"Méthode Immédiate"

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How much learner autonomy can we expect in Japanese classes?

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Bruno: The idea of basing an article on a dialog came after the long and interesting discussions we had during your stay at Osaka University. They were intellectually rich and also informative, thanks to the big difference in our professional backgrounds, which makes them complementary. I have a fairly large experience of teaching in Japan, but my knowledge about teaching has come mainly from practice. You are a professional in the techniques of language teaching, but you have been in Japan for a relatively brief time.

Jeremy: Yes, I have been in Japan now only for 10 months. I have just completed two semesters of teaching, and these will be my only two semesters because I have to return to my mother university. My background is as a career English. I taught at the University of Canberra for a decade, and in the meantime I gained a Masters degree in Applied Linguistics. I undertook quite a lot of research in language teaching and Applied Linguistics, pedagogy and I began to teach teachers, or teacher trainees. In fact, most of my work over the past 4 or 5 years has been with student teachers. But I have always kept one foot in the language classroom. It has been very important to me, so I am both a researcher and theorist on the one hand and a practitioner on the other. Really it has been my role as a practitioner which has been dominant during my time in Japan, because most of my classes have been with ordinary language learners, first and second year university students of various faculties, various levels of competence and various levels of commitment. At the same time I have carried along a graduate course in language testing and assessment.

Bruno: I have personally never been formally trained to teach languages. As an undergraduate, I studied Economics. My graduate studies were in Human Resources Management, and that's when I started studying intercultural communication between Japanese and French people. I started teaching French in Japan, because it was the first job that I found when I came here as a back-packer. I was 23 years old. The private school that hired me launched me as a professional teacher after two days of « training ». Subsequently, I taught French in Africa for one and a half years and then again in Japan when I came back and settled here. I experienced the whole range of teaching situations, going from private classes to classes in language schools and cultural centers, and then on to university part-time teaching and then full-time teaching at Osaka University. I have been active in French teachers' pedagogical congresses and I was given the opportunity to write a textbook three years ago with my

predecessor at Osaka University, Jean-Luc Azra. Since the publishing of that textbook, we have been working on the definition and improvement of what is now known as the "Immediate approach", a technique for teaching conversation which is based primarily on pragmatic considerations.

So, can I ask you again what your impression was when you started teaching in this country?

Jeremy: My first impression was one of shock in a way. I had had quite a lot of Japanese students before, in Australia, and I felt I was familiar with Japanese learners, their learning style and behaviour, and patterns of participation. But it's worth pointing out that Japanese students outside Japan are likely to behave differently from the majority in Japan, and I hadn't actually come to terms with this distinction. They behave the way they do in Australian classrooms because for one thing the Australian education system obliges them to behave in a way that is different from what they are used to and they have to adapt, as one does when one studies overseas. So I see a lot of Japanese students in Australia in an adapted state. The other thing is that when Japanese students study abroad they choose to, not in all cases but in the vast majority, they select themselves. It's what they want to do: they want to leave Japan, live in another country, learn its language or do something else. My language students in Australia wanted to study English in order to get a degree in Australia or in another English-speaking country. This is a long way of saying that Japanese learners in Japan are a different category.

Bruno: And they are a category that shocked you?

Jeremy: Yes. A number of things shocked me. It's strange I was shocked because I was well-informed before coming here. I had enough Japanese friends to tell me what to expect, and I had all the information about the university.

Bruno: What did you hear about Japanese learners before coming?

Jeremy: The image I had was that Japanese students were relatively passive, quiet and well-disciplined. Also, not very communicative in their use of the languages they study. I had heard that the classes were large, that that was something I would really have to face. But let's take the case of the stereotype that I had heard, from Japanese lips as much as from other sources. The stereotype of the Japanese is polite and compliant. I'm not denying that there are a lot of students who fit this picture, but I do remember walking into my listening class on my first day and see 50 faces. That is a large class. I knew that there would be 50 people, but that seemed such a lot more than the 50 in my mind! And they stretched back in the room like an ocean. What I discovered about this group is that although they were basically polite they were undisciplined. They didn't behave as well as I had expected. They often talked among themselves, with quite loud voices, they ignored me frequently enough, they did homework for other classes in my class and they were quite boisterous.

Bruno: Boisterous?

Jeremy: Sometimes I had to delay the main business of the lesson in order to calm them down, to keep their voices down, to gain enough silence. But I think the biggest shock for me was the lack of interest. The students in general in that class and my other classes, that is, the majority or at least 50 per cent were not interested in studying the language and I was not prepared for that. In the listening class that I mentioned I soon realized that there was a geography of the class. Those who were genuinely uninterested and unmotivated and who wanted to get on with their social lives and homework for other courses would sit at the back. Those who were keener would sit at the front. It was very tempting for me to specialize in those people sitting close to the front. I tried not to do that and I learned to walk up and down the aisle much of the time. This was one way of asserting my presence and getting people to participate. I was rarely behind the teacher's desk. But to be honest with you, I don't think that class was a success, largely because of a lack of motivation among the students: a majority of them really didn't want to be there.

Bruno: What faculty were the students from?

Jeremy: Engineering. Later, people explained to me that engineering produced the students who were least interested in English. I had another class with medicine students, and they seemed to be appreciably more engaged in the work. Not all of them, but a larger proportion. More than 50 per cent were attentive and interested. One is tempted to make generalizations about doctors who are more interested in people and engineers who are more interested in bridges and office blocks … but I won't make that generalization.

Bruno: What about human science, literature, economics students?

Jeremy: They were the best. An even larger proportion was interested and motivated. But most of the students were female in human science, more than 60 per cent. In engineering by contrast, maybe only 5 per cent were female. I think there is a valid generalization. I began to say of my classes, as the weeks passed, that the more females in the classroom the better the standard and the more enjoyable it was for me as a teacher.

Bruno: We have a lot of things in common in terms of the way that we conduct our lessons. Can you give me a brief description of how you proceed in class during a semester?

Jeremy: Yes. Here we are talking about my courses in oral communication, first and second year. With these groups, although the class size is quite large, I try to get as much of a sample of spoken English as possible despite the varied constraints. *Class size* is one constraint, and a further constraint is the *natural timidity* and shyness of Japanese students, who in general don't volunteer their participation.

What I do is set two criteria at the beginning of the course, fluency and accuracy. *Accuracy*, which I suggest to the class is extremely important, refers to grammar and sentence structure and we deal with these through exercises, often treated orally, by means of the textbook that I've prescribed. I test it through written objective tests twice in the semester. The tests amount to 40% of the final mark. That gives you the idea that accuracy is less important than fluency, and since this is a course in oral communication I think that proportion is about right. I don't want them to forget the structure of the language as they speak it.

As far as *fluency* is concerned, in class I get my students to do a lot of pair work and group work on various tasks. Some of them could be relatively structured and others more in the nature of free debate. It depends on the level and nature of the class. But ultimately, towards the second part of a semester, I will get students to give speeches. I actually avoid the term "speech" in class, I like to say "talk". The reason I avoid the word "speech" is that I don't like the formality that the term normally implies. I invite students to give a talk on a topic of their choice for around 5 minutes per person and arrange for questions to be asked by other members of the class, whom I nominate. 60% of class time is available for this activity. Half of it is devoted to the talk itself and during the other half the student handles the discussion. I participate in the discussion and ask questions and one or two other students ask questions as well.

It is important to say that I like students to choose their own *topics*, I don't prescribe them. The reason is that I want them to be at ease with the topic that they've chosen. The only condition is that I don't want them to talk descriptively or narratively, as that can be rather boring. I insist that they choose a topic that engages them in ideas and opinion.

Bruno: Can you give me some examples of the topics that were chosen this year?

Jeremy: There is a very full range actually, but I must say that even if they chose a relatively tedious topic like Japanese baseball - forgive me saying that's a tedious topic but it is in my view - then the discussion that follows much engage them in some more abstract ideas, not just "How many times did your team win this semester?" A question like "Is interest in baseball rising or declining in Japan and why?" is more applicable. The question "why" is always very important. There are lots of topics on sport of that kind. Many chose to talk about motorbike riding or touring; the sarin gas attack and the media response to it; the bombing of Hiroshima, which is often chosen by students who are from that city or prefecture; artificial intelligence. One student wanted to talk about his pessimism and negative thinking and another spoke of the hemispheres of the brain. Others spoke of their future careers and why they were attracted to them and so on.

Bruno: I have one more question. Do you give the students points for presence?

Jeremy: I tell the students at the beginning of the semester that I will accept two absences without question. After that they have to have a reason. I borrowed this approach from colleagues. I don't give them marks for just being there. I must say that having learnt a lot about Japanese students and the psychology of classes in the first semester, I could in the second semester begin to talk more authoritatively about attendance and attentiveness. I said that I expect them to attend, but it is useless to attend if one is not attentive. I was thinking of a particular student from the first semester whose attendance was 100% but who, once in class, would rest his head on the desk and sleep the whole time. This was offensive to me as a teacher and a distraction to the class, so I did emphasize attentiveness as much as possible (in the second semester). It's hard to give marks for attentiveness as it is an invisible thing, but I said that I would be looking at their participation and the quality of it.

Bruno: So students who are absent more than twice are penalized?

Jeremy: Yes, they are penalized. There were students who were absent more than twice, but I have not had any problems with this as they gave reasons that I found acceptable. I valued it highly if the students actually came to me and explained in English what was wrong and why they couldn't be there. And there were others who missed not just two or three but tended to be consistently absent, so the answer was already given and they failed. In fact, very often these were the students who missed tests and therefore failed themselves.

Bruno: Thank you. I will now try to sum up the main features of the *"Immediate approach"*.

This oral communication teaching method is centered on a particular situation: the interaction between two or more individuals in *real time question/answer conversations*. The reason why we called it the "Immediate approach" is that the students have to immediately use the new linguistic material to conduct a test held between the teacher and the students. The whole class is a preparation of the frequent oral tests. During these tests, questions and answers will be exchanged to create a meaningful conversation on a given topic.

In concrete terms, the class is globally broken into *two main time-blocks*.

During the first time-block, the teachers *introduces the linguistic material* relative to the topic of the day. It is the teacher who chooses the topic and who assesses what the core of the conversation will be. Presentation of the linguistic material is minimal: the meaning of each separate word, and the way to combine the elements into various types of sentences. Grammar explanation is avoided as much as possible or kept to a minimum (one-sentence explanations are the ideal). This is because time is precious and has to be spent on actual oral practice. The first practice occurs continuously between the teacher and individual students as the basic exchanges of question and answers are being introduced:

for example, "Are you a member of a club? Yes, I am member of the soccer club / No, I am not a member of any club". After asking the question to a few students (with the whole class listening), making various remarks and adding more words when they are found necessary, the teacher lets students practice in pairs for a few minutes. This process is repeated two or three times, and this leads to the end of the first time-block, after around 45 mns. The students are now in possession of a linguistic material that allows them to conduct simple conversations. They are invited to vary the way they manage the different elements, and to include material from the previous classes. They are also free to seek additions to the core linguistic material that we gave them. The teacher leaves some time open to questions to this effect.

The second time-block is the *conversation test*. Individual students or pairs of students come and have a short conversation with the teacher in a corner of the classroom. The rest of the class is busy preparing the next test: doing exercises, practicing orally with their partner, etc. The student or the pair of students has a few minutes to show that they can have a simple conversation on the topic of the day (they are also free to make the connection with previous topics). They should respond adequately to the teacher's questions and ask pertinent questions. The teachers gives a mark just at the end of the test: it is a reflection of the students' performance which includes speed of expression, pronunciation, accuracy of the language used, and ultimately the degree to which the conversation was enjoyable, seemed effortless. Depending on the size of the class, students will be able to sit in for a variable number of tests. For example, if there are only 20, they can sit for a test every week, so they will be able to have around 12 individual conversations with their teacher in the semester. If the class is big, like 50 students, they will still be able to sit for 4 to 6 tests during the semester. The test is therefore a central part of the class: it is an active and repeated practice of conversation.

Jeremy: Is your decision to have a single conversation topic for the whole class connected with your students' beginner level in French?

Bruno: Well, it is true that the levels of our students in French are completely different from the that of your students in English. Those who took up French at university are complete beginners, and even those in their second year are still in a lot of ways beginners as well. That makes a big difference of course.

But basically the reason why we choose the topics of conversation for the students is that we feel that having common material allows every student to benefit from the others students' contribution to the class.

We also put a lot of energy into the process of conversation. The student has to say something that is correct and makes sense, but also learn how to interact in a real conversation (how to formulate, ask,

respond to various types of questions). We found that focusing on *conversation as a real time interaction* helps us to locate a lot of areas where the students are having problems. A good part of these difficult areas is connected with culture. The fact that the whole class is working on the same central material allows us to show these aspects clearly.

Jeremy: How do you calculate the final mark?

Bruno: The student's final score is broken into two categories. Attendance, which is made up of 40 points, 5 points being deducted for each absence, and 60 points is given for oral test results. Tests are only oral and on average there are 4 tests in one semester, 3 tests during the class and one final test that is worth around 30 points. It may be shocking that 40 points is given for attendance but we don't find it a problem as testing starts from the beginning of the class. One finds that this method draws the students to study and indeed almost all students, when in the classroom, will study.

Jeremy: So, their attendance is related directly to their commitment?

Bruno: Yes. But we don't judge the commitment in itself. We give 40 points for attendance but do not judge attentiveness as it involves a lot of effort. We prefer to let our class system do the work for us. Everything is designed to push the students to prepare for their test. This represents a big shift from my previous experience as a teacher in Japan. Before I always found myself trying to control the student's participation and urging them to be more active in the class, which of course took a lot of my energy. But with this system we completely turned that approach around and encouraged the students to volunteer for tests. It then becomes natural for them to prepare for the next test without any motivational effort from our side.

I think that the success of this strategy of "making it happen through the class system" is based on some very practical organization aspects. One of them is the *attendance sheet*. Students receive their own attendance sheet on the first day. The upper part contains basic pieces of information such as their name, student number, faculty, and so on. They write them down during the first class. Underneath, they also write the dates of all the classes in the semester. On the right there are two columns, one for attendance and one for test results. In the "attendance" column, they will receive a stamp for each they attend. In the "tests" column, they will receive a mark after each test. All this is recorded only on the attendance sheet and the responsibility for bringing this to class (and not losing it!) is on the students. This simple device has a powerful effect on the class dynamic. The students can monitor their own progress. They might, for example, see that another student has already had two tests and realize that if they don't come forth to be tested they run the risk of failing. They therefore volunteer to be tested. The system puts them in the situation where they must "demand" to be tested and therefore "demand" and search for the material necessary for the test. This is the reverse of a too usual situation where the

teacher feels he or she has to force the knowledge into the student's head and urge them to be motivated to take an exam that is imposed on them.

So, how would you characterize the differences between you approach and ours?

Jeremy: In a word, I'd characterize the difference as that between a *learner-centered approach* and a *teacher-centered approach*. I'm speaking here at the level of theory and will come back to practice in a moment. Basically what I want my students to do is release themselves from the dominance of the teacher, and the idea is that if learners can assume responsibility for their learning and for the management tasks related to their learning then they will learn in a more effective manner. Independence is therefore a value. If the teacher is dominant and breathing down the necks of the students in the class then the students are likely to become dependent and only learn what the teacher feeds them. In the acquisition of a foreign language this is not always considered good practice. The idea is that the more independent the student can be the better it is for his or her learning opportunities. What underpins this notion is what we know of the psychology of learning, and that is that most learning (more than 50%) takes place outside the classroom. I am sure that a lot of educationists and practicing teachers would agree with this. What I've just said harmonizes very well with the *communicative approach*, which I consistently defend.

But, coming down to reality, that is the Japanese reality, I must say that it is very difficult to impose the pure form of the communicative method in Japanese classrooms and particularly here at Osaka University where we have over 30 students in a class. Adding to this, students also have a particular cultural character, they are not forthcoming, are not used to the idea of being independent due to their school education, they are not critical thinkers, at least not in public and they don't like to speak out for fear of making an error. There are various conditions, some of which I've spoken about already, that make the learner-centered classroom very difficult to attain. I instead settle for a compromise, and what I described before about the way I teach and test is a sort of compromise. The most communicative thing I do is to get students to work in pairs or groups as far as possible, and I have had a good measure of success with that technique. Even in the oral testing there is a degree of independence. You used the expression "making students as responsible as possible" and certainly I agree with that. In testing I ask students to choose their own topic, defend the topic that they've chosen, proceed with it in any way they like within time limits, and be ready for questions. There are restrictions, but the amount of freedom I give them, that includes research and forming a good plan, is pleasing to them and I find that it is motivating, by contrast with the rest of the English that they do in class. Giving them the freedom to talk about something that they're really interested in is somehow liberating. To some extent, I think that you could say that there is a learner-centered atmosphere in the class. However, I concede that ultimately the class is relatively teacher-directed to the extent that I would not really like if we were in

Australia. But there we have smaller classes and much more motivated language learners. It is a different ethos. Here in Japan the conditions are different and I've had to adapt, as I would I if I were in the USA, Mexico, Argentina or China; wherever I go I would have to adapt. I don't think that the communicative approach is an ideology or a set of principles that could never be compromised or broken. It is an approach, it's not a methodology and it admits degrees of communicativeness and independence, so this flaming sword of independence that I seem to be waving is not an all-or-nothing concept. There are degrees to it and independence in its pure form is actually an ideal and not obtainable anywhere. I think what's important is getting students to act as independently as they can for as much time as they are capable of in class, so I admit to appreciable compromises in my practice, and that practice is a recognition of the reality of language teaching here in Japan. This also precisely the reality that you respond to with your method and I respect that.

Bruno: I actually have received a similar comment, that is, that this method is teacher-centered, when I discussed our way of teaching with some French colleagues. When I tried to find the source of this impression, I came to the conclusion that it is not due to the lack of pair work, which is in fact an important part of our class organization. It is not because of tests, because in our way of testing the student has a lot of ways in which he or she can influence the testing process. I think that the decisive way in which our approach is teacher-centered is the material we use. The linguistic material that we introduce makes up a large portion of the actual end-product conversations. In your case it is left to the students to decide what they will talk about and how they will present it.

Jeremy: True. But there is a very important point that I want to make here which will serve to defuse any tension between the two approaches. You already mentioned the fact that one clear difference between us is that here at this university English is not being taught to beginners but rather to students of roughly intermediate level who have done a number of years of English study, not very efficiently conducted, but they've done it. In that respect, although some of them may be false beginners, they have the foundations of the language. However, in your case you deal with absolute beginners. Let me come to the point that I want to make in this section, and that is that whenever you teach beginners you have to impose teaching direction much more so than with more advanced students. I mean, it follows that the more of the foreign language the student knows the more independent he or she can be. With the students that I have there is more of a basis for that kind of behavior in class than there is in your groups. If I were teaching English to beginners, I think the level of teacher direction would be very high and no English teacher or even the most advanced practitioner would disagree, unless it's an unorthodox approach.

This actually raises a question: what happens with the "*Immediate approach*" when you have more advanced students. Will you persist with the same style or will you vary it, and in what way will you do

so?

Bruno: I think that I would also increase the extent of students' original contributions. We could imagine that the basic linguistic components that are now the bulk of our teaching would shrink in importance to let's say 30 to 50% . The remaining 50% to 70 % would then come from the students' own research. This goes a long way in your direction, I guess. But I think that even if I had more advanced classes I would still decide on a common topic myself, because I feel it helps to have the whole class working on the same material. When we are doing oral practice in which the student answers a question in front of the class, the whole class can understand the question and answer. This is made possible by having a common topic.

But I have never had the opportunity to use the "Immediate approach" with students who have been trained from the start in this technique. Until now, all the supposedly intermediate students that I have had the opportunity to teach have had some kind of handicap in real-time oral expression: they thought too much and did not manage to keep up a certain pace. It seems to me that they all benefited from a quite standard way of conducting the "Immediate approach". Of course, the situation would have to evolve after a certain stage, as we agreed before. But in the beginning, students all seem to benefit from some "real-time oral expression training". There are cultural reasons for this.

Jeremy: So you think that Japanese students' oral expression can be improved by addressing directly cultural factors?

Bruno: Yes, since I started using the "Immediate approach" I have been able to have a great many short conversations with students. Since intercultural studies has always been my field of interest, I quickly saw a connection between the way students "sounded", the recurrent mistakes they made, and *cultural conversational styles*. Some students have a good command of vocabulary and grammar but don't sound so good when they actually try to engage in a real-time two-way conversation. Others manage surprisingly well considering their purely linguistic level. They have pragmatic skills that make a difference. Let's take some examples.

Generally speaking, taking *a very long time to answer questions in Japan* is culturally acceptable It shows that you are honestly looking for the answer. In France, you are expected to answer in the next few seconds, even if it's only "I don't know". So I found it necessary to explain to my students that (a) there are two different cultural codes they need to take account of, (b) I want them to adopt the French code in class, and answer questions in less than 15 seconds, and (c) if they don't know the answer or don't understand the question, they should use a number of strategies to circumvent the difficulty. We work a lot on these strategies, the first of which is "What does xxx mean?", followed closely by "I don't know", "How do you say yyy in French?" and so forth.

The length of answers tends also to be different. For a number of reason, Japanese students' answers are often very short. We have to push them to give longer answers, which will fit better with the way a conversation proceeds in French. In Japanese, people ask each other many questions, which are followed by short answers. In French, you are expected to give additional pieces of information in your answer, otherwise your interlocutor will have a feeling that you are not being cooperative and will have a hard time continuing the conversation. So we work on the simple rule: "at least one more piece of information in the answer". For example, if I ask a student "Do you work", and she answers to me "Yes", I show how the answer could become much more significant by adding "in a restaurant", or "once a week".

Concerning the French language, I have also noticed that, in French, when you express yourself on the same topic as the person who spoke just before you (for example, you mention your city of residence after he or she did the same), you need to refer explicitly to what your interlocutor said. When you live in the same city, you will say "Me too (Moi aussi)". When you live in a different city, you have to use "Moi, …", which conveys the meaning "my case is different than yours", perhaps in the same way as "Personally,…" or the emphatic "I" is sometimes used in English. My students have a hard time remembering to use this "Moi, …", maybe because in Japanese you would do exactly the contrary: you would avoid differentiating yourself strongly from your interlocutor. In French, omitting this expression gives the impression that you are not paying attention to or did not understand what your interlocutor is saying.

Conversation tests are a chance to locate little by little these characteristics of conversational styles. Incorporating such characteristics in the teaching is something very exciting for me.

Jeremy: Yes. We've spoken already about the cultural context of approaches to language teaching and we both agreed that the reality of teaching and learning in Japan is quite different from that of other cultures. Hence, I found that I had to adapt and compromise my own generally communicative approach to teaching on arrival in Japan when I was faced with large classes and the psychological character of students here and certain other limitations. So, the kind of teaching that I did, particularly in the second semester after I'd learnt a lot of lessons (in the first semester), represents this sort of cultural compromise and I'm relatively happy with it. If I were staying longer in Japan I would adapt even further. On this point, as you and I both agree, whatever you do in the Japanese language classroom you have to respond sensitively to the psychological background of the Japanese students, their collective character, their learning styles, what they like and don't like doing and the dynamics of the class. What I like about the Immediate Approach is that it does take into account all of these conditions very well and is in fact designed specifically to respond to the critical exigencies in the Japanese classroom, and it has evolved to fit that classroom. When you talked earlier about what I called the

"teacher-centered approach" and when you talked about the (quite significant) role of the teacher in your class, you were in fact talking, from a cultural perspective, about the consistency of the teaching approach and the needs of the students. Now this raises a very interesting question: isn't the Immediate Approach confined to the Japanese reality? Is it simply a method for the conditions that exist here? In other words, can it be applied in other countries? Well, tentatively you would say it can be applied in other countries where similar educational regimes exist, and I can think of several with Korea being a good place to start and various other countries where you find large classes with very passive students. But to what extent is it exportable to cultures beyond those that are similar to the Japanese? Could it be used in France? Could it be used in the United States with foreign language learners? I am wondering about the extent of its applicability in other educational regimes.

Bruno: Well, it has been tried in France in the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language, at Paris 7 University. The students who received this teaching seemed happy about it, but we know that students usually take what they are given anyway. Nevertheless it's my impression that there is some similarity between the French educational system and the Japanese educational system in the sense that it is more teacher-centered than the American or Australian system. Maybe France would be considered as being in the middle, with the USA on one extreme (relatively low teacher-centeredness) and Japan on the other (relatively high teacher-centeredness). In France I think that it is normal that the teacher delivers most of the knowledge and it's not expected that students ask too many questions. So the process of transmitting the knowledge does not consist of oral interaction between the teacher and the students as much as in the United States. A big difference between France and Japan is that, as I mentioned before, the cultural code in France dictates that if you are asked a question then you should respond quickly. I think language teachers in France use oral exercises in class. They don't really expect students to volunteer questions, but they expect the students to participate promptly. This is the cause of quite a big cultural shock to French teachers who come to teach here as they very often find that the students do not answer quickly.

This recognition that France is a more teacher-centered culture than America or Australia helps us to understand why the Paris 7 University students we talked to declared themselves happy to learn Japanese with the "Immediate approach". They said they appreciated the fact that this approach was really focused on their own oral practice than was the case in the other more traditional classes they took. However, would it show benefits in the States or in Australia? I don't know.

Jeremy: What I might add here is that it doesn't matter if it doesn't show any benefits in other cultures. Generally speaking, methods grow up in one particular culture and might or might not work in another. But, if it just works in Japan alone that is no lack of justification for it.

Bruno: I would like to come back to our comparison between the communicative approach and the "Immediate approach". A French colleague of mine who is using the communicative approach stressed that speech acts are the nexus of that technique. Do you also consider it to be a central aim?

Jeremy: It can be. There is something called the "Functional Approach". A speech act is a function. So, with the functional syllabus, as taught communicatively, one goes through all the social situations in which one uses speech acts. They could be requests and offers and refusals, complaints and apologies and so forth. I don't think that's a million miles away from what you do in the "Immediate approach".

Bruno: Certainly. There is a little twist however: in the "Immediate approach" we focus each class on one *conversation topic* and that topic should have a interest in itself. For example, "What movies have you seen recently?" and all exchanges revolve around this topic of movies, actors, etc. The topic of conversation is what gives a direction to the whole class. We might use different speech acts in the same topic of conversation.

Jeremy: I see the difference. With a functional approach, that is, through speech acts, role-plays are very important and that is where communicativeness comes in. It's an opportunity to use the living language in realistic situations. Role plays engage two or more people in conversation which enhances communication between people and unconsciously exercises the grammar. At least that's one thing that we do in common. I think the speech act syllabus is one way of realizing the communicative approach. It is not the only way. And in fact that can be quite restrictive. I did use it here at Osaka University in the first semester in oral communication for some classes or part of classes. We would be working through a number of speech acts, which initially I thought would be quite interesting as they are so vital, requests, offers, refusals and so forth, and very culture-bound too. I thought they would be interesting for the students to practice adjusting to the levels of politeness that we have in English, but I realized half way through the semester that it was getting to be tedious, very programmatic and very uninspiring. So, I don't know that I could argue whether that it is a fully free approach, at least not the way I dealt with it, and I think the students were much more communicative when they were talking in a less disciplined way in pairs and groups on various tasks that they had to complete together.

Bruno: Until now we have worked in our French classes almost exclusively on topics related to the students' (and teacher's) own lives, for example "Where do you live?", "What kind of movies do you like?", "What kind of movies have you seen?", "which countries have you been to?", "What did you do during your holidays?" etc. Always a 'you and me' conversation. You are asking real questions to that person and you are giving real information about yourself. One of the benefits of this is that you can repeat the same questions many times but there is always a variation. For example, "Do French people like baseball?", "No, they don't like baseball. Baseball is not played in France". **Once you have done**

this exercise it's finished because the answer is now known by everybody. But, if you ask "Do you like baseball?", "Yes. I like it very much" / "Very little" and "Why? Do you play it very often?", **then even with the same basic elements you have different answers.** This departs from the role play approach, because in a role play one takes on a role such as that of a tourist. Our impression is that speaking about oneself and the interlocutor is motivating. I guess role plays can be a fun way to extend the scope of practice. Actually, some of my faster students sometimes start naturally using fictional identities during their oral practice, after practicing the "real life" answers about themselves.

We are now exploring ways of connecting this personal approach to more general topics like the ones you mentioned earlier, such as "Are you for or against this or that?" , "What do you think about uniforms in Japanese high schools?", etc. It is true that after a while, speaking only about oneself can become tiring.

Jeremy: Anything can happen that's useful in the classroom, and even just ordinary, mindless drills of the present perfect and the simple past tense can be part of a classroom, which is still broadly communicative, and people can talk about their own particular topics. Role-play is just one option but it's considered to be relatively important. Games, role-plays, various kinds of mini-dramas. These are actually crucial to the application of the communicative approach and you could say they are its cultural limitation because for a good many students role-play is very artificial, difficult and unreal. For others it's very real and very interesting.