

Business English Activities for Lower Level Students: An Instructional Design Approach

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Abstract

This paper is an amalgamation of two presentations delivered at Lao-American College as part of Teachers Helping Teachers 2007. We begin with a brief introduction to the field of instructional design (ID) and the most-commonly-used process model in this field, ADDIE (an acronym for analyze, design, develop, implement and evaluate). We also introduce how this model is being used to develop a Business English program for non-English majors at a private university in Japan, with both macro-level (curriculum) decisions as well as micro-level (task) examples, i.e. language-learning activities with a business focus for students having low target-language proficiency levels. The paper concludes with some advice and suggestions for teachers or curriculum developers planning to use an ID approach.

Introduction

Instructional design and the related field of instructional technology (IT) or educational technology (ET) are concerned with how people learn and how best to organize and deliver instruction to meet specific instructional or training needs in a variety of settings, academic as well as industrial. The following definition for IT from Seels and Richey (1994) hints at the scope of these endeavors,

"Instructional technology is the theory and practice of design, development, utilization, management and evaluation of processes and resources for learning."

We see here the equal footing of theoretical and practical considerations. At the same time, we can gain some insight into the breadth of the activities involved. We are thus concerned with both the "what" and the "how" of instruction/training, i.e. *what* materials and media (resources) to use, as well as *how* to organize instruction (processes). ID is not just about lesson planning or materials development. Expand this to include up-front analysis and other groundwork or foundation building, follow up such as evaluation of the training or instruction, and overall project management, and we have a better picture of what is involved.

My own personal understanding of ID (Jones, 2007) is that we are taking a systematic approach to instruction/training based on a firm understanding of (1) how humans learn, and

(2) instructional delivery, i.e. technology in the broadest sense of the term. Developments in ID and its siblings IT/ET should be of interest to administrators, instructional planners, classroom instructors, corporate trainers, materials writers and other related professionals.

ADDIE

Several ID models have emerged for the planning and development of instruction (see, for example, Dick and Carey, 1996 and Morrison, Ross and Kemp, 2004). One of the most influential and enduring generic models to date, however, is ADDIE (short for Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate). Most other ID models are built up around these core phases or components. ADDIE is most often represented as a linear process moving from one phase to the next. More dynamic representations however include the components arranged in a circle, highlighting the cyclical nature of the process (i.e. the whole process begins anew after evaluation), or having evaluation linked to all other components (fig. 1).

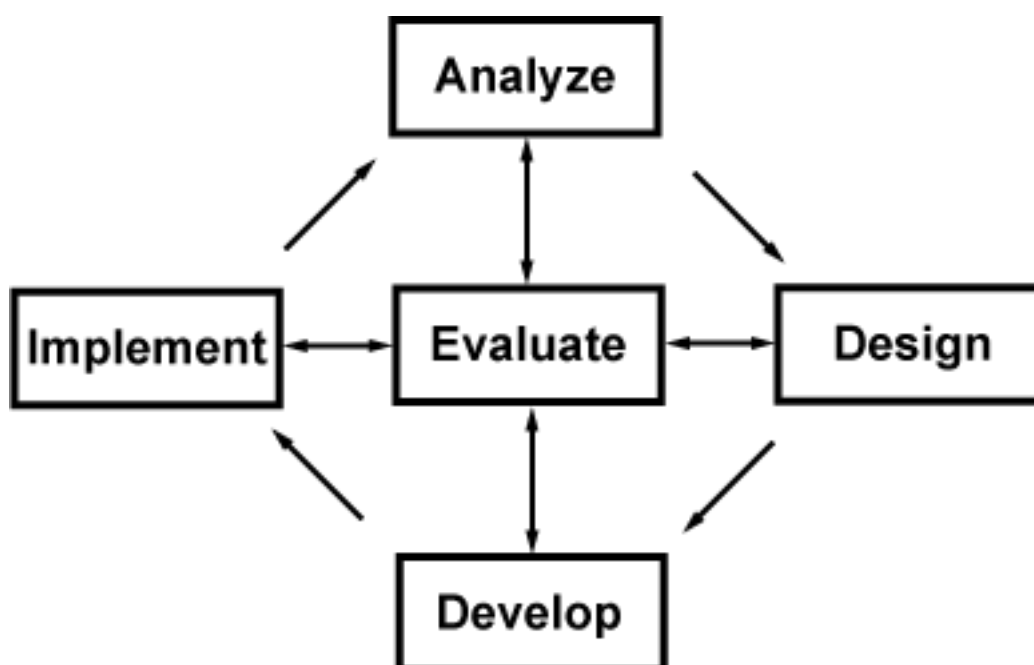


Figure 1. More dynamic depiction of the ADDIE process.

This conceptual model highlights the importance of formative evaluation during each phase of any instructional design endeavor. Each of the other ID models adds something legitimate to the mix, but the ADDIE model provides a clear, easy-to-use road map for how to approach the ID process. To give a better picture of how the ADDIE model can be used, the following section gives a brief overview of considerations during each phase of the ID process as we continue to develop our Business English program in the Faculty of Economics at a private

university in west Japan. The Business English program (two semesters each of BE I & II) is offered as a series of elective courses to students in our faculty having sophomore standing or above. Elementary Business English (BE I) requires a passing grade in the general English course (*sogo eigo*) and students electing to proceed to Intermediate Business English (BE II) need a passing grade for two semesters of Elementary Business English (BE I). Classes for each of the four levels (two each for BE I & II) meet for 90 minutes once a week for fifteen weeks. Students in the program are generally second or third-year, non-English majors with lower levels of English-language proficiency as measured by the TOEIC test (students are required to take the TOEIC twice a year).

Analysis

One of our first endeavors was to get a clearer picture of existing competencies as well as expectations and needs (individual, institutional and societal). This information is being gathered via test results, classroom observations, surveys and interviews with students, related faculty and subject-matter experts (SMEs) such as job placement consultants. We have confirmed that English-language proficiency is quite low and that business-related knowledge is rather limited. The main expectation we have uncovered is improved TOEIC (www.ets.org/toEIC/) scores. This has been expressed as a major concern by a majority of students (63%) responding to the survey (not included in this paper) and was also mentioned in interviews with both faculty and SMEs. TOEIC scores are the most common English language proficiency scale used by companies in Japan for both hiring as well as promotion and selection for overseas posts, etc. Other expectations/needs expressed were improved conversational ability, presentation skills and overall language proficiency.

Another aspect of our analysis was to begin compiling a list of exit-level competencies that students should be able to demonstrate upon completion of each level of Business English. The guiding reference for this task was Mager, 1997. Specifically, we are trying to translate all objectives into performance objectives (actions that students need to demonstrate together with both conditions and criteria) so that we have a clear way to measure achievement. This is an important goal from two perspectives, first for providing useful feedback for students and second for evaluating the success of the program and/or activity. Another part of our analysis has been reviewing relevant literature in ESL/EFL sub-fields such as English for specific purposes (ESP), vocabulary acquisition, learner autonomy and learning strategies.

As we proceed with the above analysis, we are gaining a better understanding of the performance gap that exists and areas where we should focus our attention. One major point

that has surfaced in our analysis is the lack of work experience on the part of many of our learners. This poses a major challenge in terms of establishing relevancy. Other important considerations include the learning environment at our school in general and these classes in particular, how to accommodate different learning styles and strengthen a sense of classroom community, and raising awareness and acceptance of non-native varieties of English (see, for example, Kachru, 1992).

Design

Based on findings thus far, we have begun compiling lists of design decisions and guiding principles. These are both works in progress and will be periodically reviewed and revised. The goal is to create a framework for developing instructional materials that streamlines the ID process and yet offers flexibility in terms of handling a wide range of content, language difficulty and teacher variability. Our working list of design decisions includes:

1. Clear performance objectives will be established at both the macro (curriculum) and micro (task/activity) levels (see, for example, Mager, 1997).
2. Criterion-referenced test items will be developed to clearly measure progress and performance (see, for example, Shrock & Coscarelli, 1989).
3. The curriculum will target development of all four language-skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) but will concentrate more effort on improving the receptive skills of reading and listening at earlier stages and productive skills later in the program.
4. All components will have the underlying goal of increasing familiarity and confidence with high-frequency words in the English language (Nation, 2002).
5. Attention will be focused on improving language competencies (including communication strategies), social skills and business competence.
6. Non-native varieties of English will be respected.
7. Efforts will be directed at raising cross-cultural awareness.
8. Efforts will also be focused on nurturing positive language learning attitudes and beliefs.
9. Individualized instruction will be implemented whenever possible.
10. A repository of self-access materials will be developed to supplement face-to-face meetings

The following list of guiding principals will be the foundation of our development stage endeavors:

- Effective and efficient use of existing resources,

- Balance between face-to-face meetings and self-access materials,
- Balance between concept learning and procedural learning,
- Activities and materials that appeal to various learning styles,
- Activities and materials that are both relevant and intrinsically motivating,
- Teaching methodology based on accepted and emerging theories of learning,
- Activities and materials that promote success and boost confidence,
- Get students active within the first five minutes of any encounter,
- Include non-native varieties of English

Development

Our curriculum development endeavors have so far been directed at organizing the course outlines (i.e. syllabi), including course descriptions, goals and objectives, weekly content and evaluation matrixes. We have been using Business Venture 1 with Practice for the TOEIC Test (Barnard & Cady, 2003) with the aim of judging both the difficulty level and degree of interest. We have also used the text as a reference for compiling a data base of vocabulary test questions targeting the most frequent 1,000, 1,500 and 2,000 words as well as words from the academic words list (Coxhead, 2000). Another macro level project is organizing a Moodle site (www.moodle.org) for class management and as a repository for activities and self-access materials.

At the micro level, we are developing activities that provide practice with specific language skills. Examples include (1) a PowerPoint activity (Appendix 1) aimed at introducing and practicing important reading sub-skills scanning, skimming and chunking while boosting reading rates, and (2) a listening activity (Appendix 2) that focuses attention on common communication strategies and non-native varieties of English. The emphasis on receptive skills is aligned with overall course goals as described above in the design decisions. We discuss other activities in the next section of the paper.

Implementation

We began test piloting the various supplementary activities and project work in Spring and Fall of 2006. Follow up questionnaires revealed a need to simplify material and allow for more time for individual components. We have continued to modify and adjust as we introduced full implementation in Spring 2007. We also have the Moodle site up and running, with areas for each class (between 25 and 40 students each), but have thus far only used the following modules: forums, activities and wiki. We have had to link to external sites for quizzes and podcast segments but hope to have these migrated over to the Moodle site by the

Fall semester of 2007.

Evaluation

In addition to the evaluation mentioned above, we have attempted other formative evaluation of activities via follow-up questionnaires and interviews. Feedback has been mostly favorable but we will continue to fine tune. At the same time, we continue to collect follow up data for our summative evaluation of the 2006 course. Findings from each term will provide input for further refinements as we repeatedly cycle through the process. In this way, we feel that our Business English program will continue to be improved each year and we can better focus our efforts toward helping each learner reach their potential. The main references regarding evaluation have been Phillips (1997) and Kirkpatrick (1998).

Business Activities

In this section, we outline two activities we have developed for our Business English program. We also have students work on a six to eight week class project (not discussed in this paper) each term. For the elementary class this is usually an individual project in the first term and a group project in the second term. We do this to stress the importance of both individual responsibility and group cooperation. The projects we have assigned so far are investigating and reporting on a small or medium-sized company in the community (individual project) and developing a business plan for a small company (group). These projects target the four major language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and keep to the principles outlined above in our discussion of the ADDIE model (design stage).

Activity one - Goal setting group grope

This activity is based on one of the Framergames introduced in Thiagarajan, 1997 called Group Grope. Framergames are activity shells that can accommodate a wide range of content and are generally effective in getting learners involved as well as building a sense of classroom community. Each step of our activity is introduced below together with approximate timing.

1. Getting Started (15 minutes)

Start out by greeting participants and telling them that you will begin right away with an activity aimed at forming a list of course goals and objectives. Pass out 3 blank index cards to each member and ask them to write one goal or objective for Business English on each card. You can add that the opinions do not necessarily need to be their own. You might also write up the following examples for everyone to see.

- We should learn some business related vocabulary.
- We need to practice presentation skills.
- I want to make friends.

It is also helpful to prepare about 15 extra cards to mix in when/where needed. You can begin collecting the cards from students when more than half of the members have finished, and then shuffle these cards together with the cards you have prepared.

2. Arranging Cards (2 minutes)

From the shuffled pile, pass out three cards to each student and tell them to arrange them according to how well they match their own thinking/feelings. Spread out all of the leftover cards on a display table.

3. Exchanging Cards (5 minutes)

After a minute or so, announce that individuals can exchange any or all of their cards with leftover cards on the display table that better reflect their opinion.

4. Swapping Cards (10 minutes)

During this time, students should be encouraged to swap cards with any of the other members. Also mention that they should try to talk to as many people as possible during this time and find out what kinds of goals and objectives are being expressed.

5. Forming Teams (10 minutes)

Tell participants to form groups of any size, with the only condition being that they cannot join a team with anyone they knew before this meeting. Encourage them to look for people who have cards that reflect their own personal feelings/opinions. When teams begin to form ask them to find a place to sit where they can discuss and negotiate toward a collective set of three cards with goals/objectives that reflect the opinions of the group.

6. Poster Presentation (25 minutes)

When most groups have completed their selection, pass out poster paper and markers. Collect the cards that were not selected. Instruct groups to work together on planning and drawing one poster to represent each of the ideas on their cards, but with no words or text. Circulate among tables and offer encouragement but no specific guidance. As the groups begin to finish, display the posters on the walls at different points around the room. When all of the groups

have finished, tell them to move around the room freely and try to guess/decipher the opinions represented on the other teams' posters (if time permits).

7. Show and Tell (20 minutes)

Ask the groups to sit together again and then display each poster in turn (using an overhead camera if available). Announce that this part of the task chain will be a team competition and that their team will get one point for each opinion they can guess correctly before other teams. The wording is not as important as long as the meaning matches. You can also write the opinions up for public display as they are announced and agreed upon.

8. Follow Up

To wrap things up you can present a small prize to the winning group(s) and then compile an extended list of goals/objectives from those written up during show and tell. You should combine or reword the goals/opinions that overlap with others. Tell participants that this list of "their" opinions will help you as you prepare material and activities for subsequent meetings and that each member will evaluate the course based on this list.

Caveats - Participants may struggle with various stages of the activity, but this struggle will likely be due to the complexity of the topic under discussion as much as limited language ability. Instructors should not jump in to help too soon and instead let the participants work things out for themselves. The show and tell phase can be helped along with hints from the groups themselves or the instructor, but there may be illustrations that are not decipherable. In these cases, the instructor can set a time limit or ask for elaboration to move things along. Some items may need to be abandoned but the underlying goal/objective should be elicited and written up for public display. Finally, shy students may limit their interactions to a few individuals. You will need to gauge the merits and costs of pushing for more interaction. Keep in mind that two of the goals of this activity are to create an upbeat atmosphere and build confidence.

Activity two - Scanning and skimming practice

I was introduced to this activity by a colleague several years back and have found it to be effective for practicing important reading sub-skills and building overall reading confidence. The following description includes (1) how to prepare the materials, and (2) a step-by-step explanation of how to use these materials.

1. Selecting an article - The first step is to find, write or modify an appropriate passage or

article. You should consider the content, length and difficulty level. As for content, we look for business related topics that will be of interest to our students, e.g. business trends, new products or hot industries. The passage should be around 300 or 400 words in length (something that fits on one page of letter size or A-4 paper) and not-too-challenging in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, etc. For advanced students you could use articles from Newsweek or Times, but for these lower level students you need to find materials aimed at language learners.

2. Selecting vocabulary items - After you have found a suitable article or passage, you need to look for approximately ten vocabulary items for the scanning stage. Ideally, you should choose about one vocabulary item per paragraph or every three to five lines of text. List these up in your teaching notes in the order they appear.
3. Preparing worksheet (Appendix 3) - You should prepare a task chain worksheet that can be printed on the reverse side of the article/passage. This worksheet will include the following sections: (a) Title, (b) Scanning Words (the 10 items you selected above), (c) Skimming Activity, (d) Comprehension Questions, and (e) Discussion Questions. This worksheet will be folded in half with sections (a) - (c) above the fold. The Skimming Activity should include the following instructions: a. Based only on the title, the "scanning words" above, and what you just saw as you were scanning the passage, what do you think this passage is about? Do NOT turn this paper over to look for more information. b. When the teacher says "Go!" turn the paper over and skim the reading for main ideas. Now, what do you think the reading is about? Write your new answer here. c. Now, skim the comprehension questions below for 15 seconds. If your answer changes, write your new answer below. The Comprehension Questions should include four or five questions related to the article/passage, and the Discussion Questions should include two or three questions to promote discussion of the contents of the article/passage and how this relates to the lives of your students.
4. Prepare copies for students - Prepare the appropriate number of copies with the article/passage printed on one side and the worksheet printed on the back.

When you are ready to use the activity, tell students that you will be practicing some reading sub-skills and that they need to follow your instructions. Here is how I conduct this activity:

- a. Pass out the article with the worksheet side up. Ask students to fold the paper in half so that sections (a) - (c) are facing up. Warn them to not look at the article yet.
- b. Write up the word "scanning" for public display and explain that this sub-skill involves looking for specific information, with an example such as finding in the newspaper what time tonight's baseball game will be broadcast as well as the channel.

- c. Instruct students to turn the paper over to the article/passage when you say "Go!" and to begin looking for the words as you read them off. Tell them to touch the word with their finger or pencil when they find and to not worry about words they cannot find. Keep scanning for the new words as they are announced.
- d. Say "Go!" and begin reading off the words one by one, with five to seven second interval between words (depending on the ability of your students). When you finish reading off the ten words, say "stop" and ask students to turn the paper back over. Read the first instructions in the Skimming Activity and have students write what they think the article/passage is about.
- e. When most of the students have finished, have them read their sentences to a partner and compare. Offer encouragement by telling students that there is NO wrong answer at this stage. We are relying a great deal on our imagination at this stage.
- f. When students are ready, explain that the next step is "skimming" and write this up for display. Explain that this is a sub-skill where we look through something quickly for key words or ideas. Provide some kind of example such as forgetting a reading assignment until just before class and trying to get the main points in a limited amount of time.
- g. When students are ready, say "Go!" and make sure all students turn the paper over to the article and begin skimming. Keep time and say "stop" after 30 seconds (you can extend this for lower level students or when you are doing this activity for the first time). Tell students to turn the paper back over and write a new sentence explaining what this article/passage is about.
- h. Have students share their new sentence with a partner.
- i. Use the same procedure for the next step, skimming comprehension questions.
- j. When you have completed the pre-reading stage, tell students that they can now READ the article at their own pace and try to find answers to the comprehension questions.
- k. When the majority of students have written answers for the comprehension questions, have them share with a partner. You can also follow this up by confirming the answers as a class.
- l. The last step is to go to the Discussion Questions. Discussion can be done in pairs, groups or as a class. You can also proceed through this step with or without time for preparation. Some students may need a few minutes to think about the questions and their answers and write them down before going to the discussion.

Advice and Suggestions

This section is offered as a reminder or checklist of considerations. The short list of advice

and suggestions can be outlined as:

- Concrete Goals/Objectives
- Manage class like a business
- Make each meeting an EXPERIENCE
- Design in relevancy

We use the term goals to talk about the big targets for our courses. Ideas such as "improve overall language ability" or "boost confidence." With objectives, we are much more concerned with specific demonstrable competencies. The importance of concrete performance objectives was discussed earlier in this paper, but we want to again stress that clear objectives will make it easier for students and teachers to recognize progress and evaluate the effectiveness of individual activities as well as the overall program.

Managing the class like a business has several benefits. First, we are providing students with some insight into how things operate in the workplace. The success of the classroom, like the success of a business, depends on the efforts of each member but also on group dynamics, cooperation and effective and efficient communication. The teacher can delegate responsibility and involve everyone in the decision making process. At the same time, we are teaching valuable lessons in accountability, productivity, time management and other real life skills.

With this type of course, we are quite limited in terms of contact hours and face-to-face meeting opportunities. For this reason, we want to make each meeting an experience that helps transform learners in some positive way. We want students to go away from each meeting with higher levels of confidence and motivation to put their newly acquired skills to work. A fuller description of what we are talking about here can be found in Pine and Gilmore (1999).

Finally, activities and the curriculum must be relevant to our learners. Without this relevance, learners will not buy into our ideals or program decisions. They will also not make the necessary investment that is required for a measurable return (i.e. language learning success). One way to increase the chances of relevancy is get learners more involved in the decision making process, both for what kinds of activities to engage in and the content of those activities. The goal setting activity above is an example of how we might accomplish this.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a systematic approach to course development (i.e. an ID perspective) and provided some examples of how this is being done in an ESP context. Granted, an ID approach to course development like that mentioned above does require quite a bit of effort and time. Still, the potential benefits make this a worthwhile effort and the return on investment should increase as your program matures (i.e. greater returns will come from less investment of time and energy). Greater accountability is being demanded of classroom teachers, materials developers, curriculum specialists and other related professionals. One way we can meet these demands and the changing environment is to expand the view of our role as language teachers. In addition to becoming more involved in instructional design, we can assume new relationships with our learners such as that of client and consultant, or even co-creators of value. With this kind of relationship in mind, I now demand of students a 50-50 level of commitment and responsibility for success in class. Focusing more attention on customer (student) satisfaction should put us in a better position to deal with the changing environment in our field and raise the level of individual and collective professionalism. And isn't that the direction we want to be heading?

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Appendix 1 - Reading Skills PowerPoint Activity

Introduction

This activity is designed to introduce or reinforce the concept of "chunking" and stress to learners the importance of faster reading rates. The activity includes a mini lecture, a PowerPoint presentation with a short story broken into chunks, a summarizing task, a printed copy of the story and follow up language exercises. The PowerPoint file is available for download from www.brentjones.com/ramen_shop.ppt.

Rationale

One of the main goals of the Business English program is to expose participants to as much target language as possible and build confidence with high frequency words of the English language. To gain increased input, students need to read faster. This activity will show students that they can read faster with increased comprehension.

Materials

- Blackboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers
- Computer, connecting cables, projector and screen
- PowerPoint software and PowerPoint file (www.brentjones.com/ramen_shop.ppt)
- Handout of the story (not included)

Procedure

- (1) Write up for public display the word "chunking."
- (2) Ask how this word is related to reading. Encourage guessing.
- (3) Write up "*The young man sat on the bench, took out his lunch and began to eat*" and ask how many words are in this sentence. Elicit the number 15.
- (4) Ask if we read and think about every word in the sentence when encountering this sentence in a piece of text. Explain that NO, we probably don't read and think about every word but instead break the sentence into meaningful "chunks" according to meaning.
- (5) Divide the sentence into "chunks" with slashes as follows: "The young man / sat on the bench, / took out his lunch / and began to eat."
- (6) Explain that instead of 15 words, with "chunking" we only need to process 4 ideas.
- (7) Tell students they will be reading a story about a noodle shop owner via chunks presented with a PowerPoint presentation. Ask the students to concentrate carefully, don't worry about unknown words and read for overall meaning.
- (8) With the automatic screen change set for 2 seconds, start the PowerPoint.
- (9) Following the presentation (approx. 4.5 minutes), ask students to write a short summary (3 or 4 sentences) of what they read.
- (10) Ask students to read their summary in pairs or small groups.
- (11) Write up "WPM" and the numbers "180 - 200" on the board.
- (12) Explain that 180 to 200 "words per minute" is commonly accepted as a threshold where we can begin concentrating on overall meaning instead of being occupied by each word.
- (13) Ask students to guess how fast they were just reading. Elicit guesses.
- (14) Explain that with the timing set for 2 seconds a screen, they were reading at about 80 WPM but will now try to boost that up.
- (15) With the automatic screen change set for 1 second, start the PowerPoint again.
- (16) Congratulate students on reading 160 WPM and moving much closer to the 180 - 200 WPM threshold.
- (17) Follow up by passing out copies of the story and comprehension questions.
- (18) Extend the activity by discussing what qualities are important for succeeding in business, etc.

Caveat

This activity oversimplifies the complexities of reading. Also, our brains are highly effective in finding the most efficient way to go about the business of processing written text. Students should be reminded of this and the fact that this activity is only offered as one form of reading practice.

Appendix 2 - Communication Strategies Podcast Activity

Introduction

The needs analysis highlighted the importance of having a workable set of communication strategies. Thus, this activity is being designed to raise awareness of two major communication strategies: adding extra information and asking follow-up questions. At the same time, we recognize a need for exposure to non-native varieties of English. The lesson plan involves listening to a podcast segment in which an instructor in the Business English program interviews a visiting graduate student from Malaysia about her studies and life here in Japan. Participants are asked to listen for specific communication strategies as well as details about the visiting student. We prepared a rough script for the interview (not included), but did not want to over prepare and make the interview sound unnatural. The interview was recorded digitally and the sound file has been uploaded to a podcast page at web.mac.com/bjones_jp/iWeb/kgu_be/podcast/podcast.html. A printed copy of the full transcript (available at www.waei.com/mandy_transcript.pdf) is also used in the activity.

Rationale

This activity provides students with real-life listening practice and students in our business English program will likely identify with the interviewee, thus boosting motivation. At the same time, the focus on communication strategies will hopefully highlight the importance of these two useful strategies.

Materials

- Blackboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers
- Audio file ([mandy_interview web.mac.com/bjones_jp/iWeb/kgu_be/podcast/podcast.html](http://web.mac.com/bjones_jp/iWeb/kgu_be/podcast/podcast.html))
- Audio equipment to play the file (can be burned to CD if necessary)
- Printed copies of the transcript (www.waei.com/mandy_transcript.pdf)

Procedure

(1) Write up or dictate the following questions:

What is the interviewee's name?

Where is her hometown and where was she born?

How many times has she been to Japan?

What is she researching in Japan?

What is her impression of Japan?

When will she return to her home country?

- (2) Students listen to the podcast and write down any answers they can find.
- (3) Check answers with partner and then as a class.
- (4) Read through the transcript and have students:
 - a. circle any follow-up questions, and
 - b. underline any examples of extra information (details, examples, related information, etc.)
- (5) Listen again and displaying the transcript with answers to #3 highlighted.
- (6) Ask students to write at least three other questions they would like to ask the interviewee.
- (7) Share these questions with a partner and then the class.
- (8) If possible, invite the interviewee to class (maybe at some future time) and let students lead a follow up interview.

Appendix 3 - Reading Sub-skill Activity

The following article was found on the Voice of America - Special English website.

<http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/> The article and task sheet are printed on separate pages so teachers can copy them for use in class.

Recalls Add to Pressure on Toy Industry

This is the VOA Special English Economics Report.

Parents know about supply and demand. What they supply is not always what children demand. Toymakers have the same problem. These days, they not only face greater competition -- kids have more entertainment choices than ever. But parents could also become more choosy.

Last week, the world's largest toy company announced the largest recall in its history. Mattel is recalling more than eighteen million toys that contain small, powerful magnets. These can cause serious injury if swallowed. One death has already been reported. The toys were made over the past five years based on Mattel designs that the company says have now been improved.

Mattel combined its announcement with a separate recall of more than four hundred thousand toy cars. Mattel said the manufacturer, Lee Der Industrial in China, used lead-based paint without permission. Chinese media said the company owner hanged himself. The vehicles are based on the "Sarge" character in the movie "Cars." Mattel is based in California but makes about sixty-five percent of its products in China. The company promises greater testing. On August first, Mattel recalled almost one million toys from its Fisher-Price division because of lead paint. That recall cost the company thirty million dollars.

Other companies have also recalled children's products. Last week Toys "R" Us recalled baby bibs made in China. Independent tests showed that the vinyl bibs contained high levels of lead.

The seller of a simple test for lead in products has seen its sales jump. The kit from Homax can be found in stores including home improvement centers. Homax's Donald Hamm says the company is receiving five or six calls each day from businesses wanting to sell the LeadCheck kit. The company has now set up a Web site to sell directly to the public, at leadtesttoys.com.

China has formed a cabinet-level committee to improve the quality and safety of its exports. This follows a number of recalls around the world. But China has also criticized the quality of some American imports. And it has accused the United States and the European Union of trade protectionism. The American toy industry is worth an estimated twenty-two billion dollars. Eighty percent of the toys are made in China. But now several companies that still make toys in the United States are reporting increased sales.

And that's the VOA Special English Economics Report, written by Mario Ritter. I'm Bob Doughty.

Recalls Add to Pressure on Toy Industry

Scanning Words

competition history injury permission division
independent improvement committee accused reporting

Skimming Activity

Based only on the title, the "scanning words" above, and what you just saw as you were scanning the reading passage, what do you think the reading is about? DO NOT turn this paper over to look for more information.

When the teacher says, "Go!" turn the paper over for only 30 seconds to skim the reading for main ideas. Now, what do you think the reading is about? Write your new answer here.

Now, skim the comprehension questions below for 15 seconds. If your answer changes, write your new answer below.

(Fold the page here and do NOT look at the comprehension questions below you have answered questions (a) and (b) above.)

Comprehension Questions

- a. What kind of company is Mattel?
- b. Where are the company's headquarters?
- c. How many product "recalls" are mentioned in this article?
- d. What company is benefiting from this recent surge in recalls?
- e. What is the Chinese government doing in response to the recent recalls around the world?

Discussion Questions

- a. Do you know of any other recent recall cases? Explain what you know about them.
- b. What are some ethical issues related to product recalls?