



Topsy-Turvy

I have been living in Japan for getting on thirty years now, and as there are not all that many foreigners here working as professional woodblock printmakers, I can enjoy my status as a fairly 'rare bird'. But for my first four or five years here, I was as far from rare as you could get - before I began to sell the prints I was making, I fed my family by teaching English.

But do you know, in a strange upside-down twist of circumstances, it was actually during that first few years that I made a living by drawing, something I never do now that I am a 'professional artist'.

Before even getting on the plane to come to Japan, I had our plan of action all worked out. I knew that it would be impossible at first to survive by printmaking, but because there was plenty of demand for English teachers, it seemed like it would be no big problem to find a way to provide a monthly income.

But I didn't want to work for one of the big English schools. I wanted to work in my own home, on my own hours, and using methods that I felt were most suitable - and effective - for the students. So as soon as we settled into our rented apartment, I wrote up a little flyer describing my proposed classes and timetable, and stuffed it into mailboxes all around the neighbourhood. A week later, we were in business.

I knew that all Japanese - of any age - have 'been through the mill' when it comes to learning English. They have sat in classrooms for hour after hour after hour listening to some teacher drone on explaining grammar rules. What they have never done, is talk. Everything is 'intellectual'; nothing is 'visceral'. But there is only one way to develop any kind of fluency with a language, and that is to speak it. Hesitantly at first, of course, but gradually becoming more confident as time goes by.

But how is a learner to speak, when they don't know what to say? Isn't there a paradox here? Surely, the desk learning comes first, then the practice?

No. No. A thousand times no. And all you have to do is think back to how you learned to speak your mother tongue. None of that process was intellectual; it was all trial and error.

So here was my plan; before each and every class I prepared a 'guided conversation' card, with material suitable to the age and experience of the particular group. The front side of the card - to face the students - was a sketch of a couple of people in a clearly visible situation. Waitress and customer. Two friends meeting. Parent and child. That sort of thing.

On the back of the card, which my students never saw, was a very short conversation, just about three or four lines back and forth: "Hello, may I help you?" "Yes please; I would like a hamburger ..." etc. etc.

My students sat in a circle around me, and as they looked at the illustration, I spoke the story. We then spoke it together, over and over again, as they echoed me word for word until we basically got it down. We then all stood up, paired off, and practiced it repeatedly in face to face fashion. Every minute or so I would yell, "All change!" and they scrambled to a new partner, and practiced some more.

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After they began to feel a bit confident, I would start to toss in some variables. I would hold up another card, this one showing an illustration of something that could be plugged into the canned conversation. They would of course amend their words to match: "Yes please; I would like a milk shake ..."

Once I felt they had it down pat, I would whip out a *different* conversation card - the one we had done a week before, perhaps - again yelling "All change," and away they would go again ...

This is the way to learn a language - not 'thinking' about what to say, just moving your mouth steadily in sentence after sentence, and situation after situation, until you collapse back into your seat exhausted.

And I kept this up with every single class for every week for the entire five years that I was their teacher. I included many other activities, of course, but they all shared the same philosophy - keep the jaws moving. No pencils. No pens. No notebooks. Nothing but these images - representing real life situations - and talk, talk, and more talk.

They very much enjoyed these classes, we had a glorious time together, and I really do feel that I made an impact on their language skills. Just how much of it was useful in the 'exam hell' they entered later is debatable, but that was not our intention. We were there to *talk!*

So there you have it - during the five years that I was an English teacher, I drew thousands and thousands of illustrations of people and situations and objects, becoming pretty competent at it, but once I became an 'artist', I hung up the pencils. Don't ask me to draw anything these days; I've pretty much totally forgotten how!

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