



Weekly Opinion

**Family Sleeping Arrangements as Culture**  
**—A marriage compatibility diagnostic more reliable than blood type**

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Mike Guest / Speical to The Daily Yomiuri

Are you familiar with speed dating? The phenomenon has spread widely over the past decade, with speed dating events becoming increasingly frequent in major Japanese cities. The concept is this: An equal number of men and women are seated across from each other. For a limited amount of time, usually three to five minutes, they talk with the person opposite them. Then a bell or chime is rung and they move on to the next partner until they have had a chance to meet each participant of the opposite sex. If you find one of the partners attractive, and the feeling is mutual, you can thereafter request a further (normal) date.

The underlying concept behind speed dating is that most people develop an attraction to a potential partner within a few minutes. (A University of Pennsylvania study reduces this attraction time to three seconds!) Whether initial attractions are always viable in the long term is another question, but there can be no doubt that first impressions are powerful.

I try to keep this in mind when writing articles such as these. Since most readers will decide whether to read a newspaper story based on the headline and the opening paragraph. Hopefully, the focus on speed dating drew you in to this article and has maintained your interest so far. But if I don't take this concept somewhere soon, particularly somewhere related to English teaching--since that is expected to be the focus of my column--your interest will likely wane, as it would with a pretty melody that catches the ear but doesn't develop. If it goes nowhere or just repeats itself, it loses its appeal.

So, let's look at this from the perspective of our classes. Impressions may well be made about the teacher's worthiness and competence within the first few minutes of the first class. And students are likely to decide whether the lesson content is worth their continued attention in that same time frame. This means that openings are crucial. Introductions and beginnings can determine the effectiveness of the entire lesson.

Of course, you make similar judgments about speakers yourself anytime you attend a presentation. If speakers don't have a confident posture, if they are not careful about their choice of words (full of hemming and hawing), if they seem uninvolved with the content they are presenting or insensitive to the audience, you will lose interest and the speakers may well be unable to establish their point--no matter how important or worthy that point may be.

Having seen a number of rookie teachers lose their classes in the first few minutes, I think I can identify five clear dos and don'ts regarding effective openings and introductions.

1. Don't talk too much for too long! This is the absolute golden rule of lesson openings. You don't have to explain everything beforehand or read handouts verbatim. By prattling on for more than a few minutes you'll effectively turn a lesson into a lecture and will switch the students' state of mind from active to passive mode. While this is true for mother-tongue lessons, it is doubly true for second-language classes where overload will set in and the teacher's voice effectively turns into an acoustic blur or white noise. Such intrusive teachers are like referees who want to be the focal point of the game. Let the players play!

2. Don't meander in your opening. Know what you will say and how you will say it before you enter the classroom. Don't hem and haw. Muttering indicates poor preparation. Don't go into contingencies and tangents at the outset. The lesson's subtleties, warnings, variations, potential pitfalls and so on can be inserted gradually as it progresses. Be concise in your speech, but note that this does not mean you should speak like a military commander. Use a variable tone so that students feel that you are speaking with a sense of direction and that you are not just running down an impersonal "prescribed list"--a manual teacher.

3. Avoid body language that says, "I'm not sure what I'm doing next." Looking at your feet and stroking your hair send this message. Fidgeting and shuffling also indicate poor preparation. Aimless or confused movements (I'll go to the whiteboard now. No! Stop! I'm supposed to turn on the computer now. Oh wait! Where's my marker? I'll need that first!) have the same negative effect on student impressions, indicating that the teacher is not in control. Make sure everything that you need is in place and operating before the chimes ring.

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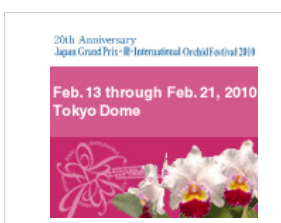
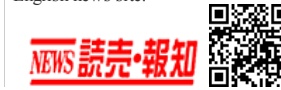
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4. Use the board well. Write instructions, topics, rules or lesson "menus" in advance. This way, you don't have to waste your time going over technicalities or using sleep-inducing meta-lesson language in speech.

5. I recommend starting with topics that will draw out, or naturally segue into, any language points, tasks or activities you hope to cover in the class time. Simply announcing the topic may not be enough. Like a well-groomed dater, wearing a perfume that enhances the exchange of pheromones, you have to engage and entice. This does not necessarily mean performing a high-energy "edutainment" routine (which can be like that pretty melody that never shifts dynamics and eventually wears out its welcome), but it does mean engaging student cognition.

The old saying is that you never get a second chance to make a first impression, but what if you actually mess up your opening somehow? Well, there are both ways of handling a sloppy opening and ways of digging yourself into a deeper hole. Let me draw an analogy here to golf. Though even touring golf pros can hit some wayward drives due to nerves on the first hole, they don't panic. They maintain their composure and focus upon the recovery shot. Their body language never says, "Uh-oh, now I'm in trouble!" If they start to think so, this will naturally affect the next shot and the next and will effectively spiral the entire round into disaster.

Likewise, experienced teachers keep their cool when openings don't proceed as expected. They have contingencies ready for getting out of trouble. They can acknowledge mistakes. ("Sorry. That wasn't clear. Let me say it again in four simple steps.") They can laugh off a sloppy section. ("OK. That didn't go so well. Let's try something different.") Or, they can repeat an activity with an added twist. ("Perhaps you didn't understand what I wanted. Let's do it again another way.")

It's like speed dating. If things don't go as planned, and that attractive speed dating partner starts eyeing the next eligible partner in line, you can say to yourself, "OK. That didn't go so well," and focus upon looking ahead to making a better impression next time. @: Guest is an associate professor of English at Miyazaki University. He can be reached at [mikeguest59@yahoo.ca](mailto:mikeguest59@yahoo.ca).

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