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Teaching Japanese Students English with Kagan Structures
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I have been teaching English for almost 20 years in Japan. I taught at the junior and senior high school levels, and presently teach at the university level. Before I began using Kagan, I was observed at my university by a CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) instructor from England. The instructor reported that there was rapport between my students and me, but not among the students. I was aware of the issue, but was puzzled about how to solve it. I had already tried some pair work and group projects but felt they did not work well or just took too much lesson time. One of my colleagues had some Kagan posters displayed in her classroom, so I started to learn from her and carried out some of the cooperative activities, which I could not call Structures yet at that time. Also, I was pleased to find many cooperative learning theories in my certification course.



After a few years of trying some cooperative activities, I became more and more interested in Kagan Structures. I decided to pay my own way to attend [Kagan's Winter Academy](#) in Las Vegas in 2011. Even though English is not my first language (Japanese is), thanks to Mrs. Laurie Kagan's clear instruction and her effective way of teaching, I was able to follow the four-day workshop without much trouble. At Kagan's Academy, I learned the meaning of Structure and PIES which I did not fully understand before.

How many teachers attend workshops, either on their own or are forced, and actually come away with something valuable that they can use in their own classrooms? In my case, most workshops didn't apply because my situation or students were not the same. I would acquire some knowledge or ideas, but couldn't really use them with my students. However, Kagan Structures

were totally different. During the Winter Academy in Las Vegas, we had the opportunity to reflect on the structures and how we could apply them in our own classrooms. Further, we got to hear from other teachers and how they could use them which sparked even more ideas. I couldn't wait to return to Japan and try out these new structures and ideas I had learned!

Student Comments about Using Kagan Structures

“I can think about the content of the reading and meaning of the words with other members of my team. If I only do it on my own, I just memorize the words and don't think deeply about the reading.”

“It is not just putting some knowledge into my brain; I actually think about it by communicating with others.”

“It is not always easy to do with others, but it is fun to do with others.”

“If there is something I don't understand, I can ask my teammates. I was also glad to get to know others from other departments.”

“When I feel like cutting a class, I know I have teammates waiting for me, so I didn't miss any lesson.”

“There is always something to teach or learn in a group. We develop a good relationship with teammates.”

If I am working alone and I face something I don't understand, then I stop thinking or can't say anything, but in a team, I can talk and ask.”

“Since I have been studying on my own, I did not realize how much I could learn by studying with others.”

The classes I teach now are mainly compulsory liberal arts English, whose main goal is to learn reading strategies and vocabulary. However, most students are not interested in learning English, so their motivation level is low. The syllabus is half fixed and half flexible. I have approximately 30 to 50 students per class. As teachers, we have no choice of textbooks, the number of units we need to cover per semester, nor the core grammar and vocabulary required in each unit. It is all pre-determined. All students must take the same final examination which accounts for 40 to 50 percent of their evaluation. Therefore, under this fairly rigid situation, the only thing that I have control over is the way I teach and the way my students learn. So I inserted Kagan Structures into my lessons.

In each unit of our reading textbook, there are reading passages, vocabulary, grammar, and reading strategies. Kagan Structures are flexible, so I found many places to insert them into my lesson plans. They are also repeatable, so once you use some Structures for one unit, you can repeat the same structures with new content which makes planning easy. Plus, students become

more and more familiar with structures which reduces the amount of time required for introducing the structure and increases learning time.

Before every reading passage, I have students do a pre-reading activity in a group or a pair, using RoundRobin or RallyRobin. For example, before reading a passage on water usage and pollution, I had students guess how many bathtubs full of water are required to produce a single hamburger. They took turns stating their opinions, then reached consensus as a team. After guessing, I tell my students that the answer is in the passage we're about to read. Every student spontaneously opens his or her textbook to look for the answer and discuss the answer with teammates. Surely many teachers do independent pre-reading activities with students as I did before Kagan. But without the structured cooperation, the activity is not as interactive and rich. In groups and pairs, students express their ideas, they praise their teammates, they joke around. The cooperative component creates a positive learning environment which increases language learning and boosts their motivation for reading.

The next stage of the lesson is for students to acquire the new vocabulary. Each student finds the English words from a Japanese translation on the handout. I have them do this independently, but after the allotted time is up, I have them check their answers using RallyTable. After they practice pronunciation of the new words and receive feedback, I have students do another RallyTable. One student says one word and his or her partner repeats it back. As they do this, they sometimes find mistakes on their handouts. Since their English proficiency is quite low, they sometimes make mistakes just copying the words from their handouts. These pair and group work structures work very effectively to provide feedback from peers and establish roles where students are accountable for performing and learning.

After students read aloud with me and do paired-reading, they do a Rotating Role RoundRobin activity, rotating the roles of Reader and Translator. In a group of four, Student #1 reads one sentence. Then, Student #4 translates the sentence. Then Student # 2 reads the next sentence. Then Student #3 translates. Students alternate the roles of the Reader and Translator after each sentence. This can also be done in pairs, but I like teams of four so while the Reader and Translator are performing their roles, the other teammates can help or correct their reading and/or translation. Before I had structures, I was just calling on one student at a time to read and translate. Now, thanks to Kagan Structures, my classroom is lively and highly engaging. Instead of engaging just one student at a time, I am engaging the entire class.

Students also like to do Quiz-Quiz-Trade. There is a small test after every unit. I give them time to prepare for the test using Quiz-Quiz-Trade. Working independently, students can study at home before the test. But with cooperative learning, students have the benefit of using their classmates as resources to help them learn. They give me very positive feedback about studying using those cards, teaching each other, and reinforcing what they have learned. Quiz-Quiz-Trade might be my students' favorite structure since they always ask me if they can do Quiz-Quiz-Trade. It is probably one of my favorites too because I can see how helpful it is when students

teach each other. I learn from them too. They have strategies for teaching things and motivating each other.

Here are the Structures I use frequently in my reading lessons and how I use them:

Used Structures

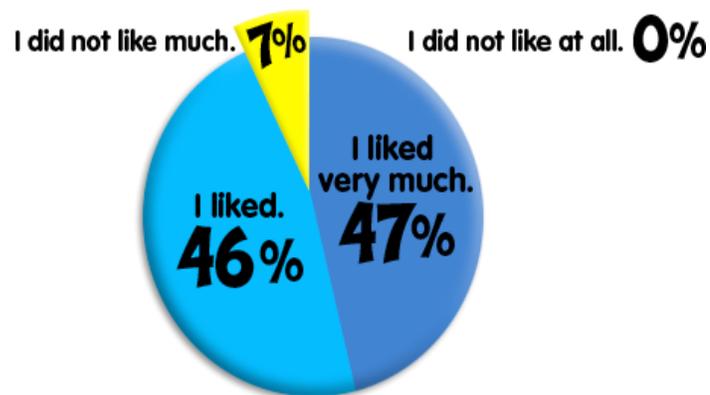
	RallyCoach	RoundRobin	RoundTable	Inside-Outside Circle	Fan-N-Pick	Pairs Compare	Numbered Heads Together	StandUp-HandUp-PairUp	Quiz-Quiz-Trade
Group Name			✓						
Pre-reading Activity		✓	✓						
Vocabulary Cards	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓
Individual Handout	✓	✓				✓			
Reading	✓	✓							
Reading & Translating	✓	✓							
Comprehension & Grammar	✓					✓	✓		
Feedback			✓				✓		
Post-Study & Test	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Marking	✓					✓			

Student Survey

After a semester of using Kagan Structures with my students, I administered a survey to get feedback from my students and how they felt about working together. Here are the results.

Result 1

► Q1 How did you like studying in a group?



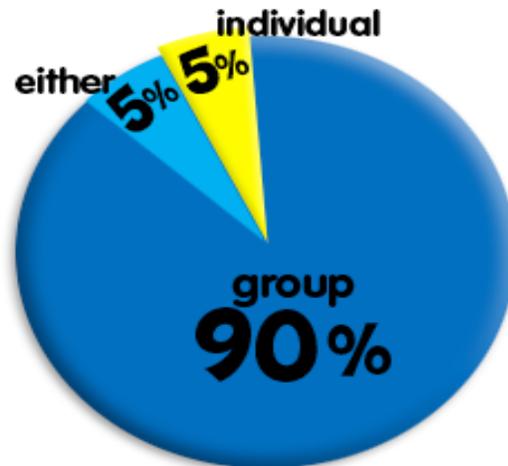
Result 2

Comparison of Preference and Score



Result 3

► Q2 Next semester, would you like to study in a group or individually?



Clearly, students enjoy cooperative learning. Ninety-three percent of students report that they like it or like it a lot. Only 7% either don't like it much. No students stated they don't like it at all. The results are very similar when asked if they would prefer to study individually or in a

group. Ninety percent choose cooperative learning over individual learning. Students overwhelmingly prefer cooperative learning over studying independently.

Conclusions

Japanese students and Japanese people in general tend to be a very harmonious group of people. But when it comes to working in a group, they tend to be quite reserved about expressing their feelings, especially if it contradicts someone else's. The culture is very respectful and students tend to withhold their ideas. While these can be positive qualities in some areas, holding back can also hinder language learning. The Kagan Structures have served as a wonderful corrective in my classrooms. Students are encouraged to perform their roles, to be expressive, to help others. The structures encourage active participation from all students.

In some classes at some Japanese universities, students fall asleep in class. That just doesn't happen in my lessons. When I did the whole-class lessons, I was engaging one student at a time. Motivation and enthusiasm for learning was much lower. I like my students fully engaged and to leave the classroom tired, but in a good way. I feel with the Kagan Structures, I have finally created that student rapport that was missing from my lessons before Kagan. In cooperative learning, students are more active, and have more opportunities to interact with the reading material and with each other.

With cooperative learning, there is much greater retention. I am now teaching one of the repeater classes. I have two students who took my class last year. The others took the class from other teachers. My students clearly remember the reading; the other students can't remember what they read at all from last year even though they had the exact same curriculum. I attribute the difference to how engaged my students are with the reading versus being passive learners in other classes.

By using Kagan Structures, my students feel like they are on the same side. They are there to help and support their classmates. Even when a student is studying by himself, he knows that his learning will be a service to other members of the team when it's teamwork time. They all feel a strong bond among teammates and take it on as a personal responsibility to contribute to learn and help their teammates learn.