

## Interview: Bob Ruud

Director, The Language Institute of Japan, Odawara

By Tom Hayes

**Hayes:** *Could you describe your basic intensive?*

**Ruud:** Our trademark course is a four-week intensive, which we call the residential, English-only communication course. Students live here. The second weekend they can go home, but a lot of them stay around that weekend, too. They are forbidden to use Japanese at length, intentionally, during the four weeks.

**What happens if they do?**

The first time they are sent to my office and I give them a strong warning. The second time they are sent back to their company. The point of the course is to start thinking in English, and to do that they have to express everything they need to say in English. If they have another outlet for saying what they need to say, they will make less progress. This is hotly debated in some circles.

**How do you know what they need to say?**

We have individual conferences and students fill out forms and students and teachers get together to find out as much as possible about what the students need. That is not easy with 32 students in a course, especially since we have a wide variety of fields represented in the classroom.

**Isn't there the danger that students will feel the course is then a business course, and not an English one?**

In our brochures and in the curriculum orientation that we do the first day, I tell them that this is not a business course. It's a business communication course. I tell them, "You have to teach us what you need to say and we will help you say it clearly. You have to teach us the kinds of things that you will have to understand, and we can help you understand them more clearly."

**Do you also discuss how to cope with the intensity of the course at the orientation?**

Yes. Because one basic problem we have is that students will generally work much harder than we want them to. They are in class 9 hours a day, and I tell them that if they are rushing off to their dormitory room

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after 8:00 p.m. and studying vocabulary for a couple

and sitting at their desk grammar rules or vocabulary of hours, then they are wasting their time. The point of their coming to a course like this is to interact with people, not to study something they could study on their own.

I also say at orientation, "I'm going to give you a test. It's an educational kind of test. It's not an evaluative kind of test, and I'm going to keep on until you pass it, and when you pass it you will have learned the most important skill that you will acquire. So what I would like you to do is write these three sentences: *Could you repeat that please? What does that word mean? I don't understand what to do.* I keep on repeating that until they have written it down. And we keep on until they can reproduce those sentences any time they want to.

The key is, do they want to? I tell them, "Communication is the skill of reproducing that sentence.

That's 50% of it. The other 50% is do you do it when you need to? If you don't understand, are you asking the question? Do you have the courage, do you have the confidence in yourself to ask a question when you need to? If you do, even the lowest student here can become an independent language learner."

Teachers here expect that kind of question. Of course, we know that sometimes when you go out into the world

you can't always ask a question—you can't interrupt at a given point in time. But there will come a time when you *can* ask and the key is to do that when you have the opportunity to do it. So on the walls of the classroom we have charts with different kinds of control language—questions for clarification, repetition, confirmation, etc., and we set up situations where it has to be obvious to the teacher whether the student understands or not, and if they're asking questions, that's great. If they're not, they're sometimes prompted, and sometimes prodded, into doing so.

**Is the control language sequenced?**

Yes. Within our conceptual framework we concentrate



in the first week on the language of description and the language of explanation. "This is a blank. It's used for blank" etc. ad infinitum. In the second week it's the language of comparison. In the third week the language of process. The fourth, problem solving. Naturally, there are certain questions for clarification that go along with that kind of comparison, or problem solving, such as conditionals, or speculation. The students are evaluated on how well they use the language and how willing they are to use it.

*You mentioned the term "conceptual framework."*

Right, and let me give you some background. The students who are here from the joint ventures are generally not going overseas. They are dealing with foreigners in Japan. The others generally go overseas within a couple of months. But some of them are part of a company's general international development plan with no specific plans to go overseas.

We deal with the challenge of having students with different needs by having a conceptual framework as a curriculum. It might be a little bit of an exaggeration to say that we don't have a syllabus beforehand. New teachers are given a syllabus, essentially a teaching calendar, based on what another teacher has done before them. This becomes a syllabus after the fact.

The syllabus is designed to meet the needs of each specific class, and we emphasize the importance of continually creating new materials to meet the needs of the individual class.

New teachers have to learn the system first, so we generally take the option of deciding what to teach away from them and concentrate on how to teach. We do a lot of supervision, a lot of training.

*When are teachers left to operate on their own?*

Teachers are never completely on their own. We have a full-time academic supervisor for the intensive course. And I do some observing. Veteran teachers are observed at least once per term. Newer teachers are observed once a week. Our teachers get so used to being observed that it's no big deal. Ours is the most rigorous observation schedule I'm aware of.

*What kind of teachers do you look for?*

M.A.s with two years experience. Experience in business or international relations is also valuable. We look for someone with a lot of energy; generally people who are quiet and introspective are less well-suited to this program than people who don't mind eating cafe-

teria meals with students seven times a week. We look for someone with a fundamentally constructive approach to problem solving. But I think any administrator would look for that kind of teacher.

*Do your teachers have to absorb a lot of new material related to business when they come to LIOJ?*

It's an advantage in some ways not to know too much about business, as long as teachers don't have some kind of 1960s holdover phobia about business. If they are genuinely interested in such things as how tunnels are constructed, how golf balls are made, how international financial transactions take place, that's what we need: teachers who can convey an honest curiosity about those things and ask questions of the students and know how to guide them in making what they need to say clear.

*How would you react to the points that the pressure of intensives reinforces students' belief that learning English is difficult, and that the heavy pressure forces them back on study skills they learned in high school?*

Students are underestimated, and in communicative language teaching too often not enough pressure is put on students. If students feel that there is an overall supporting atmosphere and the pressure put on them is in the interest of their own progress making, if they know the teachers and administrators be-

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lieve that they can make a lot of progress, and if they know the teachers know what to do to facilitate that, then students don't mind pressure. About the second point, I think learning is pressure and I also think that memorization plays a very important part, especially at the lower levels, in getting students to a point where they can get through routines in communication. There are lots of things, especially in speaking, that they can memorize to build their confidence, such as "Excuse me. Do you mind if I join you?" I tell the teachers to have all the students memorize that sentence from the first day.

## Intensive Courses



*What you're saying seems to run counter to a lot that we're told about second-language acquisition.*

The results of what we do here are pretty well documented. The notion of optimum input and monitor theory we take quite seriously. I think essentially what Krashen was saying in the natural approach is that if you have something that you must do in the target language, and you have some kind of access to the language that you need, that adds up and will show results.

It seems that one of the most important things students go into intensive programs for is quick progress and it's absolutely essential for programs to be accountable in terms of the kinds of progress students are making. This is especially important in academia now with so many Japanese students entering branch campuses of U.S. universities. I think intensive programs need to be aware of what the students will need when they leave the program, and teach toward it, whether it's getting 500 on a TOEFL test or being able to cope with general academic assignments at a university.

*What about simulations?*

We do use simulations prepared by teachers both outside and at LIOJ, but in a more general sense we like to think that LIOJ itself is a simulation of an international community. And in our residential program we have the privilege of using teachers, for example from the Philippines or from India, who are not right in line with the native-speaker concept. Students generally understand, as do companies, that they will not always encounter native speakers. Native-speaker/non-native speaker distinctions are not a problem for the students.

*What problems do you have with students? What students are just not cut out for an intensive programs like LIOJ's?*

Low-level students are a problem, as are older students. We recommend that students be at our level of 2.0 before coming to LIOJ. That's about a 400 on TOEIC. We also recommend that companies choose students from a pool of students, from extensive courses for example, who are best suited for this intensive. I think that's a good way to deal at least partially with that problem. We tell the companies, "If the student is too low, don't send them here."

Older students are more problematic. If an older student comes in who is very low, is the lowest student in the course, we can predict not much success and there is very little we can do.

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*Could you elaborate?*

If someone has a relatively adequate listening score but a low grammar score, he will not do very well linguistically. But especially if he's an older student we feel we have to put him at the top of his class. If we have a group of eight students we don't want to put that older student at the bottom of the class.

This relates to testing. We do three kinds of tests: listening, grammar, oral communication, and they are balanced equally. Most of the time we divide the 30 or 32 students into four groups according to placement score, but we also look at the scores relative to each other, and at the student's age. If we find a young student whose placement score is very low, but who has a high grammar score, we think "excellent." This student has a lot of passive knowledge, has never talked to foreigners before, and will be a different person when leaving after the four week course. If we see an older student, who has exactly the same overall score, but his listening score is higher than his grammar score, we think, "Well, the goals for this student will be different." There is no reserve of vocabulary and grammar. What he gains will not show up as clearly on the TOEIC, and if the placement score is too low to put him at the higher end of the lowest class here, he may be frustrated and he may be shamed into not making much progress or enjoying himself here. He may even come away thinking he is incapable of learning English, which in fact may be the case.

So although we do have older students who make some progress, the trend has been that younger students make more progress, especially younger students with high grammar scores. Generally, people who are too far beyond minimum or independent working proficiency stand to gain less from our program. If they are linguistically very strong but haven't worked very much with foreigners, the program can be very effective, as just getting comfortable and confident around other peoples is worthwhile in itself.

*Do you do follow-up studies on your students after they leave LIOJ?*

I wish we could do that more systematically. We do have good relationships with our regular customers. We visit them and stay in touch and we discuss individual students and their performance and we talk about their TOEIC scores after they leave the course. We also have a couple of plants out in the real world, former students and former teachers who know a lot about the real needs of the international work place.

