Like many universities in Japan, Tama University requires that non-English majors successfully complete an English as a Foreign Language course during their undergraduate years in order to graduate. While many students pass this course on their first attempt, some fail and must repeat the course in order to fulfill this graduation requirement. The English program at Tama University offers an English course designed specifically for these second-time course takers (repeaters).

Teaching the repeaters’ course is a challenge for many teachers. Students come to the course with not only widely differing English proficiency levels, but also with an experience of failure that often negatively affects their motivation and confidence in studying English. Moreover, the everyday lives of these students, as well as their study activities in the fields in which they are majoring, are generally ones in which English and English study seem irrelevant. This paper introduces a variety of classroom management strategies for overcoming such challenges, based on my experience of teaching a repeaters’ course at Tama University in the first semester of 2008, including preparing a safe learning environment, building rapport with students, and introducing and presenting content in ways that reach repeaters.

Setting

The semester-long repeaters’ course that I taught, in the English Shower program in the School of Management and Information Sciences at Tama, met on Tuesdays and Thursdays for a total of 27 class meetings. There were 28 students in the class, including one senior and 27 juniors. The ages of the students ranged from 20 to 24, and their TOEIC scores ranged from 125 to 580. All of the students had failed the course previously. The students hardly knew one another when they met during the first class.

As the instructor of the course, I maintained a teaching diary in which, after every class, I recorded my reflections on what had happened and what had seemed to work in the class. At the end of the semester, I reviewed this diary, and then asked the students to express their feelings about the practices and activities that I had considered to have worked well. The
following sections present practices and activities that the students and I both found effective, in the context of challenges often encountered in teaching the repeaters course.

**Providing a Safe Learning Environment**

In approaching the course, I reasoned that building rapport with the students would be the first and most important task for the repeaters' course teacher. Every student in the class had already experienced failure in the very course upon which they were embarking, and many of them turned up at the first class with both distrust for the teacher, who might fail them as did their previous teacher, and a lack of interest in their classmates, whom they view as failures like themselves.

**One-on-one Interview**

I furthermore reasoned that to be effective, the teacher of the repeaters' course would need to identify the reason that each student had failed the course previously before beginning the course of instruction. I therefore conducted one-on-one interviews with each student, and found that this process, though time consuming, was essential to the success of the course. Through these interviews, I learned that more than two thirds of the class had failed the course previously due to poor attendance.

The reasons for the poor attendance of these students varied, and the process of having each student clarify his or her particular reason for poor attendance proved valuable. If the problem was laziness or bad scheduling, I asked students for action plans that would help them avoid repeating the behavior that had led them to failure previously. In cases in which the student was not sure of his or her reason for failure, I helped them identify the cause, for instance, by assisting the student in researching and analyzing his or her academic record. The interviews led the students to reflect on their problems, and showed them that I cared about their success in class. The interviews furthermore helped me to learn the students’ names, to assess their English proficiency levels, and to identify their individual learning needs.

**Learning Community**

Students enjoy the opportunity to work and interact cooperatively with other students, but only when they feel a sense of safety, acceptance, and belonging. I believe that it is dangerous for the teacher to let students find their own “friends” in the course on the first day, and that the teacher should instead guide interactions between students at the outset.

One successful icebreaker that I employed for this purpose was “finding things in common.” I divided the students into groups of five, and then asked the students to find five things they have in common with members of their group. I instructed them not to try to find more than five, and to confine the content of their discussion to simple ideas such as “all of us like pizza.”
After each group had shared their five common items with the class, I asked them to form new groups of five and to repeat the exercise. Through this activity, even the shyest students naturally learned the names of 10 of their classmates, as well as similarities and common interests that they share with those people. Limiting the number of common items to five prevented students from having to talk about themselves too much, while still enabling them to express themselves.

No students in the repeaters’ course come to it with an initial sense of excitement. Rather, they often feel isolated from, different from, and even inferior to others. By learning some of their classmates’ names and finding a few things they share in common, the students nonetheless began to develop a sense of belonging.

Helping Students Stay Focused

Once a warm, friendly, and supportive classroom environment has been established, the next challenge the teacher faces is that of keeping the students focused. Most of the repeaters in my course had failed the course previously because they had lost interest either in the course content, or simply in going to class at all.

A Routine Activity

A strategy that I found effective for maintaining student focus is to introduce a routine activity in which everyone must participate. For the repeater’s course, I scheduled this activity at the beginning of class so that students would come to class on time.

The activity that I employed for the repeaters’ course was book sharing. As a requirement of the course, students had to choose one English book from the library and read it outside of class. Every class began with three students, who had been pre-assigned as presenters for that day, sharing information and ideas on the book that they were reading. The other students in the course were assigned the task of noting the names of the presenters, the title and author of the book that they were presenting, and a summary of the contents of the book as they listened to the presentation. Since I collected the notes they took, and awarded a participation point to students who had successfully completed the listening task, the students were attentive and asked questions of the presenters to confirm the information they had noted. Without needing to be told, presenters began to use the white board to clarify their presentations for their audience. Each presentation was limited to five minutes, including a question and answer period.

The brevity and simplicity of this activity made it manageable for both speakers and audience. Yet through this activity, the students were introduced to quite a few books, as well as to the names of classmates they had not yet learned. Moreover, the activity provided good English practice, since students had to listen carefully and ask questions in order to collect the information required to complete the task. As time passed, the students furthermore came to enjoy the activity, regarding it as an opportunity to listen to interesting stories, rather than a course requirement.

Course Content

I reasoned that the teacher of the repeaters’ course should not reuse the content of the course from previous years that the repeaters had failed, even when he or she is following the same curriculum and using the same textbook. Repeating the same content is boring for the students, most of whom attended at least some class meetings during their previous enrollment
in the course; some students may even have retained their textbooks, complete with answers to the exercises they completed as students in the course previously. Not repeating the same content, of course, requires the teacher to prepare additional materials. Yet the task of adjusting the content of a course to meet the needs of the students sitting in front of a teacher, I believe, is an important part of his or her job.

The teacher must bear in mind that students who have previously failed the course as sophomores have become juniors or seniors by the time they repeat it. Where previously they may have had a general interest in language study, their interests have often narrowed around their major field of study as upperclassmen. Consequently, the teacher should align the English-study content of course more closely with the majors of the students. All of the students in my repeaters’ course were majoring in business, and their interests centered on marketing products, negotiating with business associates, and communicating effectively in business situations. Many of them were preparing to start job hunting, and they were particularly interested in English that they might encounter in job interviews, as well as in composing resumes in English. In general, the course will be both more fun and more useful for students to the extent that the teacher is aware of and responsive to such student needs in making adjustments to the instructional content of the course.

Differences in Proficiency Level

The mandatory English course at Tama University is divided into 17 sections according to students’ English proficiency level; however, students who receive failing grades in the course are collected in the repeaters’ course regardless of proficiency level. Differences in English proficiency level are difficulty that the teacher faces in teaching the repeaters course.

A Role Play Exercise

To manage differences in student proficiency level, I employed multi-level role playing exercises in every class. The exercises centered on short dialogues between two people that I prepared on the basis of textbook content: during every class, I asked students to find a partner, practice and memorize the dialogue, and perform it for me at the end of class.

In writing the dialogues, my first concern was that each be short enough and of sufficient practical interest for the students to memorize it successfully. I furthermore always designed the dialogues such that one part had more lines than the other. The exercise began 20 minutes before the end of class, and students completed it on a “first come, first leave” basis; that is, when students had successfully performed their role play for me, I dismissed them from class early. Knowing that they might be allowed to leave early proved a powerful motivator: the students worked hard to memorize their dialogues. In completing this pair exercise, the partner with the higher proficiency level would generally choose the part with more lines so that the pair would be able to memorize their dialogue more quickly. Some may find the idea of dismissing students early objectionable, but through this exercise, the students benefited in several ways: (a) they became sufficiently focused to learn quite a bit of practical dialogue; (b) they gained skill in working with peers; (c) they gained confidence by experiencing success; and (d) they developed a sense of connection to the teacher fostered by my recognition of their efforts.
Helping Students Stay on Track

Repeaters often have difficulty managing their schedules. No matter how motivated they may seem, they tend to miss classes, and tend not to realize what and how much they have missed by doing so. It has been quite common for a student in the repeaters’ course at Tama University, after receiving a failing grade, to come to the teacher insisting that he or she could not have missed enough to cause him or her to fail.

Regular Personal Attention

To address this problem, I elected to (a) keep track of students’ attendance; (b) save copies of handouts and quizzes distributed in class, and write the names of any absent students on these handouts; and (c) give the handouts to these students at the next class they attend, reminding them of what they missed as well as of the risk they take in being absent. Some may regard this approach as babysitting behavior not appropriate in teaching university students. However, beyond their practical benefits, these simple practices demonstrate a sense of caring on the part of the teacher that contributes to keeping the students on track. Moreover, making students more aware of the link between attendance and success in the course gives them greater agency; as Charles (1999) argues,

When students are given ownership of problems and situations, they know it is up to them to make matters better. There is no one else to blame. Teachers are there to offer advice and support-options, but not solutions. This allows students to take responsibility for their mistakes, rather than rationalizing them away.

A sense of belonging, and of being valued, also helps students to stay on track. After taking the roll, I also made it a practice to ask the class if anyone knew the reasons for any students’ absences on that day. When the entire class was present, moreover, I told the class how happy I am when everyone is there to attend class. Through constant reminders that every one of them needed to pass the course, the students developed a sense of caring for one another, and even started to encourage one another to do their work.

Lesson Planning

Language teachers may know how wonderful it is to learn a new language, but students whose major is not English often do not share this sense. Later in life they may come to see the importance of language study, but while they are attending the repeaters’ class, such interest as they maintain is rather in passing the course than in being successful language-learners. To help the students maintain focus, the teacher needs to keep this interest of the students in mind, and plan lessons that enable the students to score well on their final exam for the course. Only when lessons have been planned to help students master the essential material and pass the course might students later come to like English more than before. The dialogue exercise presented above proved helped in this regard. Right before the final exam, moreover, I offered a review day aimed not at cramming unfamiliar material into the students, but rather at confirming for the students their success in having learned all of the essential material already.

Discussion

The strategies presented in this paper are based on my semester-long experience of teaching one repeaters’ course, and may not work well with the students in another. Moreover, my approach did not
work for everyone in my course; although no students dropped out in the middle, and all continued to attend the class through the day of the final exam, three out of the 28 students in the class ultimately failed the course.

Nonetheless, I am hopeful that the strategies prevented here will help instructors of repeaters in the future, and instructors of regular classes as well. Teachers must continue to learn along with their students, and must adjust their goals and methods to their students. To teach most effectively, teachers should maintain a positive attitude, as Charles (1999) writes, refraining from complaining, backbiting and gossiping, and enjoying the encounter with students.

