

Helping students to organize an English speaking seminar away from University

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Abstract

Seminars away from university are an invaluable experience for students, and it is important to set goals that will maximize the time on such a seminar. Three main goals, of having fun, learning English, and, essentially, finding opportunities to speak English should be made clear to students by teachers before the seminar. Also, before the seminar students need to be prepared to face all aspects of activities at the seminar, including possible language problems, and reach a consensus about the direction and content of the seminar.

1.0 Introduction

In Japanese universities students gain credits for attending both lectures and seminars, or “zemis”, as they are known. The lectures are more of a passive learning experience, with, usually, the lecturer imparting knowledge to a large number of students each week. At the end of the semester a teacher might measure how much has been learned by either a test or final report. The “zemi” classes, on the other hand, have a smaller number of students, a maximum of thirty at Toyo University. In the seminars, students get more of an opportunity to tailor their own research in a particular area of study. It is in this practical side of study that students can develop important skills to take into the workplace upon graduation. The small number of students also provides an opportunity to easily organize a seminar away from the university where they can acquire skills and build confidence in an environment that cannot be found inside the university. This paper was written after having spent a weekend seminar away with students from Toyo University who were using their specialist tourism seminar group as an English

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study group. This group consisted of two fourth years, three third years and two first year students. This group well understands the necessity for English in the international tourism field. The group wanted to address solely the issues of their individual English abilities by spending time away at a learning establishment called British Hills (reference section) in Fukushima. This center is given over to learning for many different purposes and age groups, including a choice of many lesson themes, with students ranging from junior high to university level. As the name suggests there is a strong influence from England, but teachers come from all native English-speaking countries. My attendance at the seminar was initially to observe the students and facilities for a future English study seminar of my own. However, through my observations and contact with the students I realized there was a value in recording my data and presenting it to other English teachers with similar plans to take students away on English study seminars.

2.0 Survey

Prior to visiting British Hills, students were asked to candidly complete a short survey that included the following two questions :

- 1 . How much opportunity do you have to speak with English native speakers outside of university?
- 2 . What are your reasons for attending the seminar at British Hills?

The first question was to establish a proficiency level of English for each student and to see the range of abilities. The second question was to establish a clear pinpoint objective about how students see such seminars away from university. The following choices of answers were given to students for the second question :

- 1 . to have fun
- 2 . to learn English
- 3 . to experience a foreign culture
- 4 . to take part in extra-curricula activities at British Hills (tennis, swimming etc···)
- 5 . to make an effort to do something
- 6 . out of necessity (university obligations)
- 7 . other (students were encouraged to list other reasons)

3.0 Results of Survey

As expected the replies given to the first question mirrored typical answers that most Japanese university students might give, but there was enough of a gap in abilities to have an influence on what might happen during some of the planned activities that would take place during the weekend seminar. Only one or two of the group members have had homestay experience or could be described as having communicative ability to carry on an unplanned conversation to a reasonable length. The other students were somewhat non-communicative and lacked confidence due to them having come through the mainly reading and writing biased Japanese education system.

Table 1 Results for students to attend the British Hills Seminar

Reasons for attending British Hills	Percentage
Fun	27%
Learn English	31%
Experience British culture	11%
To enjoy University activities	11%
As a challenge	12%
Necessity	3%
Other	5%

As for the second question, the results were quite revealing and, indeed caused me to write this paper. Please look at the results from Table one.

Each student ranked the choice of reason into their top three, with a weighting for those positions. The students were encouraged to be as candid as possible with their answers and to produce other reasons if they did not fit into the list. The other refers to relaxing and meeting other Japanese students in the same “zemi”. As can be seen having fun and learning English were the most popular reasons.

4.0 Discussion of results and formulating a plan for seminar students

Most of the students have no opportunity to meet foreign or native speakers of English outside the university, although they appear to want to. There is a lack of confidence that stops these young people from making contact with the large native English speaking community that exist in Japan. Many students must only associ-

ate foreigners in Japan with their English teachers at university, and have little sense regarding how foreigners exist outside of educational establishments. To the credit of the group that attended British Hills there was certainly no apathy about meeting foreigners, but the lack of confidence was evident in some students. It is obvious that the lack of contact between Japanese students and foreigners in Japan is evidence that attitudes to foreigners need to be modified somehow and more opportunities for students to practice speaking English need to be made.

As for the second question about reasons for attending the seminar, having fun and learning English were the most popular answers. Naturally, students want to have time away from the surroundings of the university and go to a place where they can have fun and learn English in a conducive environment. However, one reason that was missing from the results was surprising. Despite the insistence of students being honest with their answers no one expressed a wish to be able to communicate with foreigners more as a reason for attending the seminar, even though answers from the first question revealed the need for increased non-native - native interaction opportunities. Indeed, a pole taken of some instructors at British Hills puts increased native speaker contact as something instructors believe should be the main reason for attending establishments like British Hills, away from their school or university. As well as having fun and learning English, students need to be aware that they must also look for opportunities at all times to speak English with native speakers, and or, non-native speakers (within their seminar group). For the remainder of this paper I will address how teachers can prepare students who wish to visit similar seminars away from university and help them to make a plan of study, and show them make best use of the time in terms of having fun, learning English and creating opportunities to speak English with native and non-native speakers.

4.1 Having fun

It is the activities that can determine how much fun the students can have on their seminar. Krashen (1981) stated that learners under stress do not acquire language as well as those who are relaxed. The wider variety of exercises planned for the seminar, the more chance there is of finding activities that everyone can enjoy and benefit from. Students need to be taught to be autonomous and to take more responsibility for their own learning. This often involves tasks like setting their

own learning goals, planning their own activities, structuring their own time frame and working collaboratively with others (Boud, 1981). All these points can be included at the planning stage of a seminar. However, students will not know the type of and range of activities that could be carried out at a short seminar. The following is a list of activities that students might want to do that could provide a sufficient enough challenge and cover a variety of communicative purposes :

- 1 . A debate-be sure to decide on topics before the seminar.
- 2 . A book report or magazine article presentation - students choose a book or magazine article (depending on time before the seminar) to present to other students. Students at most universities have access to Graded Readers. These are shortened and simplified books based on famous literature e. g. Robinson Crusoe or Gulliver's Travels. Students can borrow these from most of the foreign teachers at the Itakura Campus, read them and make a few notes in preparation to introduce them to other students at the seminar.
- 3 . A movie report-like point number two, this would involve watching a movie before the seminar and preparing a summary.
- 4 . A presentation-If numbers dictate, each individual person could give a talk on a topic that interests them.
- 5 . Creative endeavors-for example collecting information at British Hills to make an advert of the facilities or the seminar. The advert could take the form of a radio advert or a short video.
- 6 . Questionnaire-Each student could design a questionnaire (with a set number of questions) based on a topic they choose (hobbies, work, study etc..) and interview each other, and present the results on the last day of the seminar.
- 7 . Songs - if students like music they could all choose a song and present why they like it and what some of the lyrics mean. Then, everyone could sing the particular song together as a group.
- 8 . Games-Shiritori in English or story building-Each student starts with a sentence and the next student has to add another sentence and this continues until a story has been created. Or an actual game such a scrabble or monopoly that you could play all in English.
- 9 . Incorporating the activities at British Hills into activities. A simple example could be a game of table tennis where losing/winning points means that some task should be completed in English.

The above list is not exhaustive ; there are other possibilities. It depends on how much time students have before the seminar to possibly prepare ideas to bring to the seminar itself. A group of 8 students should be looking at doing a mixture of three or four activities over the course of the weekend. By creating their own program from the beginning as a group and deciding on the activities for it, students will ensure they have more fun and meaning for their seminar.

4.2 Learn English

To learn English effectively in a short space of time it is necessary to be prepared, to work together and to perform some kind of follow-up work. Preparation should be at both the group and individual level. The group level means a clearer idea of what students want to achieve for the seminar as a group and how well the ideas and opinions of the seminar have been integrated into the study program before, during and after the seminar. Preparation at the individual level means encouraging students to always carry a notebook and make notes of what people say and check back with those people when something isn't understood. Furthermore, if the organizers (be it the teacher or students) do a good job, the individual should be aware of what is happening and when that will happen during the seminar.

Students need to help each other to get them through the seminar for two days. Too much English during the weekend could be a bit of an overload for some of the lesser confident students. One way to combat this is to put students with stronger language abilities together with students with lesser proficiency. Lightbown & Spada (1993) state that “.. interactional modification promotes acquisition”, so to make an atmosphere where acquisition is possible language needs to be modified via interaction between native and non-native speakers of varying proficiencies. It might be a good idea to assign one person as a language advisor to someone who could possibly need more language help than others. Bear in mind, also, that there maybe a situation where a younger member of the group may be more proficient in English than those who are more senior in age. When this happens, the older member should be willing to accept help from younger member for the seminar. The simple act of helping someone should not be seen as a wasteful act. One of the most difficult tasks for those students of better proficiency is to explain things to those who are less proficient than themselves. It is not simply an explanation for

more advanced students, but will be an exercise where all language forms need to be modified to get the message across, giving the students of lesser ability more of an opportunity to acquire forms. Also, through group work and pair work learners develop the ability to communicate through tasks that require them, within the classroom, to approximate the kinds of things they will need to be able to communicate in the world beyond the classroom (Nunan, 1999). Working as a group, not only helps the group's language ability, but also reinforces group problem-solving skills necessary for the workplace beyond university.

Finally, follow-up work after the seminar should include some of the skills that were learned as part of the seminar. These could include a report or something related to British Hills, like an advert, or a summary of the discussion/debate that took place during the seminar. Also, any of the other activities could be turned into a report and shown to other students in the future who might want to join the next seminar.

4.3 Take advantage of situations to speak out in English to native and non-native speakers

It is vital for teachers to instill in students the need to speak out in English at as many opportunities as possible. These opportunities will work to create an atmosphere for acquisition to take place through constant modification of language. Students should understand this important goal for attending the seminar and that relying on Japanese too much would not be beneficial or create an attainable goal. Students on this seminar decided to set times when English was necessary, for example in class and during meals, but other times students could relax and use Japanese. However, it was suggested students should speak English as a much as possible, even outside the set times.

Choosing activities also brings forward the need for providing basic language to get students through the activities. During one of the debates, students found that they did not know how to disagree with peoples' opinions effectively. Students need to think about what BASIC English they might need to get through these activities. This could be checked by one of the native teachers at Toyo University, who could also provide extra ideas students have not thought of. Students need to be careful that they don't get a teacher to do everything.

There are also many foreigners who work at various positions at British Hills.

Students should try to speak to these people as much as possible and report back to other students what they asked a person or how that person replied. These foreigners are used to speaking with people who come to British Hills and will always have time to speak to students who show interest in them or in English.

Another point is that those students who are not so confident or proficient should use conversation strategies (Dörnyei & Thurell 1992). They are an important part of conversation management and give students with less confidence or ability time and tools to negotiate a part of speech they don't understand through exchanges such as clarification checks, asking for repetition or using fillers to give the speaker more time to think.

In order to make opportunities to speak English students should speak English as much as possible and try to determine what kind of English they need for the weekend activities before the seminar from their own ideas and through consultation with English teachers. Finally, techniques of conversation management should be made aware to students to build confidence and help them to negotiate difficult parts of communication.

5.0 Conclusion

Seminars away from university provide students with a good opportunity to practice using skills such as English. These seminars tend to be short so it is important that time is maximized. Teachers need to allow and train students to become an autonomous group working together to help solve language problems. This starts with students collectively setting goals that should include at least having fun and learning English and must include students constantly finding situations to speak English with native and non-native speakers. Important for autonomy and goals are a selection of appropriate activities and recognition of the language necessary to undertake such activities.

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