak their minds. A main part of the program was the translation of current Japanese phrases into English. Later, students created situations to utilize these words and phrases into natural dialogues.

As my research will indicate, this slight deviation from more conventional methods produced higher vocabulary retention rates and established an environment where students themselves facilitated the learning process. Generally, they showed far more enthusiasm for the class material as they became active learners. This, in turn, made for an enjoyable teaching experience because it increased the number of motivated students.

### Are You Serious?

Young people around the globe seem to develop a language all to themselves. Therefore, adults often find it onerous to keep up with “student speak” and attribute the phenomenon to an identity matter that teenagers use to differentiate themselves. Last year in Japan, hardly a moment passed without the phrase まじだ being uttered *ad nauseam* by students nationwide.

Rather than dismiss this extremely popular new phrase, it alternatively became a main tenet of my classroom methodology. As an educator, one of the more obvious stipulations I require of students is that they speak English while in class. Since the class is rather large (approximately 45 students), there are sometimes certain individuals who conveniently forget this directive. If small talk in Japanese finds its way into our class time, students must explain their private discussion in English. The natural response to the teachers request is usually “いえ、別に,” “ごめんなさい” or “何もない” (“It was nothing much,” “I’m sorry” or “It was nothing.”)

An educator can accept the student’s apology or ignore the interruption and proceed with the lesson, but that would fail to capitalize on an excellent teaching opportunity. Besides, they will quickly find that the same disruptive scenario will repeat itself almost every lesson. Instead, educators must appreciate the teaching opportunity an unruly class may create because at the very least the group is anxious to initiate conversation (Cook, 1997). The key here is to avoid any embarrassment to a student as it will only defeat the very nature of a communicative classroom. An opportunity to turn small talk in the native language into free conversation in the foreign language will be enhanced if students are encouraged to ask how to say colloquial words or phrases in English.

After a Japanese word or phrase is chosen courtesy of small talk, a brief explanation on the blackboard at the front of the class serves as a focal point to begin the lesson. Next, students repeat the phrase a few times until they are comfortable with the pronunciation. After that, students drill the phrase in pairs and use it in a sentence. Most of the class will revel in this exercise as they see it as useful language practice. Teachers should monitor the groups for encouragement and, depending on the personalities, have the most active pair recite their example. Giving necessary positive feedback and noticing which students are putting in the effort will keep learners involved.

### You’re Joking

Yet, another popular saying among young people is うそ, literally, you’re lying. More times than not, I often feel that the softer “you’re joking” is more of a natural English equivalent so I tend to encourage that usage. Opportunities abound to incorporate this word into lesson plans.

Teacher: Hey, we have a test next week!

Students: C'mon, you're joking. No way!

Teacher: OK, I'm joking, but you still should study during the week.

Not only is the teacher educating the students on vernacular usage, but they are also, in this cultural relationship, teaching the students about sarcasm. While it must be carefully explained that sarcasm is usually a personality trait, used by certain individuals- thus, avoiding the group stereotype mistake-the above exercise works because students are actively participating in questioning the teacher.

### **The Curry Case**

One of the top stories in the media last year was the Hayashi couple's alleged curry rice poisoning and insurance scam. My students were well aware of the case, but could not express many words or an opinion in English involving the events. To facilitate the lesson, we decided to perform role play exercises and perform a courtroom simulation. Groups of students were selected to play Mr. and Mrs. Hayashi and others made up either interrogating police officers, detectives or neighbors. This form of simulation theory has a history of popularity with students (Gorden, 1978) and can be an effective motivational tool (Suddaby, 1976).

In my study, students were asked to create a vocabulary list based on their own knowledge of the events and translate it into English. Then, within their group they wrote questions to ask one another or in the Hayashis' case, wrote answers to expected inquiries from law officers or the media. Additionally, the students were required to use as much of the aforementioned colloquialisms to reinforce their usage and to keep the exercise somewhat amusing. During this operational phase of the simulation process, instructors serve as coaches (Bradford & Uecker, 1999) encouraging communication, answering questions and reminding participants about the "English only" rule.

After an initial phase of vocabulary review, we proceeded with the debriefing stage. Here, a mock trial-complete with a judge; lawyers and witnesses-was performed by the students. To supplement their characters in the case, participants contributed additional information and vocabulary to enhance their roles. Lederman and Kato (1995) explained that the purpose of this stage is "for students to gain insight about the meaning of their simulated experience." To better facilitate the debriefing phase, participants explained their experiences as each of the characters.

Students disclosed that the litigation process and the English word usages were challenging and made them look at the case in a different light. Utilizing an American courtroom scenario-where the jury must reach a verdict beyond a reasonable doubt-made our classroom the scene of lengthy debate,

cantankerous arguments, and brought out many intellectual attributes and frustrations associated with practicing law. As part of the evaluation phase, apparently the simulation exercise was a success because it stimulated the learning process, taught participants new words and, most importantly, forced students to think critically. Class participation for the simulation remained extremely high for such a large group, and as the case unfolded, students gained confidence in their oral skills and continued to test each other on vocabulary usage.

### Retention Rates

Over the course of four lessons students took quizzes each week based on the previous lesson's vocabulary. Words came from the textbook dialogues and simulation role play, along with the in-class translations of the adverted to earlier Japanese words. Accordingly, the retention rates, as indicated below, were significantly higher for the Japanese words than for the textbook vocabulary. Although the textbook material comprised nearly 80 percent of the class time, students still had a higher retention rate for the Japanese translation material. When probed for the reason of this occurrence, the overwhelming response was that students believed the Japanese words were far more colloquial and it was more likely they would use them when travelling overseas or given the chance to speak English with a native speaker. (See note at end of paper).

Table 1 indicates that students maintained their cognizance of the word "seriously" as other textbook related vocabulary words substantially decreased. This began the trend of students remembering the Japanese translated words much more than the textbook vocabulary.

The phrase "you're joking" was featured in Table 2 and had a retention rate of 100 percent over the four week period. Students obviously understood the usage of the word as it had the highest retention rate among words in all the quizzes.

*For all quiz results, \* denotes the Japanese translated word.*

TABLE 1 VOCABULARY QUIZ RESULTS-CLASS AVERAGES

Quiz Words	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	% Change
Elderly	77%	72%	68%	61%	-16%
Beard	84%	74%	70%	64%	-20%
*Seriously	82%	80%	81%	79%	- 3%
Describe	86%	83%	76%	70%	-16%

TABLE 2 VOCABULARY QUIZ RESULTS-CLASS AVERAGES

Quiz Words	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	% Change
*You'e joking	93%	96%	94%	93%	0%
Predict	84%	79%	75%	72%	-12%
Typical	88%	84%	82%	78%	-10%
Draw	91%	87%	88%	83%	-18%

TABLE 3 VOCABULARY QUIZ RESULTS-CLASS AVERAGES

Quiz Words	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	% Change
Intelligent	87%	85%	81%	76%	-13%
Unusual	84%	87%	81%	78%	- 6%
Coworker	88%	84%	80%	74%	-14%
*Insurance scam	90%	90%	86%	84%	- 6%

In Table 3 above, students had a more difficult time with “insurance scam” the Japanese translated word from the simulation game. Another angle on the weekly quiz could be that student’s already possessed knowledge of the word “unusual” and this led to the higher retention rate of the latter.

The results in Table 4 again show that retention of the Japanese translated word, in this case “guilty” was higher than the others. Many students used this word during the simulation lessons and felt at ease with the word. Again, many students likely had previous acquisition of the word “actor” thereby explaining its steady cognizance level.

TABLE 4 VOCABULARY QUIZ RESULTS-CLASS AVERAGES

Quiz Words	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	% Change
Brainstorm	85%	79%	75%	70%	-15%
*Guilty	95%	94%	93%	93%	- 2%
Actor	88%	85%	84%	81%	- 7%
Bank teller	86%	83%	81%	76%	-10%

## Conclusion

The quiz data reconfirmed my belief that current phrases and events have a necessary place in the foreign language class curriculum. While many words do not have a literal translation, it is the responsibility of the teacher to demonstrate that human feelings-the embodiment of these phrases-has a suitable application or transliteration for varying cultures. Most importantly, students will appreciate the explanations and feel a sense of satisfaction knowing that their own unique language pattern has an equivalent in English. Based on my experience, this factor alone will inspire the students to seek out answers on their own and enhance the learning process.

For educators, there is a plethora of material to choose from to implement a more colloquial approach. Current events especially scandals are an excellent resource to utilize because students are usually knowledgeable of the subject matter and most have an opinion on it. With a keen interest in the subject matter, students will soon mimic the brief phrases they use everyday-you're lying and no way!- which is indirectly laying the necessary foundation for a more enjoyable and positive foreign language experience. This may contribute whether they will continue to study the foreign language or reject it because of its lack of applicability.

*Note: Quizzes began with four words for the first week and included the previous week's words on the next quiz. Thus, the last quiz of the series contained 16 words. All the words were used in sentence practice the week prior to the quiz to assure that the Japanese translated words did not receive far more usage.*

## References

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