Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Helping teachers reflect on their teaching

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This is the second of three phases of a research-funded project on teacher development being carried out in schools in Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The focus of this phase is the development of teacher self-reflection as part of the teacher training program. Based on class observations and discussions with teachers, the authors have designed a Teacher Self Assessment Guide that teachers can use easily and quickly. It will be trialed at schools in the three countries in 2009.

本稿は、研究助成を受け３段階の研究計画で進めてきた、日本、タイ、ベトナムの学校での教員研修に関する研究における、第２段階の成果を報告するものである。第２段階における研究目的は、教員研修プログラムとしての「教員による振り返り」の手法を開発することである。授業観察および教員との対談で得たデータを基に、教員が簡単に素早く付けることが出来る「Teacher Self Assessment Guide 教員の自己評価ガイド」を作成した。2009年度に先述の3カ国の学校で試験運用する予定である。

Students at the authors' university have been participating in overseas studies in Vietnam and Thailand for the past few years. During these trips, we were able to observe English classes in local schools. Having noticed similarities in teaching practices in Japan, Vietnam, and Thailand, we formed a research team with the aim of training teachers to develop their own materials (Aliponga, Luk, Williams, & Yoshida, 2008). As well as conducting classroom observations of English language classes, we also interviewed the teachers before and after the lessons. Generally in the pre-lesson interviews, the

teachers explained their plans for the lessons. However, during the post-lesson interviews most of the teachers came to realise that they did not actually carry out what they had previously indicated they would do in class. In other words, they could not achieve the goals they had set for their lesson. The teachers' realizations during the post-lesson interviews also showed self-reflections of classroom actions are not commonly practiced by many of the teachers. In September 2008, the authors held a seminar in Vietnam with over 80 local English language teachers and graduate students of English teaching. Participants included teachers' whose classes we had observed. The purpose of the seminar was to report on the findings of the class observations, and have open discussions focusing on the implications that the observations have on language teaching and teacher development. During the seminar, common basic questions and needs among the participants were identified, and with the aim of answering those questions and meeting those needs, we have developed a Teacher Self Assessment Guide.

Literature review

Marva Collins (1992), an American educator and National Humanities Medal recipient, put it succinctly when she said, "Don't try to fix the students, fix ourselves first" (p. 9). Indeed, well-informed teachers pay attention not only to the conduct and behaviour of their students but also to their own actions. In fact, Ur (1997) pointed out that self-reflective observation of classroom practices is an essential part of the teacher development cycle. Kayler and Weller (2007) emphasised the idea of self-reflection as one component of a cycle, stressing that improvement should be continuous. In assessing their own practices, not only are the teachers able to identify any areas of their teaching that may be inadequate or problematic, there is also increased awareness of the impact of their teaching on their students (Kayler & Weller, 2007, p. 143). When teachers initiate changes to better themselves professionally, they are also making meaningful contributions to the students' learning experience, and this in turn would be reflected as growth on the program or institution itself (Hrach, 2001-2002, pp. 6-7). Furthermore, self-evaluation is not only valuable for improvement of the teachers, students and the program, it also gives the teachers ownership, individual voices and control of their own teaching (Contreras, 2000; Spitz, 2001; Kayler & Weller, 2007).

Premise about teachers

In most professions, there are established standards that ensure the quality of the professions. If an employee continually performs below those standards, the employee will eventually be dismissed from the job. Most people would agree that teaching, being integral to society, is an important profession. As such, it can be assumed that there are standards set up to ensure the quality of teachers. Although Davidson (2002) suggested that English teachers be treated as other professionals (like doctors and lawyers) to the extent that they can be held legally responsible for the lack of quality service provided to their students, there are some deterrents to teachers upholding or meeting such standards. In many of the classrooms we visited in Vietnam and Thailand, poor working conditions meant teachers did not have access to essentials like chalk and dusters. In some

schools we visited in Japan, the teachers had wanted to put together materials to support their teaching, but limited access to computers and printers discouraged the teachers from realising their plans. Another reason that dissuades teachers from trying hard is a rigid pay scale. In Japan, Vietnam, and Thailand, many of the teachers we interviewed (particularly part-timers) found it necessary to hold two or three teaching jobs to earn a sufficient salary to support their preferred lifestyles in their respective countries. There seem to be very few reasons for teachers to improve themselves. The system in which many teachers work is not conducive to growth or change. However, despite the failures of the system, teachers do spend time and effort on self-improvement. This is evident in teachers spending their own time and money to attend language teaching conferences and seminars.

Teachers work alone

While there are certain aspects of a teacher's job (such as teachers' meetings) that are done in cooperation with others, the main part of their work is done individually. There is little or no supervision, no real oversight of pedagogy or of what is being done in classes. Hosokawa (n.d.) notes that although the Ministry of Education in Japan introduced Integrated Learning in primary schools, it does not supply a set content for the teachers, i.e., a "teacher can teach whatever they want" (p. 1). This does not mean that the teachers are free from any responsibility. They are expected to meet the objectives set by their schools or institutions. In many cases, the objectives are fairly simple ones that may include keeping classroom order, teaching from a textbook according to a set schedule, and giving tests at designated times.

Tests are given to assess whether the students have gained the knowledge that was taught. Many of the teachers we interviewed in the three countries noted that the aim of their classes is to help students pass entrance examinations. Most of these examinations only test reading, writing and grammar, so even though many students are passing the tests, they cannot functionally use English outside the classroom. In other words, the institutional objective of giving tests is being met but the course aims do no correlate to students who are confident and capable of using English. However, even though students' ability to use English is itself not a course objective, many teachers make it a personal aim for their classes. Each year, many teachers participate in seminars and workshops to improve their teaching. They are using their own time to improve an area that is not part of the objectives because many of them feel a commitment to their students and feel a sense of responsibility to their growth. While the teachers' actions are influenced by their respective Ministries of Education, the students' parents and the society, their desire to develop student competency in English is in fact what motivates them to continue to develop themselves as professional teachers (Hosokawa, n.d.).

Teachers' views on students

From our interviews, it was noticeable that teachers often experience personal satisfaction in their jobs when working with highly motivated students who demonstrate a clear desire to learn and to actively utilise the teachers as a learning resource. This is professionally rewarding for

both the students and the teachers. Many teachers want to give more to the students and feel proud of their own achievements as a result of the success of their students. On the other hand, when students have low motivation and apparently have no interest in what is being taught, many teachers cite the students' lack of interest as the students' failure and they disassociate themselves from the students. In other words, motivated students are viewed as the teachers' own success, while unmotivated students are seen as being responsible for their own failures.

One point to be made here is that motivated students are "good" students regardless of the teacher. In fact, motivated students are often good despite the teacher and they cannot be held back by a teacher's limitations. Students who read ahead in the textbook are moving at their own pace regardless of the teacher's pace. However, students who are unmotivated or disruptive are often defined as "bad" or "lazy." The use of these labels conveniently avoids placing responsibility on anyone but the students. Teachers do not feel a need to change their own behaviours because it is the students' bad behaviours, determined by factors outside the classroom, that need changing. Collins (1992) sees this often-typical situation and remarks that "the good ones [teachers] are constantly trying to find answers; the poor ones are constantly making excuses" (p. 11).

Table 1 shows typical comments from our teacher interviews about students and appropriate responses which would allow the teacher to affect student behaviour positively.

Table 1. Negative student attitudes and appropriate teacher responses

The student is	The teacher should
unmotivated	motivate
lazy	encourage
bored/ uninterested	be interesting/ make interesting classes
not interested in English	show the relevance of English
doesn't like English	be likeable
is too shy	promote confidence through activities

Teacher Self Assessment Guide

Teacher development, as with any development, implies changes for improvement, but before any change can occur, the teachers must understand and be actively aware of what is happening in their classes. Change cannot take place until the teachers knows what can and should be changed. Our Teacher Self Assessment Guide is one way of having a written record of activities done during a lesson. It is intended to be easily understood by the teachers who use it and could be used without being time-consuming. There are 5 Teacher Self Assessment Guides: reading, speaking, listening, writing, and grammar.

General description

Each Teacher Self Assessment Guide, planned to fit on an A4 size sheet, focuses on a specific skill. Each Teacher Self Assessment Guide has four sections, including a pre-class

and post-class section. The pre-class section includes a list of common *Objectives* for the particular skill, plus space to write in other objectives. *Activities* that are directly related to the objectives can also be noted. Teachers can choose to write down in the *Activities* section prior to or after class. The post-class section includes space for *Reflective Notes*. A final section is *Student Observation*, to record notes on one particular student during class. We believe each section is easy to use and be supported by short and clear explanations. Appendix 1 shows a possible layout for the Teacher Self Assessment Guide.

Objectives

This section will include basic objectives for the specified skill. There will also be a section for teachers to write in additional objectives. The list of objectives serves various purposes. Most simply, it provides a list from which the teachers can decide what they will teach in the lesson. It also acts as a checklist to remind teachers of the variety of objectives that can be taught within one skill. This is useful as it is easy for teachers to overlook some objectives when planning classes. At the same time, the list of objectives could reveal discrete skills that the teachers may not have considered for their lessons. For teachers who repeatedly use the Teacher Self Assessment Guide for a particular skill, a record of the objectives could be compiled providing the teachers with a broader picture of what has been taught over time.

Activities

The purpose of writing down the activities is to make clear the connection between the objectives for a lesson and the activities done to achieve those objectives. Similar to the pre-lesson interviews with the teachers, explicitly stating the activities to be done in class clarifies how the lesson will progress. And similar to the post-lesson interviews with the teachers, explicitly stating the activities that were actually done during the lesson encourages the teachers to reflect on the lesson.

Reflection notes

Reflection is an important part of growth in education. Teacher diaries (Jeffrey, 2004), peer coaching (Benedetti, 1997), portfolios (Johnson, 1996), weblogs (Hall, 2006), and collective reflection (Dong, 1997) could all be beneficial to varying degrees. However, these types of reflection may be viewed by teachers as being too time-consuming. To avoid this, the word *Notes* is deliberately used. These notes should be brief, but detailed enough to make it clear if the objectives of the lesson have been met or not and what can be changed to improve the lessons next time.

Student observation

As discussed before, achievement by self-motivated students does not necessarily indicate teacher success. For the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of a lesson, choosing a less motivated student or a student who ranks average or just below average in the class would give a more accurate picture. Awareness of that student's attitude, behavior

and how they are responding to class activities could help teachers reflect on their teaching.

Analysis of the Teacher Self Assessment Guide

The Teacher Self Assessment Guide was developed to be used easily and quickly. Teachers are encouraged to use it frequently to give themselves a better understanding of their teaching practices, not only for one lesson, but also throughout the course of a class (or classes). As discussed earlier, teacher development involves changes, so the teachers' self-reflections must lead to a decision to act on current teaching practices for the process to be effective. It is hoped that as teachers incorporate the Teacher Self Assessment Guide into a routine of self-reflection, that they will see an improvement in their students' competency as well as their own teaching.

Conclusion

Rogers (1940) asserted that "when we become English teachers, we take on responsibilities to our subject and to our students" (p. 397). We regard self-reflection by teachers as a crucial part of taking on those responsibilities. Teachers' active awareness of themselves and their students is necessary for professional development. We believe that the Teacher Self Assessment Guide is a helpful way to cultivate this awareness. By the end of 2008, we will be distributing preliminary Teacher Self Assessment Guides to our participating teacher groups in Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam for trial evaluations. In 2009, with the feedback from the teacher groups, we expect to introduce a comprehensive Teacher Self Assessment Guide kit. After that, we plan to have discussions on developing materials for good teaching practices.

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Appendix 1

Sample Teacher Self Assessment Guide – Reading

Teacher Self Assessment Guide - Reading			
OBJECTIVES	**ACTIVITIES**	**REFLECTION NOTES**	**STUDENT OBSERVATION**
- get the main point ✓ - understand important facts ✓ - guess vocabulary from context - get specific information - make inferences - recognise text organisation - identify writer's purpose - understand writer's conclusion - reading speed Others: - _____ - _____ - _____ - _____ - _____	Pre - Read a passage, students answer questions. Post – this was too difficult, so I had students work in pairs	Many students couldn't do the work. I changed to have them do it in pairs. I thought it would be easy, but too much vocab they didn't understand. Too much time needed to look up words. need to do something about vocab... students don't write vocab in notebook... they need to read the questions first...	Name: B. Etudient Etudient read the passage, but then tried reading the questions but didn't succeed. He was looking up each word in the dictionary, but sometimes got the wrong definition for how it was used – e.g. red-faced – he thought it was about paint. He needs to think about understanding the whole passage...next time I should give questions about the general topic