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# Using surveys to develop critical thinking and build community

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## Introduction

Even in large English language classes in Japan, students hope for frequent opportunities to communicate in English. Their low level of vocabulary often makes students feel that they cannot express their exact ideas fluently. Nevertheless, they still need to be offered chances to speak out. Using topics closely tied to their lives such as driving, health, friends, drinking, sports, nutrition, studying, or part-time jobs helps students find something to say quickly without searching for many words in a dictionary.

Although using surveys is a staple of many ESL programs because of the chance to interview various native speakers in the target language environment, surveys are sometimes less commonly used in an EFL environment. Surveys of classmates, other students at the same school, friends and family as well as international guests or keypals, can offer real language use opportunities, even if the questions on those surveys are initially asked in Japanese. We instructors need to provide a lot of linguistic

support for students through the various phases of designing, conducting and discussing a survey. The lively atmosphere of information gathering injects real life and even humor into discussions of both everyday and controversial topics. Using these surveys not only creates community in the language classroom as everyone works together to collect the information and discuss it in English, but it also allows students to exercise critical thinking skills such as prediction, prioritizing, analyzing and summarizing. In this paper, I will show how surveys can be used in various university level English courses.

### **Why use surveys?**

There are many affective reasons for using surveys with our students. First of all, students may already be familiar with and enjoy this interactive style of information gathering. Several textbooks, such as *Airwaves* (Fuller and Grimm, 1995) and *Issues and Answers* (Johnson, 1999), feature questionnaires to use with a partner or data boxes of information collected in the U.S. and Japan. Secondly, with student-generated surveys, we can adapt text information to a Japanese situation by using questions that reflect our own students' experiences. Even very fluent students mention that they sometimes prefer to talk about Japanese situations because that is what they know best. In addition, especially as they adjust to university life and sometimes to living alone in their first and second years, students are inherently curious about what other students are doing. Beyond these topic-related issues, Coffey (1999) suggests that the collaboration on questions, group inquiry and team spirit that develop while doing a project can help students focus on the knowledge they have learned rather than on the language per se. This type of project also reduces the tension sometimes felt

in Japanese classrooms where the students who can speak fluently hesitate to do so in front of a group. This survey activity also offers the very shy students or poor speakers a chance to play an equal role in the class activities. Sometimes those students turn out to be the best data organizers or the best illustrators for preparing graphs, diagrams or visuals of the results.

From a pedagogical point of view, too, there are several reasons why these surveys are worth doing. Most importantly, surveys allow students to use language for communication, to express their own ideas and to respond in a natural way to unexpected answers from the people they interview, especially if the questions are done in English in the classroom or outside with other speakers of English. In addition, even with questions originally asked in Japanese, students develop their critical thinking skills learning how to prioritize questions, predict answers to questions and analyze and summarize the results.

From a practical point of view, surveys boost the individual speaking time of each student. Each student participates in a group both before and after asking questions one-on-one with many other members of the class. The use of surveys also creates an open atmosphere in which students can feel free to express their true opinions, not just what mirrors the text or what they think is socially acceptable. For example, in one class doing a survey on health and nutrition, several class members wanted to ask others "Have you ever eaten only sweets as a meal? Explain." In small groups, they could comfortably discuss that question. This question sparked many follow-up questions such as "How do you feel when you do that?" or "Do you live alone?" or "Doesn't it make you sick?" and "What kind of things do you eat?" When students discuss something among themselves, the filter of propriety

disappears and students offer very fresh, honest answers. In a whole-class discussion, this question may never have come up. However, in this case, in the whole-class discussion later, this question led to the topics of anorexia and bulimia in Japan and the U.S., the role of the media in determining what looks are fashionable and the use of vitamin bars and drinks instead of real meals. I like to encourage students to ask the unusual questions because those seem to launch students into a more natural, interesting discussion.

### **Sample topics and questions for surveys**

Most questions for the surveys I have used with my students come from the topics in our textbooks, issues in the news, or social issues students are interested in.

Some popular topics and questions are listed below.

#### *Driving*

- How often do you drive to school?
- What kind of music do you listen to in your car?
- What do you think about electric cars?
- Do you ever speed? Explain.
- Where do you (would you) like to go driving?
- Have you ever been stopped by the police?
- Have you ever had an accident?
- How long does it take you to get to this school?

#### *Exercise*

- What exercise do you do for your health?
- How many times do you exercise a week?
- How long do you walk every day?
- Do you exercise every day?
- What do you do when you want to lose weight?

What is the best exercise for your whole body?

### *Meals*

How many meals do you eat in one day?

Do you eat three meals a day? If no, how many?

How does breakfast affect our body?

Do you eat breakfast every day?

What do you usually eat for breakfast?

What's your priority when you eat? Cost or time?

How much does it cost you for food per day?

per week?

How many times a week do you use a rice cooker?

### *About certain foods*

What kind of food do you usually eat every day?

How much tofu do you eat a week?

Which do you prefer rice or bread? Explain.

Which do you like meat or fish?

How many times do you have fish in a week?

How much milk do you drink a day?

Do you buy mineral water?

How often do you have fast food?

Which junk food do you like?

How many times do you have sweets a week?

Have you eaten sweets as breakfast, lunch or dinner?

### *Watching TV*

How much time do you spend watching TV every day?

Which drama do you like?

How often do you watch the news?

Could you live without a TV? Why or why not?

Are you ever a couch potato?

Which programs do you think are not good?  
Do you fall asleep with the TV on?  
What do you think about the media and crime?

### *Recycling*

Do you always separate your trash?  
How often do you take your own bag when you shop?  
Do you think stores should charge for plastic bags?  
Do you carry your own chopsticks?  
Where do you throw your PET bottle at a convenience store?  
What do you recycle?  
How many PET bottles do you use a week?  
Do you buy anything at flea markets?

### *Alcohol and students*

How old were you when you had your first drink?  
What kind of drinks do you like?  
Do you drink with your family?  
Do you know your own limit of drinking?  
How much do you spend when you go drinking?  
Do you like "konpa"? Why or why not?  
What are the good points about drinking?  
What are the bad points about drinking?  
Did you have any education about drinking in school?  
Have you ever discussed drinking with your family?  
Do you do "ikki"?  
Do you think "ikki" is fun?  
Have you ever driven after drinking?

## **Choosing the survey questions**

In order to generate a wide variety of questions for the class survey, each student generally prepares three to five written questions as

homework. Then, in groups of four to five, students choose the most interesting questions. For each survey, we try to balance the easy-to-answer, frequency type questions with a few open-ended opinion or experience questions. A survey may use three or four questions or ten , if you want every student to ask the same questions. A survey may include many more questions and give the students the flexibility to choose a few questions from each section. Although this gives the students more freedom, it makes the comparison of the results more complicated.

Going over the questions and choosing which ones to use and exactly how to word them involves metalanguage. Hancock (1997) recorded students preparing for role plays and found that the layering of language in group work usually involved using the L1 for metalanguage or metatasks, such deciding who speaks first. This would be true if students were planning to present the results of their surveys to the class. He noticed that lowered volume often preceded a switch into the first language. Many students and teachers wonder about the possible repetition of errors while students work alone in groups and therefore dislike group work. However, to encourage more use of English in the classroom, key expressions and language patterns can be brainstormed and listed on the board. This allows group members to pull together in trying to use English as they together prepare to write questions or tabulate data or organize points for a presentation. A few of the following expressions can be put on the board for everyone to see while they discuss the questions.

- |                                     |                                     |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Which questions do you like?        | That's a good question.             |
| Should we use this question?        | Let's use that.                     |
| Which questions do you want to use? | This one and that one are the same. |

Let's ask a question about \_\_\_\_\_.

Good idea!

What does this question mean?

How can you say \_\_\_\_\_ in English?

This question gives us "yes" or "no".

I don't understand this question.

That's a hard question to answer.

We need two more questions.

The questions generally need to be refined for several reasons. Some grammar and vocabulary errors will make the questions incomprehensible. We also check to eliminate redundant questions and make sure that questions are specific enough to get the desired answers. Also, sometimes a follow-up question is included to ask for a reason or an explanation. Checking the use of some Japanese words for cultural items is checked at this time. Sometimes as a class, we choose the best 10 questions to ask. Other times, students choose 5 or 10 from the whole survey and ask 3 or 4 people by the next class.

Another option is do the question asking in the class. By limiting the number of questions, students with lower level speaking skills can really know the grammar of their question and how to anticipate responses. Asking too many different questions puts a heavy listening load on the students. Advanced students, of course, can handle this.

### **Asking the questions**

Before students can start asking the questions, you need to deal with two related issues: which language students will use for the questions and whether they will use class time for conducting the surveys. It is ideal for students to ask their survey questions in English, but finding willing native speakers to answer a survey is quite difficult for most students, if not



impossible. Although some students may use English with family members or at a language school, volunteer activity or part-time job, the fact that English classes are the only real opportunities to speak English each week is a reality for most students. If native speakers or international students are available in the area or by e-mail, using English should be encouraged. If, on the other hand, students have no natural chance to use English outside their class, they can ask the questions in Japanese and later present their findings in English orally or in writing or both. The writing can be done in class or as a homework assignment. Encouraging the students to ask the people closest to them - friends, club members, families and then acquaintances lets the students relax and not worry about the correctness of their English grammar. Their focus is finding and comparing the answers given to certain questions. Whether to include respondents of different ages depends on the topic being discussed, but often answers from older or younger respondents can stimulate discussion. As a group, you can decide whether to include age and gender as part of the questions.

Whether the questions are asked in English or Japanese, students always answer the questions first themselves to help them anticipate what others may say and to give them a base for comparison.

## **Looking at the results**

After the questions have been asked, small groups compare the answers received. Four students in a group works well because there is enough different data to generate interest. Students look for trends, similarities, surprises, unusual responses or incomprehensible answers. They compare their own answers to the questions. Depending on how many questions

students asked, discussion time for this may run 15-30 minutes. Orally each group can present the most common, most surprising or unusual answers from the survey. Tabulations can be done by one student per question or by groups or as a class on the board. Students can also try to see if age and gender influenced the responses they got.

### **Summarizing the surveys**

The language needed for summaries often causes students problems. Creating a poster or handout for the class requires less language. A pie chart or graph or cartoon can be done on a paper or transparency and shown to all. One group can meet with another group to compare their findings. Students can generate these visuals on computers, which gives them good information transfer practice. Another way is for each group to put their diagram on a small white board, which can be shown to the other students.

Typical grammar problems that surface include the use of “most, almost, and most of the people we talked to.” “Most of students like...” and “Almost students eat breakfast” are common errors. Making generalizations about the results is something that you could practice together with information gotten from one question before students make any presentations. Students also need a review of “surprised” and “surprising” and ways to explain or hypothesize about the results, such as “They may have answered this way because they are all students.” For homework, students can write a one-paragraph summary of what they learned from the results and what surprised them. For this task, students need to synthesize information from their interviews with respondents, their own assumptions and ideas that came up in their discussions.

## Other variations

With beginning or intermediate levels or in a short time period in a higher-level class, each person is responsible for asking only one question and should ask all students in the class and the instructor. This person then prepares to report orally or make a data box which illustrates the class thinking on this question.

In a multiskills or writing course, expand the project to include an interview with an expert to shed light on the topic and assign more extensive reading on the topic. Dantas-Whitney (1998) describes a survey project for intermediate ESL students which concludes with an interview of a native-speaker expert in the field of the topic surveyed.

However, this could be adapted to include an interview with a Japanese-speaking professional. Then, later, the information gained could be reported in English. Although speaking with a Japanese professional does not carry the same pressure or perhaps appeal of speaking with a native speaker on the topic, it is a good linguistic challenge for students to synthesize the information from the survey, the expert and the text for a later report.

Using e-mail to do surveys with keypals is another possibility. If the instructor can arrange for each student to have a keypal, there will be many different answers to compare. In this case the questions should be limited to one or two to ensure that people will respond quickly.

## Conclusion

Using surveys in an EFL classroom can help classmates work as a team, learning to ask follow-up questions and not take answers at face value. It fosters an appreciation for the diversity of lifestyles and opinions represented in what some call "homogeneous" classrooms. Surveys give

students chances to quickly communicate in a meaningful way about their own lives. Students also develop sharper critical thinking skills by analyzing the answers to the questions they have prepared. With some linguistic support from the instructor and strong interest in the individual questions, students can challenge themselves to really use English for communication.

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