

# Applying Cognitive Learning Skills to a College EFL Course — Connecting Contemporary Fine Art with Language Learning —

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Recent development of the cognitive science suggests that acquiring skills like second language learning can only be achieved by repeated rehearsals in a real life environment. EFL classes with contemporary artists are the unique experimental project tying up a college and an art center, in which college students and contemporary artists collaborate to each other in not only language learning but also exploring and knowing cultures and backgrounds, which in turn contributes to the students' overall growth as global citizens. The author discusses how the project was carried out, the effects on students, and the future possibilities of such classes in EFL arena.

## 1. Introduction

Developmental cognitive psychology suggests that second language learning can only be achieved by extensive practice in actual language use. This paper discusses some experiential classes for students at a Japanese public college. The classes were carried out in cooperation with visiting artists from a contemporary art center. In these courses, the author believes that student / artist interaction provided many good opportunities for L2 practice and use.

## 2. Applying Cognitive Psychology Skills in a Language Learning

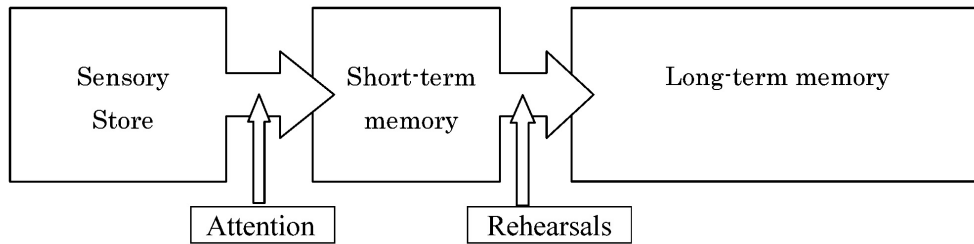
As any EFL teacher knows, English language learning in a place with access to few good English speakers can pose some problems. Perhaps the most important factor would be to gain in basic linguistic knowledge to facilitate actual language use as a part of everyday communication.

In the history of cognitive psychology, the development of a theory of "short-term memory" in the 1960s is very important. Figure 1 illustrates the basic theory. (Figure 1) It proposed that attended information went into an intermediate short-term memory where it had to be rehearsed before it could go into a relatively permanent long-term memory. Short-term memory had a limited capacity to hold in-term memory and had a limited capacity to hold information. By rehearsing the contents of short-term memory, for example, by saying them over and over again to oneself, the information would be transferred to a relatively permanent long-term memory. However, if the item left in short-term memory before a permanent long-term representation was developed, it would be lost forever. One could not keep information in short-term memory forever since new information would always be coming in and would push out old information from the limited short-term memory. (Anderson, 1980)

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[Figure 1] The model of memory involving an intermediate short-term memory (Anderson 1980)



Anderson (1980) called our ability to understand and generate language or apply our knowledge of rules to solve a problem "procedural knowledge". "Declarative knowledge" is explicit knowledge that we can report and of which we are consciously aware. In language learning we would be able to refer to it as the knowledge of grammar or spelling of a word. In contrast, "procedural knowledge" is knowledge of how to do things, and it is often implicit. Further, as we use the same knowledge over and over again in a procedure, we can lose our access to the rules that originally produced or enabled the procedure. Procedural knowledge such as language acquisition is acquired gradually and only with extensive opportunities for practice.

Therefore in order to get better in a certain language, you need to use the language as often as you can, until you forget about the rules such as grammar, making numerous mistakes and errors on the way and not caring about it, enjoying the conversation itself.

Unfortunately, in a provincial area like Aomori the chances are very rare when students can actually use and speak English. International exchange students are also few in numbers at our college. There are students from Russia and Korea, but none from the English speaking countries. As a teacher, I was wondering if I could simulate such an environment for students without going abroad,

like any other teachers would try to provide the learning environment in the classroom each time to promote the students' effective learning.

For some time I have been wondering whether I could create a classroom environment in which students can learn from real communicative experiences. And the course under discussion might have represented a step in the right directions. The English courses were conducted in collaboration with the visiting artists from the contemporary art center.

### 3. Background

Aomori Public College or APC was established in 1993 as a single-department college with its Management and Economics Division. Currently there are approximately 1,200 undergraduate students and a dozen or so graduate school students. Although Aomori is the capital city of the area, it is a comparatively rural region, and students have few opportunities to use English outside of classes. On the other hand, English courses are required in the first two years of their undergraduate academic courses.

Now I'd like to turn to ACAC, which stands for the Aomori Contemporary Art Center. Besides its periodic exhibitions, ACAC has a main program called "Artists in Residence", which invites selected artists from in and out of the country. The invited artists

stay at ACAC for a few months and concentrate on their artwork. APC and ACAC are adjacent in location, which enables the college students to meet these artists and have them as guest speakers, or visit them on site to look at their work. The two groups can exchange ideas, and get to know each other's countries and backgrounds. English was used as the link language to promote communication between the artists and the students.

I collaborated with the institution and the artists from seven different countries ranging from Asian to European and coordinated such experiential English courses from the year 2003 to 2008. Most of the artists were non-native speakers of English.

#### **4. Procedure**

Now I'd like to discuss how these classes were conducted in the order of 1) Role of English, 2) Participants, 3) Time, and 4) Venue, followed by the table 1 as a summary of the classes.

##### **1) The role of English**

As you can see in the table 1, most of the artists are non-native speakers of English. The role of English here is the common language that links the two parties, and both of which are the non-native speakers. This was very important experience for my students because it was something new to them. They learn here that all speakers of English are not always native speakers. In that sense, these people are the same as the students themselves. You might think that it is just a matter of fact, but people living in the racially homogeneous nation like us tend to think that almost all the people outside the country speak English. As non-native speakers, we share the same situation. Therefore the students will realize that speaking the second

language is not a special thing at all and this experience itself can contribute to getting rid of the fear or anxiety of speaking another language.

##### **2) Participants**

The number of students in a class varied between 10 and 30. Average class size was 20. Classes were divided into three levels depending on the TOEIC scores of the students and my classes during 2003 to 2008 ranged from elementary level to honors level. The dividing lines were different each year. For example, in fall 2005, the lowest classes were less than 360, the middle ones were between 470-365, and the highest ones were above 475. Based on these class levels, I decided to give translation or not to give translation to help students. In the meantime, however, I had to fix my ideas about the level and the needs of translation because not all the elementary level students needed the translation depending on the situation, which I'll discuss later.

##### **3) Time**

Class hours were 60 minutes for language courses at that time, as opposed to the other lecture classes were 90 minutes, allowing half an hour to move to the art center and to be used as extra time for questions and activities.

##### **4) Venue**

Classes and workshops were conducted either on site in the exhibition rooms at the art center, or in the classroom or the computer room of the college using the audio-visual equipment, depending on the needs of the students, the needs of the artists, the exhibition schedule, and the event schedule. In order to meet them all, preparation and briefing time was mandatory between the artists and sometimes with curators at the art center. Our

college had a room called Language Resource Room, or "LRR", where people can come and go freely and casually to get information related to language learning, and it was the place for a casual get together for the people who are interested in international matters. So sometimes artists would visit this room as

a base in the college and talk with students. The coordinator of the room contributed to this project very much as a contact person with the art center.

Table 1 lists the artists who kindly joined and collaborated on the project.

**Table 1**

No	Artist's Nationality	L1	Class Date	Art Specialty	Students' Classes*	Was translation provided?
1	Germany	German	Nov. 27, 2003	Woodblock print, sculpture	Regular	Yes
2	Croatia	Croatian	Dec. 5, 2003	Sculpture, installation	Regular	Yes
3	Cambodia	French / Cambodian	June 24, 2004	Woodblock print, installation	Regular	No
4	Finland	Finnish	June 30, 2004	Photography	Honors	No
5	Germany	German	Oct. 28, 2004	Installation	Elementary / Regular	No
6	UK	English	Nov 2, 2004	Installation, drawing	Elementary	Yes
7	Hungary	Hungarian	Jul 8, 2005	Drawing, installation, decorative art	Elementary	No
8	Canada	French	Nov 25, 2005	Installation	Regular	No
9	UK	English	Dec. 11, 2008	Cut-out paper installation	Regular	Yes

\* Students' classes are divided based on TOEIC scores from 2003 to 2005 and in 2008 on TOEIC Bridge scores.

## 5. Evaluation

As for some of the class examples and students' comments, please refer to *Learning by Experience - Artists in Residence, Japanese Students and a Class in EFL-* (Tada, 2008). Based on the students' comments and the result of questionnaire after class, I'd like to make a tentative evaluation of the project.

Positive aspects of the class:

### 1) Good student motivation

Witnessing the reality of the people from other countries could in turn, motivate the students to communicate with the people outside the country. I myself have worked for an American company, and felt the joy and fun of being able to communicate by myself using English as a second language. Japan's barrier in language learning is its homogeneity. By introducing living examples to students, you can break through, to varying degrees, such barrier and instill the idea that the world is diversified.

### 2) A context for language growth

Experiential classes like these can provide students with opportunities to use English as a second language. Even though the learners gain in the declarative knowledge like vocabulary or grammar, the knowledge wouldn't be useful if it remained in the short term memory without being used at all. The knowledge becomes a skill when transmitted to the long-term memory through extensive exercise, practice, or rehearsal. The skills like language acquisition would not be transformed to be the learner's ability to use language in real life, unless they are actually used. In some of the students' comments after class, students say that they are glad that they had the opportunity to actually try and use the

language and enjoyed conversation with speakers of English.

### 3) Build self confidence and awareness

The experiential class can raise confidence through direct contact with international people and raise awareness as global citizens. Learning about the other countries and cultures were the precious by-product of the class. In other aspects, even relatively low-level students can learn from the context and it promotes students' comprehension. O'Malley (1990) discusses that "...Academic tasks, for example, tend to be cognitively demanding and usually require language in which contextual cues for meaning are reduced. Tasks outside the classroom, on the other hand, are often undemanding cognitively and are characterized by language that either has rich contextual clues or is formulaic and therefore easy to comprehend or produce." In these classes, "the tasks outside the classroom" that O'Malley refers to became the "tasks inside the classroom". That is the reason why the students did not require translation. There were a lot of "contextual clues" in the classroom.

Aspects of the course that require more thought or need work:

### 1) Workload

In order to prepare classes, the workload is tremendous. All of the artists have unique ideas and concepts about their work. And their backgrounds differ greatly as well. Hence, it is mandatory for a coordinating teacher to talk with artists in depth and learn about them well beforehand, in order to help students by preparing pre-reading documents, handouts and probably questionnaires afterwards. Therefore, at least two to three pre-meetings are required to make

necessary arrangements, which could keep you quite busy.

## 2) Time

Together with the preparation time, the class itself is time-consuming; it is very hard to squeeze these classes within the structure of a regular class schedule. Technically, these classes are included as "extra" class time in the business English courses. Therefore it requires teacher's effort to finish the other teaching material as efficiently as possible.

The timing for the classes is also always hard to determine. The artists are here to create so it is no doubt that the exhibition is their top priority. Next comes the series of formal events, such as artist lectures or workshops given in the art center, which are also their primary concerns. Having finished with these obligations, the artists feel ready for something extra. The art center is run by the municipal government which is basically the same organization who runs the college, but the actualization of the classes depends on artists' good wills. Therefore by the time the artists are available for college classes, it's always toward the end of the exhibition and the end of the semester, which allows only a little time left for them to stay here and for students to interact with them more. This is one thing that should be considered to promote students' after-class communication with artists and to develop the program further.

## 3) Unpredictability

It is difficult to predict what will happen in the classroom. In these classes, the contents are, to a certain degree, possible to plan and can be structured in some way, but you always have to be ready for some unpredictable elements. In other words, you

never know what might come out of the class, in the way of students' reactions, comments, and questions. For example, there may be some questions from students which seem neither relevant to their artwork nor their background. The teacher should handle such questions with care by attempting to clarify the students' intention, for sometimes the students' innocence can be the cause of artists' annoyance or discomfort. However, seen from another point of view, this can be also a fun part. What we have seen in numerous after-class chats with the artists could be the most enjoyable part of the class and can contribute to the true joy of learning.

## 6. Summary

Regardless of the number of classes we have done so far, there are some areas that could use improvement. For example, giving questionnaires every time after classes and, presenting numerical indicators like Richter scales, would be interesting evidence of the legitimacy of these classes. Due to time constraints, this was not possible in some cases. However, the anecdotal evidence from the students' comments in previous classes suggest that the classes were held with rich contents and it would be worth while to offer the class again.

On the other hand, it is also a precious experience for the artists themselves to have contacts with local college students, as we always hear such comments from the collaborating artists. Having read the students' comments about her artwork in the letters addressed to her, one artist sent me an email saying "... it was truly a pleasure, and of course I'm glad if I can enrich their life experience in some way. They definitely enriched mine with their enthusiasm, letters,

fascinating comments and questions."

When asked "Why art classes with business students?", I would say, "Even students who are headed for the cut-throat business world would have to learn about life." We need balance in life and in education. If we can open students' eyes to the diversity of values outside their own small worlds, perhaps the experience will expand their horizons and can improve their lives in some small, but meaningful way.

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