

Notes on Teaching University Level EFL in Japan

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If I ever have the luxury of reminiscing about teaching at the university level in Japan, two experiences will certainly come to mind. One of those experiences occurred soon after my arrival at the University of Tokushima. While walking along a corridor, I happened to glance inside a classroom and saw a teacher lecturing to rows of empty seats. For a moment, I thought that I was witnessing some sort of innovative teaching practice. However, as I continued walking and passed another open door of the same classroom, I saw 10-15 students clustered at the rear of the classroom, sitting as far as possible from the instructor. About half of those students had their heads resting on their desks in a display of disinterest that I had never seen before, a display that would most likely be considered impolite in academic settings that I encountered during my education in North America.

My experience on that otherwise forgettable afternoon might not be striking for many Japanese people, but it made a lasting impression on me and greatly affected my approach to teaching Japanese students. That experience prompted me to try to fathom what I had seen. I tried to understand more about why such behavior occurred and I tried to develop techniques that would prevent me from facing a similar situation. I started researching documents about Japan's education system and started discussing what I had seen and read with Japanese people, including students, teachers and acquaintances.

On another occasion, later in my teaching career in Japan, I served as an invigilator for university entrance examinations. In the room to which I was assigned, approximately sixty students of about eighteen years of age worked earnestly to complete exams. The atmosphere in the examination room was deadly serious, completely opposite to the warm and relaxed atmosphere that I would prefer to have in education. It was an unhappy surprise when an experienced teacher explained that the examination I invigilated was far less rigorous than other examinations routinely faced by students in Japan.

My invigilation experience was disturbed by the thought that so many hours of cramming and practice tests boiled down to ranking young people by using examinations of questionable quality. It was distressing to think that the futures of these young people could be determined by such testing and evaluation methods. As I watched the students working hard on their examinations, I recalled a story about a Japanese high school student who found a new way to solve math problems, but when he tried to use that newly discovered method in class, he was reduced to tears by a teacher who said that only the approved method was valid. I doubted

that any student being tested before my eyes would benefit if he or she offered innovative responses for test questions.

As I invigilated, I found bittersweet consolation in recalling that I had not had to endure an education system overly devoted to the service of what Robinson (2001) terms *industrialism*. I felt happy that my schooling had focused on encouraging a spirit of inquiry and expression of ideas. I was vaguely disturbed by a feeling that my work at the university level in Japan somewhat resembled the work of a medical doctor who treats stress caused by traumatic experience. I had another disturbing feeling that the students being tested might think that I approved of the system forced upon them, when nothing could be further from the truth. It felt hypocritical to be associated with a system that I would not want for my own child because I want her to be judged on the basis of ability to think and discuss, not on the basis of scores on examinations of questionable quality.

Previous Reports and Personal Experience

Obviously, Japan is not the only country with an education system that needs improvement in order to face economic globalization and challenges associated with working and doing business (Robinson, 2001). However, research on Japan's education system identifies a particularly striking array of problems that affect Japanese students up to and including university level (cf. McVeigh, 2002), including problems that my own students have endured and still endure. Over the years, some of my students have shown signs of the alienation, discontent, ego development struggles and poor family dynamics that has been noted long ago (Matsubara, 1993). One of my better students committed suicide some years ago, giving me an unwelcome experience related to the bullying, dropping out from school, and suicidal tendencies mentioned by other observers (Tazaki & Baer, 1997). Some students show the exaggerated self-consciousness and the negative self-image described in a report by Munekata (1997). Many students are tired because they must work part time out of necessity or because they want to enjoy carefree lifestyles and overseas holidays (Greenlees, 1996).

Many students attend the university that employs me because they were refused admission elsewhere or because their parents want them to live near the family home. Such students confirm the claim that many Japanese students attend schools unwillingly and are unsatisfied with academic standards or their study majors (Uchida, 2010). The performance of some students supports the view that many students read nothing more serious than *manga* and replace study with 'copy and paste' (Japan Today, 2010). Personal experience confirms a report that Japanese students face a higher education system in which testing for employment is central, with grading based more on class attendance than on learning (McVeigh, 2002). There is ample evidence to support the view expressed in McKinney (2005) that some students see no

need for conversational foreign language, spend evenings watching TV or playing *mahjong*, have suffered academic burnout because of preparing for university entrance examinations, lack hope as they face a future as a cog in a corporate machine and feel that much school learning is meaningless in the real world.

Given the uniqueness of every teacher, student, and class, no magic formula can guarantee successful teaching. However, there may be value in reviewing some basic principles that have helped me enjoy teaching. The following ideas apply particularly to teaching EFL at the university level in Japan, but there may be wider applications to teaching in general. It will greatly satisfy me if any of the ideas can help in some small way to improve the teaching and learning experience.

Caring about Students

A student once told me that she wanted to become a doctor so that she could get rich and another student admitted that he wanted to become a teacher in order to have a steady job. I react negatively to such statements because I feel that sincere concern for the well-being of students is most important in teaching. My focus on student well-being is tied to the idea that a university is a business that sells an educational product and students who consume that educational product should be treated as valued customers. By this way of thinking, as in other businesses, if students are happy with the product, things will probably go well and if students are not happy, there will be problems.

In connection with the idea of treating students like valued customers, it saddens me that many people approve of openly scolding a student for poor academic performance. With the possible exception of tactfully enlightening a student who lacks common courtesy, I find it impossible to understand how scolding fits well with good education. How can action that is inappropriate in other business environments be appropriate in education?

Enjoying the Teaching Experience

Personal experience informs me that some people who work as teachers do not enjoy teaching. It is also clear that students know if a teacher is ill at ease or bored and that discomfort or boredom creates a negative atmosphere. For me, the challenge is to enjoy each class, and if a class is not so enjoyable, there must be an effort to improve that situation. It seems clear that having good communication with students and finding out how they feel is vital in creating an enjoyable course.

Sharing the Learning Experience

I see merit in a teacher being an associate in the learning process instead of being a kind of enforcer or babysitter, but that sort of association is not favored when the instructor stands on a platform at the front of a classroom and speaks at students. To me, a university is a place where student ideas and teacher ideas combine to make better ideas, a place for thought development. To me, a university is not a place for memorizing and repeating ideas of other people who are supposed to be wiser. Therefore, I see EFL education at the university level as a process of sharing ideas about everything under the sun, not just some things in a particular textbook.

Making Classes Meaningful

An important feature of my approach is to let students have a significant amount of control over their learning. A main reason for not using a textbook is the feeling that, if students select topics for class, there is a better chance that students will share interest in those topics. It seems obvious that it is best to avoid doing in class the sort of activities that students can do on their own. If a student can cover material via, for example, textbooks, DVDs and answer keys, what is the value of covering that material in class?

Experience teaches me that learning *about* English rather than learning *in* English hampers communication insofar as teaching and testing grammar focuses student attention on trees instead of on the forest. It is hard to see how language can be well taught and tested as a set of interacting formulae in the same way as, say, physics might be taught and tested. It seems obvious that class activities should help students express themselves meaningfully, in terms of their own experiences.

Managing Class Size

Students who are used to the student-teacher ratio of Japanese classrooms are familiar with lecture style didacticism. Such students are used to memorizing content for repetition on written exams and less comfortable with interpreting information or expressing opinions. Large class size reduces opportunity for students to express themselves, which discourages students from commenting, asking questions, or admitting that something is difficult to understand.

If students follow a textbook having highly structured exercises, it is hard to see a significant difference in having five students, twenty-five students, or 125 students in the same room. However, if emphasis is placed on having students interpret class material and express opinions, there is a clear need for smaller classes. To try to overcome problems related to students lacking interpretation skills and communication skills, my practice has been to try as

often as possible to make classes smaller. For me, having two classes with ten people each is a vast improvement over having twenty people in one group. In my experience, splitting classes into smaller groups increases teaching time but tremendously increases the degree of satisfaction. Feedback from my students consistently supports dividing large classes into smaller groups in order to improve the language class experience.

Lightening Up

I frequently observe in Japan a seriousness that I find difficult to share and that can even seem comical to me. My own students confirm that many Japanese classrooms lack a relaxed and easy going atmosphere, suggesting the continued relevance of observations made decades ago about the humorlessness of Japanese education and society in general (Stevenson, 1990). Apparently, such dearth of humor fits well with a pressurized environment of didactic lecturing and practice testing that pushes students to pass university entrance examinations.

Regardless of education level or education system, some students are more serious about study than other students. As a result, great flexibility is required to deal with the various personalities that are bound to be present in any group of people. To try to create a learning environment suitable for as many people as possible, my general aim is to try to make the classroom a warm but light-hearted place where students can relax and enjoy as they learn. Since I feel that seriousness in Japanese classrooms often relates to taking examinations, I try to relax students by placing considerable weight on general class participation instead of on specific tests. In addition, students grade themselves as part of my evaluation process and I feel that students respond well to the challenge of viewing themselves fairly.

Hazards of Criticism

While it should be obvious that any education system has negative elements that deserve criticism, I am acutely aware that less discerning readers may see in this paper unjust bias against Japanese classrooms. Clearly, criticism is hazardous in a country where personal feelings are sacrificed regularly to preserve social harmony and there are particular risks for any guest worker who offers less than unbridled homage to the host country. A well-known image in Japan shows three wise monkeys who try to avoid reality by not seeing, not hearing, and not speaking. Consequently, it seems reasonable to believe that some readers see no value in the saying 'If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem!' Other readers may see no value in critique that blends anecdotal evidence, documentary evidence, and generalization.

Despite the risk that some readers may misunderstand, this essay continues because withholding honest criticism would betray people who have offered me their candid opinions.

Hopefully, readers can agree that Japanese education needs improvement and can see value in blending legitimate complaint and constructive suggestion. Hopefully, it is obvious that there is no desire to disrupt harmonious relations with good people, including students, friends, and colleagues who participate in an educational system that they consider normal. There is certainly no suggestion here that student well-being is always absent from Japanese education and always present outside Japan.

This essay does not identify new weaknesses in Japanese education and it has been tedious to rehash well diagnosed problems in order to provide context for personal experiences and observations. Sadly, the obligation to note uncorrected weaknesses in Japanese classrooms merely emphasizes that so much diagnosis has produced so little treatment. There is also reason to believe that no significant improvement would occur even if new weaknesses are identified. After all, even before the Great East Japan Earthquake strained budgets, Japan had a history of ranking lowest of OECD nations in terms of government spending on education measured as a percentage of GDP and a history of ranking near the worst in terms of student-teacher ratio (The Guardian, 2011).

Some readers may get sidetracked by trying to figure out if the seriousness in Japanese classrooms stems from cultural factors or from intrinsic pedagogic weakness. I see no point in trying to differentiate a nation's culture from its education system or to discuss culture and education in terms of cause and effect. The point is that spending much time in pressurized classrooms surely inhibits students who might want to experience more free-spirited foreign environments that do not share Japan's sense of seriousness. It is also true that some foreign language classes of reasonable size are available in Japanese schools, including the University of Tokushima. However, it is hard to imagine how most Japanese students can get quality foreign language education when teacher-student ratios in Japan are so poor and when the lack of streaming in public education produces negative effects that continue to the university level.

Conclusion

Stress in Japanese classrooms will increase, judging from a recent announcement that Japan's Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology Ministry (MEXT) plans to revise university entrance examinations (The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2012). Such increased stress seems unfair and unnecessary, particularly if proposed changes involve examinations such as TOEIC and TOEFL that have a tradition of testing grammar rules instead of oral production or of testing recall of details from extensive speeches instead of true listening comprehension. Unfortunately, MEXT will probably implement revision with full support of universities, cram schools, textbook publishing companies and testing agencies that stand to profit by maintaining *status quo* or by making cosmetic changes that, in effect, maintain *status quo*.

Given Japan's love of enduring traditions and respect for deeply entrenched vested interests, it is hard for me to imagine that the country's education system will soon improve significantly. Little consolation remains except the cold comfort that comes from calling for needed change while expecting that call to be ignored or dismissed. Therefore, this essay ends by suggesting that reform of Japan's education system could begin by offering students an alternative to current university entrance examinations. The alternative would involve a program sponsored by government or industry that would let high school graduates choose (a) taking university entrance tests as usual or (b) working for two years on community service projects inside or outside Japan. Universities would reserve a certain number of places for students who successfully complete community service and those students would be able to attend university without having to take entrance examinations.

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