Practical Report of Instruction Methods for
Developing Self-Expression and Critical Thinking Skills
in Junior High School English Classrooms

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Abstract

Rapid changes in society have created the need for schools to foster in their students, in addition to the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills, the academic abilities to think independently, to make decisions appropriately, and to express oneself effectively. The revised Courses of Study emphasizes the enhancement of these academic abilities through language activities in all subjects. In foreign language education, the goal is set at improving communication abilities through integrated activities incorporating listening, speaking, reading and writing skills with language knowledge, such as vocabulary and grammar, and cultural background knowledge. The English department at Kamakura Junior High School affiliated with the Faculty of Education and Human Sciences at Yokohama National University addressed the need to develop effective instruction methods for enhancing these academic abilities in 2012. This paper presents the methods developed and the procedures implemented in the English classes there. This paper consists of three parts. The first part describes the reasons for the necessity of fostering these academic abilities at schools and the recent revisions in the educational laws and Courses of Study. The second part explains the instruction and tasks utilized in the first-year classes to develop the students' ability to express themselves effectively. The third part discusses the debating activities conducted in the third-year classes to develop the students' ability to think independently and make decisions appropriately.

1. Background and Purpose of This Study

Japanese society has been rapidly changing due to the advance of globalization, the development of information technology, the decline in the birthrate and the aging of the population. Children, who will be the future leaders of the country and society, need to acquire abilities corresponding to these changes.
The results of OECD-PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2003 reported that Japanese children at the age of fifteen ranked among the top in science and mathematics but were no longer ranked among the best in the world in reading literacy (National Institute of Educational Policy Research, 2004). The results of PISA and national academic achievement tests conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2007 shed light on the particular academic abilities that Japanese children need to improve. One of these is an ability to make use of acquired knowledge and skills to cope with problems in real-life situations. The assessment results also revealed the problems of Japanese children’s low motivation and lack of desire to learn.

Accordingly, the Central Council for Education (Chuo-Kyouiku Shingikai) began discussing and looking for effective policies to enhance the academic abilities of Japanese children in 2005. In addition, the Basic Education Law was amended in 2006, and then, correspondingly the School Education Act. Article 30 of the School Education Act formulated that the goal of education was to foster academic abilities, “richness of mind”, and a sound healthy body. The academic abilities were defined as:

1) acquiring basic knowledge and skills
2) fostering the abilities to think independently, make decisions appropriately, and express oneself effectively using acquired knowledge and skills to solve problems
3) promoting attitudes which foster autonomous learning

Notably, numbers two and three of the above closely correspond to the educational reform demands that arose from the results of the national and international assessments.

Based on the amended education laws and advice from the Central Council for Education mentioned above, MEXT revised the Courses of Study in March 2008 for kindergartens, elementary schools and lower secondary schools, and in March 2009 for upper secondary schools and schools for special needs education, etc. The revised Courses of Study set the goal of education as fostering a “zest for life” (ikiru chikara in Japanese) (MEXT, 2009). According to the Courses of Study, a “zest for life” consists of three components: academic ability, “richness of mind”, and a sound healthy body as formulated by the School Education Act. Academic ability is called “tashikana gakuryoku” in Japanese and is defined as follows:

Ability for steadily acquiring the basics, identifying issues independently, learning and thinking independently, and voluntarily making judgments, taking action, and finding better solutions to problems.

The definition of academic ability in the revised Courses of Study reflects the amended School Education Law and the discussions of the Central Council for Education. The Courses of Study for lower secondary schools has been implemented in all three grades of junior high schools since 2012. The school education conducted under the revised Courses of Study needs to emphasize the second component of academic ability as defined above. To foster this academic ability, the revised Courses of Study requires the enhancement of language activities in every subject.
The revised Courses of Study set the goal of foreign language education in junior high schools as: developing the students' basic communication abilities in integrated activities of listening, speaking, reading and writing, to deepen their understanding of language and culture, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication using a foreign language, namely English. The first part of the goal, “to develop communication abilities using language knowledge and skills”, coincides with the second component of academic abilities (to foster the abilities to think independently, make decision appropriately, and express oneself effectively using acquired knowledge and skills to solve problems). In foreign language education, to achieve the goal, the development of self-expression and critical thinking skills were identified as being most vital and it was deemed that these should be fostered in communication activities using the skills and knowledge of English.

Kamakura Junior High School affiliated with the Faculty of Education and Human Sciences at Yokohama National University (Kamakura J.H.S) set the goal of their education as: to foster the abilities to think independently, make decisions appropriately, and express oneself effectively (Kamakura Junior High School, 2011). They conducted educational research to seek effective instruction methods to develop these abilities in the English classes conducted there. This paper reports on the core of the research conducted in the English department there in 2012, the first year that the revised Courses of Study were implemented in junior high schools. Considering the development of foreign language abilities, an emphasis was placed on fostering the ability to express oneself in the first-year classes and the ability to think independently and to make decisions appropriately as critical thinking skills in the third-year classes. The following sections present the kinds of instruction the English teachers developed, discuss how they were implemented in their classes, and discuss the points which need to be considered.

2. Instruction for Developing Self-Expression Skills: First-Year English Class

2.1 Purpose of this section

The first-year English classes conducted at Kamakura Junior High School aim at developing the students' self-expression ability in English. In these classes, self-expression is defined as, not simply the output of English, but rather the output of the students' own ideas in English. That is to say, English is perceived to be a practical means of communication.

The Course of Study for foreign languages revised in 2008 formulates that schools need to focus on cultivating the students’ skills of thinking independently, making decisions appropriately and expressing oneself effectively (MEXT, 2008). In English classes, these skills are mainly related to the abilities of expression and understanding in English. For the first-year students, the Course of Study emphasizes developing the students' speaking and listening abilities.

2.2 Goal and curriculum for first-year students in 2012

At Kamakura Junior High School, the speaking ability goal for first-year students had been set as “a student can continue talking with others about him/herself and the things around him/her for one minute in English” (Kamakura J. H. S, 2011). This was to be done without preparing a skit. It was to be simultaneously created in interactive communication.

All first-year English classes in 2012 were designed to achieve this goal. One performance task
was set in each term, which corresponded to the speaking goal of that term. Table 2-1 shows the three performance tasks for that year.

### Table 1 Performance tasks arranged in an annual curriculum for first-year students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal of Speaking</th>
<th>1st term</th>
<th>2nd term</th>
<th>3rd term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can introduce oneself</td>
<td>Can explain others or things around oneself</td>
<td>Can talk with others for 2 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Performance</td>
<td>Let’s introduce yourself at a school abroad.</td>
<td>Let’s talk about your favorite stories.</td>
<td>Let’s talk with your friends whose dreams come true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>“Lucky! You’ve got a chance to study abroad. You can choose one school in England, America or India. Date of the plane ticket is next Friday. Think about the speech to introduce yourself in front of your new friends.</td>
<td>Do you have a favorite book, manga, movie or drama? Please tell us about your favorite stories. You have to describe the characters in the speech.</td>
<td>“I made it! We’ve got a time machine. Today we’ll go to the future, when your dream has come true. What is your job? Do you have a wife or husband? Do you have any pets? What is your hobby?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Speech Test</td>
<td>Speech Test</td>
<td>Conversation Test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3 Yearlong input activities

Throughout the year an emphasis was placed on making an enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom and on having the students acquire basic English phrases, basic grammar, natural intonation and a natural accent without resorting to using Japanese in order to encourage the development of more natural self-expression skills. This was done through the implementation of input activities, two examples of which are given below.

1. **Gesture singing**
   - The students were led in singing English songs which incorporated recently learned or soon to be learned grammar points as a warm-up activity.
     - Pictures which demonstrated the song’s lyrics were drawn on the blackboard and the song was sung while using gestures which illustrated the songs’ lyrics.
     - Within one month, the students were able to sing with their faces up (without referring to the lyrics) with just the help of pictures and gestures.

   (→ A scene of the gesture singing activity)

2. **Gesture reading** (adapted from Kitahara (2010))
   - Picture cards and gestures (rather than Japanese) were used to teach and check the students’ understanding of the material covered in the textbook.
   - The students made gestures “describing” the English sentences in the textbook.
   - The students were able to memorize at least one page of the textbook with the help of picture cards and gestures.
2.4 Performance tasks implemented in 2012

(1) First-term performance task

The first-term task was giving self-introductions. This being probably the most common task performed in first-year junior high school English classes, it will only be touched on briefly here. The students were given the situation of being in a foreign country and introducing themselves to the people there (See Table 1 for details). This put a slightly different perspective on it. Though they gave the basic information that is usually supplied in a standard in-class self-introduction, they also gave added information that could only have been given in the imaginary situation supplied. For example, since the Olympics were going to be held in London that year, many students chose England as the country they were in. Due to this, the students included information such as being there for the Olympics, wanting to see a particular Olympic event, wanting to go there with the person they were talking to, etc. This gave the introductions a more emotionally involved tone.

(2) Second-term performance task

The second-term performance task was based on describing their favorite story. Four fifty-minute lessons were spent on this task.

Class 1:
- The students were instructed to bring their favorite manga, book or movie program to class. At first, they were told to mentally formulate at least five sentences about the story. (No writing was allowed.)
- In pairs, the students took turns saying their sentences and answering at least two questions from his/her partner about his/her story.
- The students were instructed to add the new information supplied in their answers to the questions to their “speeches”.
- The teacher monitored the activity and provided corrective feedback.
- At the end of the class, the students were given approximately five minutes to write down their “speeches”.

Class 2:
- The students were divided into groups of four and took turns giving their speeches to their group members. Each group member was required to ask at least one question or to give advice to the presenter.
- The teacher monitored the activity and gave corrective feedback.
- After the group-work had finished, the students revised and/or incorporated any new information that had arisen into their speeches.

Class 3:
- The students were divided into three groups (approximately fourteen students in each). The three groups went to three different corners of the classroom and the students in each group took turns giving their speeches to the other members. Thus, there were three speeches going on simultaneously. The teacher stood in the middle of the classroom, and listened to and evaluated
the students' performances.
- Students’ performances were evaluated in terms of attitude towards communication (volume / eye-contact / gestures) and speaking ability (volume of information / speaking speed).

(←A scene of a student’s speech about her favorite book)

Class 4:
- Students wrote what they had said in the previous lesson and handed it in.
- The teacher corrected grammatical mistakes.

(3) Third-term performance task

The goal was to continue talking for two minutes. (An emphasis was placed on becoming a good communicator. That is, the students were told the importance of PQR: P = Plus one more sentence, Q = Question, and R = Reaction). Five fifty-minute classes were spent on this task.

Class 1:
- The students made a mind mapping sheet about their “future selves”. For example, age, occupation, family, pets, place of residence, etc.
- The students practiced speaking using the information/ideas that they had written.
- The students made pairs and practiced talking for two minutes. Then they changed partners and practiced again. This activity lasted about thirty minutes and the students had the opportunity to talk with approximately ten classmates.
- The teacher monitored and gave corrective feedback.
- At the end of the lesson, the students were given five minutes to write down in their notebooks what they had said.

Classes 2 and 3:
- The teacher had the students practice speaking while looking at what they had previously written in their notebooks.
- The students formed pairs and practiced talking.
- They were given the opportunity to ask the teacher how to say the things they wanted to express but lacked the English ability to do so.

Classes 4 and 5:
- The teacher told the students that he was putting a magic spell on them and that they would forget everything they knew about their classmates, and that they were meeting people for the first time at a party.
- The students talked with their partners, and then with several different classmates, for two minutes each about their “future selves” as if they knew nothing about each other. This activity lasted for thirty minutes and the students had the chance to talk with approximately ten classmates.
- The teacher monitored and evaluated the students’ performances. The students’ performances were evaluated in terms of attitude towards communication (speaking positively/hesitantly) and speaking ability (appropriateness of response, smoothness, accuracy).

2.5 Discussion

Through conducting the performance tasks described above, three things to be considered were found.

First, a performance task is an output activity in which students have to think about what to say in a given situation. When a performance task is conducted, it is important to set a situation which motivates the students to speak and listen to others. One way to do this is to choose topics of conversation focusing on things they have, like or can relate to. Through the communication, students come to know what their friends/classmates like and dislike. By learning about each other, the students become interested in others and become emotionally involved. In language teaching methodology, this is often called a “communication gap”, which is always needed in communicating. But the most significant matter is not the gap itself, but the emotional change it causes. For examples, there were students who were happy to learn that there were classmates who liked the same manga. They naturally uttered comments such as, “Oh, I like it too!” Other students were surprised that their friends disliked the characters in a story which they liked and wrote comments such as, “I want to speak more with my friend because she doesn’t like a character I like.” Communication should not just be an exchange of information but a catalyst for the opening of minds and hearts.

Second, when a performance task is conducted the evaluation of output activities becomes a major issue. A high emphasis is often placed on grammatical accuracy and usage, and much time is often spent on writing correct drafts before speaking. However, the more time spent on writing a “perfect” script, the more the students tend to try to “read” it in their heads. Speaking becomes an activity to practice making “sounds” from “letters”. This results in the students hesitating to speak when they are not sure about the accuracy of their statements. They need to be made to realize that it is okay to make mistakes, that it is by making mistakes that one improves. What the students should have when speaking is not a draft but ideas to express.

Third, the most important thing in teaching English is to ensure the students acquire a positive attitude towards communication. Through the performance tasks described in 2-4, the students appeared to have developed a more positive attitude towards communication. This was due to:
- becoming interested in their classmates and their classmates’ likes and dislikes
- being asked questions by their classmates and starting to think about themselves more deeply
- being able to express themselves and/or understand others in English, resulting in an increase of confidence in regards to their English ability
- receiving positive responses and reactions from their classmates
- being frustrated by a lack of vocabulary or grammar knowledge when trying to express their ideas, resulting in wanting to acquire new vocabulary and grammar knowledge
- getting positive feedback from the teacher
- finding a good model of communicator among classmates. One student wrote after the third-term performance task, “It was easy for me to talk with Ms. F because she reacted a lot with a
smile and asked me a lot of questions. I want to be a good communicator like her.”

In further studies, an evaluation system for performance tasks needs to be developed. Appropriate, valid viewpoints of evaluation when judging speaking ability have yet to be clarified. In addition, effective methods of evaluation, especially when evaluating interactive activities such as chatting and conversations, have yet to be conceived.

3. Instruction for Developing Critical Thinking Skills: Third-Year Debate Class

3-1 Purpose of this section

Most Japanese begin their formal English education in their first year of junior high school. By the time they have reached their third year, most students have generally amassed a fair amount of basic English knowledge and have reached a stage in their development where they are capable of thinking in a more adult fashion. Though the English structures used may be simple and the grammar imperfect, the contents of what is expressed should reflect their physical and mental age as it would in Japanese. They have reached the point where there is a need for them to develop and improve their critical thinking ability. Practicing to debate in English can teach students to think and express themselves in a logical organized fashion in English.

3-2 Procedure

All third year students (approximately 176 students divided into four classes of forty-four) were required to participate in a debate class every other week during the second and third terms of classes (a total of ten fifty-minute classes over a twenty week period). Each class of students was divided into two groups with each half attending the debate class on alternating weeks.

Week 1: In the first class it was explained that a debate is basically a “game” in which one defends a position regardless of one's true beliefs, this being the main point differentiating a debate from a discussion, and that there are winners and losers. The students were told that they would have to think in a logical objective manner and not let emotions get involved. The topic “Money Is the Most Important Thing in Life” was then introduced. All of the students were required to think of and write down two pro arguments and two con arguments for the topic using the patterns, “I believe/don’t believe money is the most important thing in life. I have two reasons for this. First,…Second, ….”

Week 2 and 3: The students were divided into six groups: three pro groups and three con groups, and a leader was chosen in each group by doing “Rock-Paper-Scissors”. They were told that the purpose of initially writing both pro and con arguments was that they should try to anticipate what arguments the opposing side would present and to prepare their own arguments accordingly. Each student then read his or her arguments to his or her group (the pro students reading only their pro arguments, the con students only their con arguments). They were then instructed to give each other advice and/or suggestions concerning the contents of the arguments as well as the English used. During this time, the teacher walked around monitoring, giving advice and answering questions. The students were then told to select three or four arguments --three for a three-member group, four for a four-member group--from those presented. (In some groups,
arguments overlapped resulting in there being too few. In this case, the students were told to brainstorm and to come up with additional arguments.) They were then told to decide in what order the arguments would be presented and to allot one argument to each student, who would be responsible for preparing the argument for the debate by providing examples and/or supporting information. The teacher again walked around monitoring, giving advice and answering questions. (At this point, there was such a constant flow of questions, since each student was basically working independently, that it was impossible at times for the teacher to get to all the students. The teacher encouraged the students to ask the other group members for help and to be more confident in their own ability. They were told to focus on content, and to not worry excessively about grammar.)

Weeks 4 and 5: The students were divided into three groups—each group consisting of a pro group and con group. The groups took turns reading their prepared scripts. (The leaders were instructed to begin with, “We believe/don’t believe …. We have three/four reasons for this.”) The students on the opposing side were told to take notes as they listened as they would need to repeat or paraphrase what had been said in their rebuttals. (The students were told to mainly focus on one of the opposing team members – the member sitting directly across from him or her.) They were told to listen from beginning to end but that since they were non-native speakers of English they would be given the chance to ask for repetition, only one time per argument, by saying, “The first/second/etc. argument, one more time please.” They were told to interrupt the speaker and ask for clarification if necessary during the repetitions.

Once this was completed, the phrases, “That’s true, but...” / “That’s not (always/necessarily/etc.) true”/ “That’s not true” were introduced and the procedures for rebutting were explained. The students were told to say, “You said, ....” and to quote or paraphrase the argument they were going to rebut. This was to be followed with the appropriate rebuttal phrase from those introduced and with information and/or examples supporting their rebuttals. This being their first debate, they were told they would be allowed to prepare scripts for their rebuttals this one time. These were started in class, and finished as homework.

Week 6: The students were told that since two weeks had elapsed they were to repeat what they had done in the previous class (reading their initial arguments). However, this time they were told to continue on to their rebuttals.

At this point, a problem emerged. It became evident that the students had difficulty in selecting the appropriate rebuttal statement. They often opted to use “That’s not true” when they disagreed with the statement. They had trouble grasping that something being true, and something not being desirable were completely different issues. This was discussed, and the first debate came to an end.

Week 7: The students were divided into three new groups with new leaders, and each group was assigned a different debate topic. (Which group was assigned which topic, and which students were on the pro sides and which were on the con sides were all decided by doing “Rock-Paper-Scissors”.) They were given the remaining class time to discuss and form their arguments. The topics were:
-Should junior high school students be allowed to bring and use cellphones in school?
-Are cram schools necessary?
-Are school uniforms a good idea?

Week 8: The students were given the entire class time to finish preparing their arguments while asking their group members and/or the teacher for help. Students who finished early were allowed to read their arguments to the teacher in the locker room and to get advice. (Only about one-fifth of the students were able to do this.)

Weeks 9 and 10: In the final debates the general procedure was basically the same as for the first debate, the major difference being that though they had prepared written scripts for their initial arguments, they were given only five minutes to prepare their rebuttals. They were not allowed to write at this time to prevent the debate from becoming a simple writing exercise. They were told that the time was to mentally formulate their rebuttals and to look up the necessary vocabulary.

3.3 Discussion

Two main problems emerged during the initial debate. One was mistakes in word choice. Many students chose words they were familiar with without thinking of the actual meaning of the words. In most cases they felt that the word they had chosen was close enough to the intended meaning to convey the intended message. The other was an inability to provide supporting information and/or examples. This arose from the tendency to think that stating facts to a certain degree naturally led to a logical conclusion that needed no further elaboration, and/or to the tendency to think that their initial arguments were easily understood universal truths that required no further explanation. They tended to think that adding supporting information would lead to redundancy. Being told this was not acceptable and that they must strive for clarity led to some of the students becoming confused and/or frustrated.

As an example for the sake of clarification, in the first debate many students thought that the statement, “You can’t buy a house if you don’t have money” was a perfectly clear statement. First, it had to be pointed out that not everyone owns and lives in a house. (After a classroom poll, it became obvious that a large number of students lived, not in houses, but in apartments or condominiums.) At this point, it became obvious to the students that a “house” was not synonymous with a “place to live”. Next, they had to be pushed to explain why having a regular place to live was important.

A similar problem with word choice occurred with the use of “everything” versus “many things.” Quite a few students said, “If you have a lot of money, you can buy everything.” It had to be pointed out that though one can buy many things if one has a lot of money, there are things that cannot be bought regardless of how much money one may have.

Subsequently, the most often asked questions to the teacher were “Is this the right word?” and “What is the difference between … and…?” demonstrating that a definite awareness of the need to pay more attention to word choice had developed.

One major problem occurred during the rebuttals. Some students found it difficult to make
rebuttals to statements which were deemed to be true. E.g. You can’t buy time with money. They demonstrated an inflexibility in their thought processes which caused them to focus only on the grammatical structures used and prevented them from grasping the actual message. When the class as a whole was asked for suggestions to complete: “You said, ‘You can’t buy time with money.’ That’s true but…” There were suggestions such as “but you can buy food” making it necessary to point out that it was a question concerning the relation between time and money, not a question of what can be bought with money. Once the example suggestion “but you can make time with money/but you have more free time if you are rich because you don’t have to work so hard” arose, a hurdle seemed to have been cleared and many of the students seemed to suddenly realize that it was acceptable to deviate from the original sentence structure. They seemed to have become, almost instantaneously, more focused, and more flexible and logical in their thinking.

In the final debates, a majority of the students could focus more objectively on what they were saying and add logical supporting information and/or examples. Though some students still struggled with this, they were far fewer in number than in the first debate. Though there were grammatical problems at times, the students were also generally able to make plausible rebuttals to most arguments presented. There also proved to be a significant decrease in the number of word-choice errors.

At the end of the second term, around week six, the students had their regular end-of-the-term performance test. They had been told the previous week that they would be required to give their true opinions about one of the debate topics currently being used (chosen randomly) and answer questions by the teacher. With the exception of 4-5 students, all students began with, “I believe/don’t believe…. I have ___ reasons for this. First,….” Though it was obvious that many of the students had partially prepared at home, overall they expressed their opinions in a natural, organized, logical fashion attesting to the positive influences of the debate class. Their critical thinking ability had clearly improved.

4. Conclusion and Further Study

In this paper, we have explained the reasons self-expression and critical thinking skills need to be developed in English classrooms. We have discussed the instruction methods to develop these skills that were implemented in the English classrooms at Kamakura Junior High School and the areas in need of improvement that were subsequently discovered. In further studies, we need to address the refinement and “generalization” of the methods. They should be applicable in a variety of situations such as different English classrooms with different teachers and students of varying levels of ability. In addition, it is necessary to examine the effectiveness of these methods in developing self-expression and critical thinking skills. To do so, we need to develop a framework of performance assessment as well as valid reliable methods for conducting student self and peer evaluations.

Acknowledgement

This practical report is based on the research project conducted at Kamakura Junior High School
in 2012. We would like to thank Ms. Saya Matsui and Ms. Kaori Mano for their effort and cooperation on this project as research members.

References


