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**Abstract****Adapting to a 45-Minute Language Lesson:  
A Preliminary Account****Christine Winskowski****Catlin Hanna**

In order to give our junior college students more opportunity for distributed language practice (short, frequent periods of exposure), we divided our 90-minute weekly classes into two 45-minute classes. We also selected materials that lent themselves more readily to the shorter class periods, had more clearly defined language input, and offered more opportunities for out-of-class listening. Student feedback on the shorter, more frequent classes was overwhelmingly positive, especially from the second year students, who had experienced both the traditional 90-minute class and the 45-minute classes. Second-year students found that the twice-weekly short classes were more convenient, provided more useful listening and speaking material as well as more opportunities to speak in class. They also felt they were learning more English overall than in the previous year. Feedback was strongly positive for the first-year students as well. They all found the shorter classes were as good as or better than traditional-length classes, and found the materials interesting and useful. While we have other changes we wish to implement, we felt these changes were a clear improvement, including the fact that a holiday or a single student absence does not mean that a week's worth of class has been missed.

## **Adapting to a 45-Minute Language Lesson: A Preliminary Account**

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The state of language teaching methodology in Japanese universities very much rests between two paradigms. One is the traditional paradigm, in which students pass an intensive 90 minutes engaged with close reading of text, study of grammar, translation of phrases, etc. The other may be called the “pragmatic” paradigm, although this is an over-simplification, since it is an eclectic collection of approaches. Usually, the pragmatic paradigm adheres to practical and idiomatic usage with judicious combinations of memorization, practice, and free-use exercises, incorporating authentic texts at selected times. Spoken use may be emphasized over written use; extensive focus in reading or listening may be combined with intensive focus.

In the Department of International Cultural Studies, the language courses were established with the intent of getting the best of all possibilities, though the speaking courses were conceived with a strong pragmatic bent - small classes, active practice, and colloquial and authentic language input. Yet we noticed that in the 英語表現 B (English Expressions B - Speaking and Listening) course, formerly 英会話 (English Conversation), our pragmatic approach and methods were packaged in the traditional time-slot, i.e. a weekly 90-minute period.

However, language learning, like other complex types of cognitive learning, fares best with shorter, more frequent exposure to language input. Complex cognitive and motor behaviors such as typing, sports, music, mathematics, and language are best learned with what is widely known as *distributed practice* – short, frequent periods of exposure – rather than *massed practice* – longer, less frequent exposure. This is a learning principle first formally observed and reported by Hans Ebbinghaus in his studies of memory in 1885, and confirmed by many hundreds of subsequent studies in the research literature on the psychology of learning. Simply put, there is less long-term forgetting with distributed practice; mental and physical fatigue and other distractions have less opportunity to interfere, and intervening periods of “rest” from the subject of study allow time for learned material to be consolidated in long-term memory.

Since we were familiar with other university educational systems where language classes are distributed in three, four, or five one-hour periods per week, we proposed the prospect of dividing our weekly 90-minute English Expressions -B (Listening and Speaking) period into two 45-minute periods per week. Of course, integrating these 45-minute periods with the rest of our department’s 90-minute class schedule posed some logistical challenges. To solve these difficulties without dislocating other classes in our fairly tight schedule, we suggested that the two class sections per semester that we each already teach simply be divided in two at the 45-minute mark, and each section be taught for half the period. Our class schedule went from

what is exemplified in Figure 1 to what is exemplified in Figure 2.:

Period	Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	8:50					
	10:20					
2	10:30	英語表現 BI-1(CW*)			英語表現 BI-3(CW)	
		英語表現 BI-2(CH*)			英語表現 BI-4(CH)	
	12:00					
3	13:00	英語表現 BIII-1(CW)			英語表現 BIII-3(CW)	
		英語表現 BIII-2(CH)			英語表現 BIII-4(CH)	
	14:30					
4	14:40					
	16:10					

\*CW - C. Winskowski \*CH - C. Hanna

Fig. 1 – Sample conventional 90-minute English class schedule: Each instructor taught two 1<sup>st</sup>-year sections and two 2<sup>nd</sup>-year sections.

Period	Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	8:50					
	10:20					
2	10:30-11:15	英語表現 BI-1(CW*)			英語表現 BI-1(CW)	
		英語表現 BI-2(CH*)			英語表現 BI-2(CH)	
	11:15	英語表現 BI-3(CW)			英語表現 BI-3(CW)	
	12:00	英語表現 BI-4(CH)			英語表現 BI-4(CH)	
3	13:00-13:45	英語表現 BIII-1(CW)			英語表現 BIII-1(CW)	
		英語表現 BIII-2(CH)			英語表現 BIII-2(CH)	
	13:45	英語表現 BIII-3(CW)			英語表現 BIII-3(CW)	
	14:30	英語表現 BIII-4(CH)			英語表現 BIII-4(CH)	
4	14:40					
	16:10					

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Fig. 2– Sample schedule for the same English sections, meeting twice a week for 45-minutes.

Instead of holding a 90-minute class for Section 1 (or 2) on Monday, and for Section 3 (or 4) on Thursday, we now meet both our sections, each for a 45-minute period on both Monday and Thursday. In order to minimize time lost as we change classes at the 45-minute mark, classes are scheduled in adjacent classrooms, and the instructors move from one room to the other.

**Impact on our class planning and organization**

As colleagues may appreciate, this change went beyond simply dividing the lesson time in half, stopping at the middle, and continuing at the next class. We realized that we would be changing the way we taught. We had some initial concerns about adjusting to a 45-minute period. Would it seem too short? Would we have enough time to introduce new material and have students do some practice with it? What sort of teaching materials would best suit this

class length and accomplish our course objectives? We knew that we were going to have to become highly efficient in our planning and delivery of each class - no slow starts, aimless chat, or running back to the office for a forgotten item. We knew that the substantive class content we both strove for would need to be infused with a bit of time-rigor and fine-tuned with optimal teaching materials.

One change we deliberately incorporated was a change of textbook. We had already abandoned our use of *Connect with English* (McGraw-Hill, 1998), a popular series based on a video story. While we found this material an excellent source of authentic spoken English, whose story was intrinsically interesting to our students, the material was designed to aid *practice* of English rather than actually *teaching* English. That is, while there were many interesting discussion topics and discussion activities, nowhere were the students introduced to and taught input language, and the burden fell on us to constantly supplement these materials.

We next had tried *Interactions Access Listening/Speaking*, part of the well-known *Mosaic* series published by McGraw-Hill (2002). This material contained both listening activities and speaking activities, with rather more emphasis on the listening. As we used this material, however, we both had come to feel that the speaking component, while covering a good array of functions, was simply too limited and ill-defined in its actual language content (input). Further, we felt that the longish chapters would not divide conveniently into 45-minute periods.

All of these issues were critical matters to us. Our aim was to find material that accomplished several things: First, we wanted substantive, clearly-defined input language for our students to learn, so that we (and they) had some sense of their progress, and so that we could objectively measure that progress. Second, we felt that the best use of class time would involve mostly speaking exercises; listening work could be primarily assigned as homework, offering individual students the chance to spend as much or little time as they needed. Finally, we needed material that quickly moved from the introduction and explanation of new language to practice and use, with clear and specific outcomes for each part of the unit and each class. This last element became even more important as we faced the prospect of shorter periods.

Our initial efforts with our most recent textbook selection, *ICON: International Communication Through English* (McGraw-Hill, 2004), has largely satisfied the demands of our course objectives and our time constraints. ICON focuses primarily on speaking and listening, though there are reading and writing components as well. It has four levels; we use ICON 1 and ICON 2 for our first- and second-year classes. The listening material is on a Teacher's CD, with a subset of material on the Student's CD. Each text has 12 units; we use 6 units per semester and cover one book in a year. From the introduction of a unit's vocabulary based on the chapter topic, the language input is cycled and recycled in short, immediately accessible exercises. Each subsection expands usable expressions for conversational exchange, for exploring grammar points, conversational strategies, or listening. Quite unconsciously, we have fallen into planning approximately two or three intensive speaking or listening exercises of 15-20 minutes each for

each 45-minute class. Each exercise has a clear purpose and well-delimited language input, and the rapid changeover in activities forestalls student fatigue and wandering attention. Our original intention, to cover one unit every two weeks, has largely been accomplished.

All in all, we feel that the critically important selection of a suitable text for our shorter classes has worked out fairly well. It has allowed us to identify student outcomes for each class and to build student skills in an orderly way. There remain some details to be worked out: Our plan to use the Connect with English video as supplementary listening materials has had uneven success, and need smoother integration with the main material. Quizzes and exams supplied by the ICON publishers seem like a promising resource; we are exploring their adaptation to a web component of the course. And our intent to optimize two brief homework assignments complementing the weekly classes is still being worked out. For example, due to limited resources, we cannot assign all students to record homework conversations in the same two- or three-day period. We also hope to make the listening material in both the Student's CD and the Teacher's CD available to students online. Still, while our adaptation to the 45-minute classroom is yet a work-in-progress, we feel reasonably satisfied that things are on track.

### **Student feedback on the 45-minute language lesson**

We anticipated that our first-year students and second-year students would experience the 45-minute language lesson somewhat differently. The first-year students would be entering college, and while they would be accustomed to 90-minute periods, the anomalous 45-minute language lesson might seem one new thing among many new things in their college experience.

The second-year students, on the other hand, had become accustomed to a 90-minute language lesson, both for speaking / listening and reading / writing. Actually, before we took the proposal for 45-minute language lessons to our department, we polled the students on how they felt about the prospective change. 70.6% of our 51 second-year students found the proposal acceptable (41.2% checked "It's ok with me" and 29.4% checked "I liked the plan"). However, while no one checked "There might be a problem," there were 29.4% who checked "I don't like the plan." Thus we thought it possible that some students would feel the shorter classes were problematic.

After most of the semester had passed, we had a chance to find out how the students were experiencing the change to two 45-minute classes a week. In the last two weeks of class, around the time of the standard IPU course evaluation administration, we also administered our own course evaluation with items designed to help us understand how our students were experiencing particular elements of the class (the time period, speaking opportunities, amount being learned, text materials, homework, etc.). A total of 51 out of the 54 first year students in the department completed the evaluation questionnaire. We were gratified to find that the students' experience of the 45-minute language lessons was generally quite positive. We discuss each class separately below, item by item.

**First-year students' course evaluation responses**

1. For language study, the 45-minute period is 22 better than 90 minutes.  
29 as good as 90 minutes.  
0 worse than 90 minutes.

As far as language study, the students have their weekly 90-minute English Reading and Writing class and second foreign language class to compare with our class. We were pleased to discover that no students preferred the 90-minute class and many felt that 45-minute periods were better. This result is consistent with what we have observed in our classes. The energy level remains high for the entire class and if students do look at the clock, they often remark at how fast the time has passed.

2. In class, I am speaking 

5	11	14	7	
a little		a lot		

 of English.

For this item, we intended for the students to circle one of the vertical lines, but found that the instructions were not clear and students marked the questionnaire in a variety of ways. We have tried to represent their answers accurately here.

While we would prefer to see more students answering closer to the “a lot” end of the scale, we know from the second year students' results and our own observations that they are speaking more English than they would be in a weekly class.

3. The class speaking activities are (check as many as you want)

<u>2</u> too much	<u>48</u> ok	<u>2</u> too little
<u>6</u> too easy	<u>21</u> just right	<u>3</u> too difficult
<u>14</u> useful	<u>1</u> not so useful, because (please) explain _____	

Students appear to be generally satisfied with the type of speaking activities in class, indicating the amount of speaking, the difficulty, and the usefulness is acceptable. As this year is also the first year we have divided first-year students by level (according to initial TOEIC score), it is good to know that the level of difficulty appears to be appropriate for most students. The person indicating “not so useful” offered no explanation.

4. The class listening activities are (check as many as you want)

<u>0</u> too much	<u>35</u> ok	<u>2</u> too little
<u>2</u> too easy	<u>22</u> just right	<u>2</u> too difficult
<u>10</u> useful	<u>1</u> not so useful, because (please explain) _____	

The level of satisfaction with the listening activities appears to be very similar to that of the speaking activities with most of the students finding the quantity, level of difficulty, and

usefulness appropriate. Again, there was no explanation by “not so useful.”

5. The [supplementary] video *Connect with English* is (check as many as you want):

- 7 too difficult
- 28 a little difficult, but I understand the story
- 4 boring
- 18 good practice
- 1 not good practice
- 13 good for learning culture
- 0 other-please explain

The students have some difficulty with the language in the video, but are able to follow the story and generally feel that it is a useful activity. This is the assessment that we expected as this video is used almost exclusively for extensive listening practice. The story is discussed, but language heard in the video is seldom studied explicitly. While we feel that it is good practice for the students to focus on meaning and use context to understand the story, we would devote more time to language forms used in the video if more class time were available.

6. The textbook (check as many as you want):

- 7 has useful English      26 has interesting topics      11 has interesting activities
- 7 is too easy                  26 is a good level                  3 is too difficult
- 0 other-please explain

Students seem to be satisfied with the level of the textbook and interested in the content. Since we have found this to be quite an easy book textbook to use, we were pleased to see that the students largely agree.

7. The homework (check as many as you want):

- 2 is too much      46 is just right      4 is too little
- 8 helps me practice and learn      0 is not so helpful
- 0 other-please explain \_\_\_\_\_

Students are given an average of 30-60 minutes of homework per week. This homework includes listening activities from the textbook or the supplementary video material, recording conversations with a partner, and written exercises in the textbook and workbook.

8. I am learning 

6	11	3	1	1
3	13	11	2	

 of English  
                                 a little                                  a lot of

Student responses were clustered in the area just to the left of the middle indicating that few students feel that they are learning “a lot of English.” Rather, it appears the majority feel the amount of English learned is moderate. In a program that claims to emphasize English, this doesn't seem entirely satisfactory. With 90 minutes per week allocated for English speaking and listening, however, it will be a challenge to improve these results.

9. In class it would be best to do more:

*Learn another country's culture*  
*More listening and speaking/talking (13)*  
*Sing a song/listen to music (2)*  
*Game [sic]*  
*Vocabulary*  
*Grammar*  
*Speak more slowly*

Since the entire class period is already spent exclusively doing speaking and listening activities, we are not sure what students meant when many of them wrote that they would like to do more listening and speaking. It may be that they feel the current amount of class time is insufficient to really practice these skills. It may also be that students realize that in the normal course of events, they often lapse into Japanese during activities. This is not surprising given that they are with friends with whom they have established relationships in their first language. We have found that on occasions when we have drawn students' attention to their tendency to drift into Japanese and have given them the language necessary to do all parts of the activity (turn taking, asking for clarification, etc.) in English, there is a marked increase in the amount of English used.

10. In class, it would be best to do less:

*Watch video*  
*Homework*  
*Video script*

The very small number of comments here suggests that the students are essentially happy with the content of the class and find the majority of activities interesting and useful.

11. My effort in class (circle one):

2 poor      16 fair      29 good      2 excellent

It appears most people feel they are making at least a reasonable, if not good effort.



## 12. My other comments:

*I enjoy this class (3)**I am interested in this class**Class is very interesting**I want to speak more***Second-year students' course evaluation responses**

At the same time that the first-year students were asked to evaluate the class, 50 second-year students were given a similar version of the questionnaire. This version was tailored to discover how they felt about the new 45-minute class periods in comparison with the previous year's 90-minute classes. Questions and responses follow.

1. My overall feeling about 45-minute classes is
- |               |    |   |   |                  |
|---------------|----|---|---|------------------|
| 12            | 16 | 6 | 1 | 3                |
| 6             | 5  | 1 |   |                  |
| they're great |    |   |   | they're terrible |

As on the first year questionnaires, the students did not all respond by marking the vertical lines, so we have reproduced their responses as accurately as possible. Students are clearly quite positive about the shorter class time.

2. I'm speaking English in class 27 more than last year.  
22 the same as last year  
1 less than last year

Students seem to feel that the 45-minute class gives them more opportunities to speak English. Despite the fact that the actual time spent in class has not changed, this was our feeling as well. This may be due to the pressure we feel to use the short class period efficiently, not getting started slowly, not spending too much time on transitions between activities or letting activities run on too long. We suspect that we may have unconsciously done those things because we realize it is difficult for students to maintain a high degree of concentration on difficult material for 90 minutes. The fact that students' energy levels remain high throughout the shorter classes may allow them to participate more actively.

3. My English contact outside of class is 13 more than last year.  
36 the same as last year  
1 less than last year

It was our hope that the twice a week format would allow us to assign students more work to complete outside of class. We are, however, still in the process of determining the type and quantity of homework that would be most useful. It appears that one third of the students are having more English contact between classes, while two-thirds do not notice any change in

their contact with English outside of class.

4. The English I'm learning is 32 more than last year.  
14 the same as last year  
2 less than last year

As mentioned earlier in the paper, there are two factors that may affect students' perceptions of English classes this year in comparison with last year. One is the change to two 45-minute periods and one is the change of textbooks. Both these changes appear to have had a very positive effect on students' English learning.

5. The 45-minute classes are 40 more convenient than last year.  
4 the same as last year  
6 less convenient than last year

As second year students are often very busy with job hunting, transfer exams, part-time jobs, graduation research and other activities, we thought they might be less enthusiastic about the switch to meeting twice a week. Apparently the benefits of the shorter period (and the remaining free 45 minutes of the period) outweigh any inconvenience they might experience.

6. The English textbook (ICON 2) is 32 more useful than last year's book.  
14 the same as last year's book  
1 less useful than last year's book

We are pleased that most of the students concur with us that the current text is more useful than the previous selection.

7. The textbook activities, design, pictures, etc. are 36 better than last year's book.  
14 the same as last year's book  
0 worse than last year's book

As we expected, most students agree that the current textbook is an improvement over the textbook used previously. The ICON books are more liberally illustrated and colorful. Also, there is less explanatory text and more input language.

8. The amount of listening practice is 19 more than last year.  
30 the same as last year  
2 less than last year

While a slight majority of students feel that they are speaking more English than last year (see #2 above), somewhat fewer students feel like they are getting more listening practice. This is not surprising since although a CD is included with the students' textbook, the main

listening tasks for each unit are found only on the class CD and are done in class. As well, this group of second year students is not watching the *Connect with English* video. For next year we hope to make textbook listening activities available online and include the video in the class curriculum.

9. The homework (check as many as you want):

2 is too much      46 is just right      0 is too little  
10 helps me practice and learn      2 is not so helpful  
0 other-please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Like the first year students, the vast majority of second year students seem to be satisfied with the quantity and type of homework. The content of their homework is similar to that of the first year students; 60-90 minutes per week of listening, pair speaking and writing activities in the book.

10. In class, it would be best to do more:

*Easy and interesting listening/more listening (3)*  
*Talk about American culture*  
*Increase opportunities to talk with the teacher because when we talk with friends,*  
*Sometimes it doesn't work*  
*Practice pronunciation*  
*More conversation/speaking practice (6)*  
*English talking between students (need our effort)*  
*Speaking English without looking at paper*  
*Discussion*  
*Walk around*  
*Enjoy music*  
*Reading*

These comments show that by the second year, students are quite aware of what kind of activities would be beneficial to them. In particular, the students seem to realize that having sustained English conversations in a monolingual classroom is challenging, but necessary for real progress in language acquisition.

11. In class, it would be best to do less:

*Game [sic]*  
*Grammar*  
*Homework*

These few responses and the responses to the previous question suggest that the students are generally satisfied with what is happening in the English Listening and Speaking class, but they would like more of it.

12. My effort in class is (circle one):

2 poor      8 fair      31 good      6 excellent

Again, it appears most students feel they are making good effort.

13. My other comments:

*Like textbook - very interesting (2)*  
*45 min better than 90 min (2)*  
*Enjoying class (4)*  
*I try to study English more and more*  
*I become to like English more and more [sic]*  
*Very nice class, thank you*  
*Class is too easy*  
*Enjoy actively in class, enjoy speaking*  
*Happy can talk with others in English*  
*You are wonderful teacher*

### Discussion and Conclusion

The feedback we have received from both first and second year students about the switch to two 45-minute classes per week is overwhelmingly positive. In addition to the questionnaire, a Japanese member of our department informally asked the students how they felt about the change and reported that they were all extremely positive about it. In particular, the students feel that the class period passes very quickly and they don't feel tired.

As for the instructors, teaching two back-to-back 45-minute classes in two different classrooms with no break is not easy, but we believe that it is a clear improvement on the old system. Benefits not mentioned yet include the fact that with the old schedule, a holiday or a student missing a class meant two weeks away from class. Now it is rare to go more than one week without seeing all the students. Seeing the students more often has allowed us to get to know the students better and faster than in the past and to establish a comfortable classroom atmosphere.

We are not completely satisfied, however, with the Listening and Speaking class, and feel this is only the first in a series of steps. The challenge now is to develop out-of-class materials, possibly online, so that students may preview the lesson and important vocabulary, do listening exercises, watch the video and do listening comprehension activities, and take quizzes on their own time. This would allow the limited class time to be devoted more to the kind of extended speaking and listening activities that both we and the students believe are the key to substantive improvement of communicative ability.