Transforming Language Education in Japan: Adopting a Wider View of Higher Language Education

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A recent emphasis on life-long learning requires a shift in how language teachers conceptualize and practice pedagogic responsibilities. One responsibility is to allow students greater freedom in their efforts to integrate language, communication, and content learning needs. This paper focuses on how these and related concerns and issues interact with efforts towards life-long learning in Japan. Practical teaching ideas aimed at developing wonder, critical inquiry skills, and classroom community are also discussed.

この論文では、言語教師がいかにして自分の役割を再定義し、生徒が第二言語学習(Foreign/Additional/Other Language　Learning)は生涯探究し続けるものであると理解する環境を作りだすことができるかを述べている。学習者の好奇心や自由な発想を育成することができる経験から引き出す学習方法についての議論を補強する文献や理論について述べた後、共感、包容力、独立した思考、新しい視点、自己実現を奨励するような協調的なクラスを創造している日本の大学の例について紹介する。最後に、生涯をかけた言語学習への意欲を高める環境を創造できる授業の具体的な方法の例を挙げている。

Marshall Childs, writing in the Japanese Daily Yomiuri newspaper section entitled The Practical Linguist (March 6, 2000), asks how Japanese can acquire and use language ability, a tool he says is necessary for them to live in the international community. We should not, Childs argues, think of language as a construct of fixed logical patterns to be analyzed, but rather as an experiential growth process where learners are emotionally attached to their study. Learning a second language equates with learning to participate in shared meanings where

> a language teacher will be successful to the extent that his or her students are gripped by experiences in the target language. The teacher will be unsuccessful to the extent that students approach the language from outside as an object of study (pg. 16).

However, in order to nurture language learning for life in any language, a fundamental shift must take place in the way many language teachers view their roles and responsibilities. If we believe that the repeated calls for the reform of language education from the Japanese government, business circles, the media, and the public do in fact emphasize a commitment to foreign, additional, or other (FAO) language-using abilities, then an explicit concern for communication must be taken very seriously. This concern should, as Pang (1999) states, encourage language teachers to seriously consider the issue of promoting democracy and inclusiveness in our classes, and to negotiate educational opportunities with our learners that can take place both inside and outside the classroom.

This paper will discuss how language teachers can redefine their roles and develop classes in which students begin to see FAO language learning as a life-long journey of discovery. After a discussion of the literature and theory that underpin our argument for experiential classes that foster learner curiosity and openness, we will turn to the example of one university in Japan where work is underway to create cooperative classes where empathy, tolerance, independent thought, new viewpoints, and self-actualization are encouraged. Our paper finishes with concrete examples of classroom practices that can foster an environment where students will develop a love for life-long language learning.

Background and Rationale for Focusing on Life-long Language Learning

A number of developments in Japanese education over the past few years suggest that the concept of life-long language learning is consistent with the stated goals of the major stakeholders in Japanese society. For example, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Technology, Sports, and Science (MEXT) has repeatedly stated over the past decade that it is vital for Japanese to cultivate greater proficiency in other languages, in this case, English. The Ministry's University Council (MEXT, 1998), and their Action Plan (MEXT, 2003) state that the goals of foreign language education should focus on the development of communicative skills, knowledge, and international understanding so that students are better equipped to understand others' ideas and express themselves in a multicultural and more globally-connected world.

According to the University Council report (MEXT, 1998), language education is also seen as an important part of general education. The goals of general education in Japan are stated as nurturing human resources so that people can observe and judge things from a variety of perspectives, encouraging students to think independently and in an integrated manner, teaching learners to make appropriate decisions, and providing opportunities for learners to apply knowledge within the context of their own lives. This reflects similar dynamics that are taking place elsewhere, as can be seen in the UK language education report of 1989 as described in Cox (1991), and Splitter's *Philosophy for Children* (1995) in the United States.

In terms of lifelong learning, Splitter (1995) maintains that schools and teachers must offer students a realistic way to deal with the larger questions of life, such as who am I as an individual and as a social being; does (my) life have a purpose; what does it mean to live well; and, what kind of world do I/we want to live in? Calvet (1998) concurs, and argues for a wider social view of the role of language, "…in the same way that boats are linked to the history of man, language (too) is directly involved in the world and linguistics should take this into account" (pp. xiv-xv).

A wider view of our roles and responsibilities as language teachers also begins with a clear recognition of not only socio-educational issues, but of socio-political ones as well. Prodromou (1988) writes of the importance of recognizing the political implications of language teaching, stating that that there are two options regarding additional language study. One option, he says, is to reject or reduce the import of the language study, thereby limiting its usefulness to one of technicality. The other option, Prodromou believes, is to treat the teaching and learning of FAO language in

its broadest sense, in effect as a non-neutral process that embraces the ideological nature of language teaching and learning. By ideological, Prodromou refers to the fact that what is taught and how it is taught reflects attitudes to society in general and, in particular, to the individual's place in society (Freire, 1972). Seen in this light, educational practice is a statement of power relationships, specifically of how authority is viewed in the classroom, and by extension in the wider society outside the classroom. Prodromou suggests that there should be a balance in FAO language teaching, where institutions and teachers adopt either a *cultural foreground* or *cultural background* approach to teaching and learning. Whereas the latter prioritizes culture(s) outside the local setting, the former places priority on culture(s) grounded in the local setting.

Dubin and Olshtain (1986) ask about the degree to which students depend on knowledge and use of English to gain access to subject matters of interest to them. They argue that as language teachers develop their classes, they must seriously attempt to stop viewing their language programs as self-contained systems, and recognize the open-ended, real-life needs of students with regard to the FAO language for life-learning study. Chastain (1980) adds that FAO language study should not be seen as a hurdle to be overcome on the way to a degree or qualification, but rather as an integral part of the total curriculum provision. Chastain calls on language teachers to determine if, from the students' point of view, their FAO language classes are for real. A real FAO language class is one where clearly stated and agreed on goals correspond harmoniously with classroom and out-of-school communication activities. However, Chastain feels that language teachers must identify not only student language needs, but also what they want to learn to do in the language, and then compare this with what is actually done in their language classes.

In addition to the need for language teachers to focus on the real-life needs of their learners, there have been increasing calls for language teachers to actualize their links with the larger curriculum in which they operate as educators. Mohan (1991) contends that

> formal education typically adopts practices and assumptions which separate language teaching from content teaching. A greater awareness of, and focus on, integrated content-thinking and language learning and doing can enhance students' overall higher learning, and will require collaboration between discipline-area faculty/teachers and their specializations, and additional English language teachers, which will also require redeployment of teaching territory on the one hand, and a more collaborative specialty-area content and language/communication curriculum on the other (p. 6).

This notion of connecting language and content study is connected to what Holliday (1994) calls the *strong version* of communicative language teaching, what we designate as a communicative language-based and content teaching and learning (CLBCTL). Communication in class, based on a strong CLBCTL model, relates to how students interact aurally and visually with texts and knowledge, and with one another. A strong focus on CLBCTL results in discipline-learning centeredness, where the teacher and students together negotiate appropriate classroom activity

and encourage classroom behavior in order to bring about language and content learning within the context of local needs to acquire knowledge, develop the skills to interrogate knowledge, and interpret the value of the learned knowledge and skills.

A review of the literature to this point, therefore, suggests that language learning for life should be understood as part of the learners' overall thought and emotional development connected to academic study, occupational requirements, and their personal growth. Another plank in the philosophical argument for a life-long learning orientation to FAO language education is in the understanding of the concept of a one-world ontology.

The One-World Ontology of Language Communication and World Engagement

While the FAO language education portion of the curriculum is an ideal area to initiate political, social, and culturally aware reforms in higher education, Nainby, Warren, and Bollinger (2003) go one step further by developing a conceptual bridge between contemporary communication theory and critical educational practice. At present, on a conceptual level there exist two separate worlds: a linguistic world of signifiers, and the world of *things*, such as mental experiences, ideas, concepts, or the *signifieds*. One world is that in which humans communicate with symbols, sounds, gestures, and pictures. The second world, they argue, is the world humans talk about, that is, all of the various subjects that move us to talk to one another. This has much in common with Constructivist Psychology, a discipline that has deeply influenced areas of TEFL (e.g. Edge, 1992; Hadley & Evans, 2001; Moskowitz, 1978; Richards & Lockhart, 1995).

Nainby, Warren, and Bollinger (2003) believe that language teachers must help students to rethink why we constitute the world as we do. In a one-world ontology the two stages become one—we can unmask and re-create at the same time. A representational model of education (two-world ontology) fails to account for the complexity of lived experiences of people in class. The emphasis remains on systemic meanings rather than communicative acts. Asking students, for example, why they are taking a class and hoping to elicit some profound answer in accord with one's own (educator) assumptions may seriously conflict with student response of "to get credit" and fulfill the institution's requirements for a degree. Shor (1996) reports that students are keenly aware that they have no power to propose, let alone take, their own courses. This is a reflection on the power of those who set up the courses. He noted that when he attempted to negotiate power and create more meaningful educational experiences, he encountered stiff resistance from various stakeholders in the institution.

The Need for a New Paradigm

A paradigm shift is needed, away from a focus on technical training and linguistic language learning and towards a lifetime of communication and identity formation. We believe this will encourage students and teachers to challenge their areas of study, their views of life, and their communicative experiences, both in and outside the classroom. The educational paradigm we advocate responds to recent calls in Japan for educational reform (e.g. MEXT,

2003), and recognizes the necessity of defining that approach based on Japanese needs to use language as a socio-cultural bridge between themselves and people of other nations.

Our paradigm is built on a one-world ontology of language study. It draws on Davies' (2001) advocacy of linking language and content learning concepts of democracy, development, and activism, and Splitter's (1995) philosophy for thought learning. It affirms the teaching and acquisition of language through a fully negotiated, politically aware, and socio-culturally engaged class setting that can be translated to interactions outside the classroom.

Encouraging a life-long love of language in our learners will require providing them not only with useful communication tools to *get the boat out of the dock* as Calvet (1998) argues, but also to whet their appetite to experience the empowerment which comes when they take ownership of the language, and then use it to think and act more responsibly as both individuals and members of their communities. We should, as Holliday (1994) and Sano, Takahashi, and Yoneyama (1984) argue, begin this process by first building learning communities in class and, together with our students, explore shared understandings and learn together how we can act on those understandings to link the world we know and experience, the world of words and gestures that we use to speak, write, read, and hear about the world around us. It follows that a developmental framework for the above re-conceptualization would consist of six main goals:

1. the development of inquiry and inquisitiveness,
2. the development of a hypothesizing or guessing attitude and recipes for putting words and feelings into immediate action,
3. the development of problem-posing and problem-solving,
4. the development of a dialogic learning community that is neither teacher-centered nor learner-centered but rather *learning-centered*,
5. the rejection of any imperialistic, hegemonic, or ethnocentric mind-sets
6. the nurturing of curiosity about what it is that makes us similar and different from each other.

We will now turn our attention to one university where work is underway to achieve these goals and encourage learners to further develop their identity as English speakers who have a love for learning the language.

The Communicative English Program (CEP) of Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS)

Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS) is a private four-year college in Niigata City, Japan. The college is composed of two departments, Information Systems and Information Culture, and the total student population is under 2000. It is the second choice of students in the prefecture after Niigata University, which has become a semi-privatized national college.

The management powerbase of the school is composed of conservative staff members of a retired LDP politician who is the regent of the university. As such, upper level administrators are often focused on different issues, and so are either unaware of, or not particularly interested in,

many of the views espoused in this paper. The faculty in the Department of Information Culture, however, has created a wider curriculum that focuses on social justice, intercultural understanding, and linguistic learning within the Japanese society and abroad. The Communicative English Program (CEP) was created in 2000 with the goal of teaching learners International English, as opposed to an overemphasis on American or British English.

Aware that fully-negotiated, democratic classes would, as Shor (1996) discovered, likely be a threat to the power brokers of the university, the terminology and shape of CEP was purposely designed by its coordinator to find common ground between the conservative and liberal dynamics that take place in the school's decision-making apparatus, with an eye to the perception among students that improved oral communication would be seen as an attractive skill. For that reason, the first year of CEP has been set up as a closed system, while the second year attempts to address the concerns of this paper.

The first year of CEP is a semi-intensive required course for all students in the department. The coordinator decided that the interests of management needed to be addressed, and as such, the first year of the program is controlled, structured, and undemocratic. With so many learners of differing interests and levels of motivation, this decision is also seen as pragmatic and expedient. In-house research (Hadley, Jeffrey, & Warwick, 2002) suggests that student proficiency in English does improve after one year in the program, and if learners opt for the university's semester overseas program in the United States, they return to NUIS with the linguistic tools they need to proceed to the second year of CEP (Advanced CEP), which is designed to help students engage in the task of language learning for life.

Advanced CEP

With the traditional concerns of the university's organizational culture thus satisfied, Advanced CEP exists as an elective course for students who wish to continue their English language study. Approximately 20 to 30 students enter the course at the beginning of the year, but this number declines to about half by the end of first semester, because of either the challenge of the course, or time conflicts with other courses that meet in the afternoon. The core students that remain tend to be those who have made a significant investment of time in the study of English, and as such, have started on a journey towards accepting their developing language ability as part of their identity. Contrasting the oft-spoken phrase in rural Niigata of "I am Japanese, so I can't speak English," instructors encourage students to consider saying instead, "I am Japanese, *and* I speak English."

The development of FAO language education syllabuses and materials should clearly reflect the interests of students and situations which students feel are related to their lives. The needs of the classroom teachers are met by the greater freedom given them with respect to how to teach and how to approach topical issues, compared with that in the CEP classes for first year students.

Advanced CEP is designed to encourage full student involvement from the very earliest stages of coursework. The coordinator works with students and classroom instructors to identify the learners' perceived language learning needs,

and balances this with the needs and resources of teachers facilitating the classes. Such an approach is supported by Nunan (1996), Breen and Littlejohn (2000), and McDevitt (2004), and it complements the concerns of the Japanese government, since FAO language study in this light should help both learners and teachers to foster life-learning and life affirming dispositions for language growth and for personal development. The dispositions that we encourage in class are:

1. asking questions and being inquisitive,
2. guessing and being curious,
3. being compassionate and showing empathy,
4. being less judgmental and prejudicial,
5. making decisions,
6. being more independent and self-reliant,
7. being less competitive and more cooperative,
8. tolerating ambiguity and difference,
9. sharing explicit and implicit understandings,
10. being more flexible and adaptable.

Following the lead of Mohan (1991) and Holliday (1994), the Advanced CEP curriculum and classroom materials are based on the topics found in the third and fourth year graduation seminars, taught by full-time faculty in the department. These faculty members are not language teachers and teach a variety of subjects in the seminars, such as peace studies, environmental awareness, gender issues, and regional dialog with Northeastern Asian countries.

Students self-select these seminars with this Japanese member of the faculty, and bring a sense of curiosity as they explore both personal and social issues with their teacher-mentor. Although the possible topics available to the class are limited mostly to the topics offered in the graduation seminar, the students in the Advanced CEP class decide which topics they wish to discuss. Materials are then created in modular form by the coordinator. The non-language teaching faculty members who teach the seminars and the CEP instructors are provided with these materials beforehand to prepare for the course.

Students are required to do much of their work outside the classroom, and as much as possible, interact with English speakers who are not part of the university or the course in order to help them develop their opinions. Students bring these thoughts and experiences to class when we conduct lessons in Advanced CEP. Faculty members teaching the seminars who are fluent in English are also regularly invited to class to participate with the students during the times when the topic of their seminar class is being discussed in the Advanced CEP class. Debates in English on these class topics are held once every two weeks. During this time, the values and opinions of all the students and faculty are considered in an open forum, and through this dialogue, a new sense of community built on tolerance and cooperation is created.

Initiatives such as the type seen in Advanced CEP are not without unique challenges. One problem that has emerged in Advanced CEP has been the development of closed communities. Students who have invested their time studying in Advanced CEP become tight-knit groups, and

new students who do not *fit in* socially with this established group drop out of the class. As well, improvements in language in terms of proficiency seem to be much less pronounced than in the first year. One reason is because the learners come to the class with a higher level of proficiency than when they started CEP 1, so it is natural to see less-dramatic improvement in such pre-intermediate learners. However, it is also the case that the positive affective factors of the group mitigate a necessary element of pressure needed to encourage students to push themselves once they have attained a certain level of communicative competence.

Despite these concerns, we feel the positive results observed in the Communicative English Program at NUIS over the past two years have outweighed most of these weaknesses. We have seen that students have truly taken ownership of the class. Integration of CEP into other parts of the overall curriculum has helped students to connect their studies to English Language Learning in an immediate and meaningful way. We have observed that students seem to be living with English outside the classroom as they wrestle with complex issues. Many students also seem to be gradually linking English language learning experiences with their own personal identities, and this suggests that they may well be on the path towards a lifetime of language learning.

Strategies for Promoting a Wider View

We will now look at classroom practices that encourage and empower learners in line with the ideals outlined above. It is hoped that new and experienced teachers alike will experiment with these strategies and activities as a way of promoting this wider view of language education. The following discussion starts with ideas for classroom management, moves on to critical thinking activities, and concludes with an empowering activity.

Classroom Management

Helping learners in their language learning endeavors and developing a thirst for lifelong learning starts with classroom management and creation of an environment that encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and deeper reflection. With these goals in mind, one of the authors has experimented with changing seating each week and regularly devoting class time to warm up writing on student-chosen topics. The following is a short explanation of each.

Using grading software like *Easy Grade Pro* (2003), the teacher can easily shuffle the seating arrangement and print out a seating chart for each meeting. Students come to class, look at the chart, and find their seat for the day. There are a number of advantages. First, students have the opportunity to interact with classmates they might not interact with otherwise. Changing seats also promotes the type of social constructivism associated with Vygotsky (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998) and helps to alleviate some attitude problems, or the downward spiral that sometimes gets set in motion with groups of less motivated learners, or those with negative attitudes toward study.

In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Calkins (1994) outlines the benefits of a regular schedule of writing time. Although she talks about young L1 writers, this strategy is intuitively appealing for a broader range of learning contexts. Dedicating time at the beginning every meeting helps establish a routine, gives students a chance to organize their thoughts, and

promotes deeper thinking. Some teachers may be worried about sacrificing ten to fifteen minutes, but the first few minutes of class is hardly wasted study or learning time.

The teacher can encourage autonomy by not limiting topics, or tie the warm up writing in closer with the other material for the day. In either case, students should be writing on topics that are meaningful to them. Before doing other activities, students can be encouraged to share what they have written and practice conversation strategies, such as asking follow up questions, asking for clarification, expressing interest, surprise, or sympathy. Teachers can stress that this sharing time is a good opportunity to practice communication skills, i.e. being a critically attentive and sensitive listener.

Critical Thinking Activities

Some of the most worthwhile activities for promoting experiential growth are those that encourage learners to reflect on their own beliefs. This includes critical thinking activities that, for example, explore the influences of mass media (Jones, 2004a), or focus attention on personality traits or characteristics that are, for example, appealing or offensive (Jones, 2004b). These activities can be designed around concepts such as dialogical reasoning, argument and persuasion, and inquiry and integration, while including teaching strategies such as meditative teaching, collaborative teaching, scaffolding, collaborative apprenticeship learning, inquiry-based teaching, and guided student-generated questioning.

Other potentially powerful activities for fostering curiosity and self-reflection are based on metaphor and metaphorical thinking. Pugh, Hicks, Davis and Venstra (1992) offer several ideas for introducing metaphor and the following activities are adapted from their work.

Metaphor activity 1: Lump of clay, or rosebush?

A comparison of the *lump of clay* and *rosebush* metaphors for learners and the educational process provides a nice starting point for exploring beliefs and attitudes toward learning. The following steps can be used to encourage this exploration:

Step 1: As a class, consider the various perspectives of these two metaphors (i.e. the learner is like a lump of clay, warmed by attention and concern, slowly molded into a mature thinker, or with the proper fertilizer, sunlight, and water, the rosebush will grow and bring forth its characteristic flower). Go into as much detail as possible, listing up all relevant support for the metaphors.

Step 2: In pairs, students brainstorm for other metaphors for learners (e.g. voyager, vessel, sponge) and elaborate.

Step 3: Individually, students write a paragraph on one metaphor they especially like for learners.

Activity 2: Metaphors to describe yourself

In this activity, students are prompted to use a variety of metaphors to describe themselves.

Step 1: Students and teacher answer a list of questions:

(1) What animal best describes you? Why?

(2) What color best describes you? Why?

(3) What automobile best describes you? Why?

(4) What season best describes you? Why?

(5) What food or drink best describes you? Why?

Step 2: In pairs, students share their answers and look for similarities and differences.

Step 3: Individually, students write a short answer explaining whether or not we can influence our lives through the use of metaphors.

Activity 3: Worldview

This activity shifts the focus from the individual to the national and international level.

Step 1: As a class, consider possible metaphors for the home country, or host country.

Step 2: In pairs, expand on this discussion with metaphors for neighboring countries and countries around the world.

Step 3: Individually, students write a comparison and contrast paper for two countries.

Empowering projects

The last thing we would like to introduce is an example project for promoting learner autonomy that incorporates many of the concepts and teaching strategies listed above under critical thinking activities. One of the authors uses this team project in the second term to shift the focus from independence and self-reliance toward cooperation and collaboration, skills students will likely need upon graduation.

In this six to eight-week project, students are responsible for making their own online language learning activities. The first step is to individually try several online activities. The teacher can provide learners with a list of links to various sites with these kinds of activities, or set up a simple website with these links. Students are encouraged to first check the different sites and then try a few different types of activities at different levels. Then they need to print out two activities and write a short description together with their impressions regarding both ease of use and language learning value.

Students then bring these activities and their descriptions to class and share them with their group members. Then they need to begin discussing what kind of activities they want to prepare, and write a proposal which includes what the target is, for example textbook review, TOIEC practice, something related to their major, or something lighter, like travel English. They also need to propose what kind of focus the activity will have (e.g. vocabulary focus, grammar focus, or prepositions) and decide on the kind of activity. Choices include matching, fill-in the blanks, scrambled sentences reading activities, or their own idea.

The proposal provides the teacher with an opportunity to adjust or redirect. Some groups may propose activities that are below their language learning potential. Teachers need to stress that the objective is to learn something, not just stick to what they already know.

After getting their proposal accepted, groups begin drafting and preparing the activities. Depending on the amount of class time and homework dedicated to the project, groups should have their drafts ready for peer evaluation within two or three weeks.

Peer evaluation can be done individually or in groups, limited to other individuals or groups in the same class, or

expanded to include other classes if feasible. Regardless, multiple evaluations of the same activity will help ensure that useful comments will be received. Evaluation of the activities should be focused on both content and delivery. Groups eventually go over the evaluations together and decide what revisions or adjustments are needed before final submission. For extra credit, groups can upload the activities to the Internet.

Conclusion

The most important skills or dispositions we can teach and learn with students are not those we traditionally associate with language study, such as vocabulary building, reading or listening comprehension, rule-governed grammatical awareness, conversation, or fluent expression in speech or writing. Rather, a life-long love for language learning can be nurtured if teachers and the syllabus respond to student needs to connect the language studied to the real concerns that students have in their lives about not only school, but, for example, relationships, their identity, their curiosity, their uncertainty, and their apprehension about the future. Language learning for life begins when students see that the use of newly acquired second language is as important as their native language, and that both will make a difference in their lives.

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