



## Repeat After Me!

Now and then I use the occasion of an anniversary to pick up a topic for A Story A Week, as I did a few weeks ago when I talked about being in Japan for 25 years. That was kind of an un-missable event I thought, but another anniversary earlier this year didn't seem important enough to mention, so I let it go by un-marked. But curiously, my experience this past couple of months with printer-trainee Tsushima-san has brought me back to the same topic in a roundabout way.

The anniversary I neglected to tell you about early this summer was the passing of 20 years since the closing of the English language school I set up shortly after we arrived in Japan. This was long before my printmaking skills were anywhere near capable of supporting our family, and running a conversation school in our home seemed like the perfect way to not only make a living, but to become well integrated into our local community.

It performed both functions very well indeed, and over the five years that my little school was in operation, I ran thousands of classes, and hundreds of 'members' came through our front door for their weekly lesson. All of these students were receiving (or had received) formal language training at school, so I made absolutely no attempt to duplicate that sort of material. In my classroom there were no textbooks or pencils, nor was there any discussion of such things as grammar or syntax. My teaching was focussed on one thing and one thing only - to keep their jaws moving, to help them turn their 'book learning' into practical communication.

I did this by using a method that could be called 'guided conversation'. For each group of students - each and every week - I prepared a sample snippet of typical English conversation between two people: perhaps an exchange between a customer and a clerk in a shop, or a scrap of chat between two friends meeting on the street. The topics ranged over all aspects of daily life.

I began each lesson by 'acting out' the two parts of the conversation, repeating it two or three times. The students then joined in, going over it with me again and again until they could repeat the words smoothly and were on the way to memorizing it. They never saw the written words, and there was absolutely no explanation of the 'meaning' or the grammar. It was simply repetition of sounds.

After we had repeated it often enough, we then all stood up and positioned ourselves in two lines facing each other in pairs. On my signal, each pair acted out the conversation, all speaking at the same time. For anyone listening at the classroom door it must have sounded like chaos, but that didn't matter - each pair could clearly hear each other. As soon as they had run through it, I would call "All change," and they moved one step to the right, faced a new partner, and repeated the conversation. I constantly worked the room, listening, correcting and suggesting as appropriate.

By the time we had gone around the cycle a few times, they really were starting to feel fluent with the conversation, so I started to 'mix it up' a bit. I would stand behind the row at one side and hold up illustrated cards that held hints on how they should modify the conversation. For example, if the original script had contained the line, "We went shopping for a new washing machine," I would hold up a card showing a TV

set, or a rice cooker, or something similar. The student would make the necessary change, and the other partner - who hadn't been able to see the card - would of course have to respond in a sensible way.

Now all of us well knew that it would be highly unlikely that in their future encounters they would ever have the opportunity to use this exact conversation script, but that wasn't the point. Simply the goal was to keep their mouths moving, to keep them talking, and to make sure they were also listening. By the end of this segment of the weekly lesson, they were exhausted. Exhausted from *speaking English* - a world of difference from their usual classroom experience!

But look at this - I've spent so much space giving you this 'background' that I have no room left to explain just what connection this has with new printer Tsushima-san.

We'll just have to continue next week ... see you then!

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