Title	EFL
Author(s)	,
Citation	. 11 (2003-01) pp.15-21
Issue Date	2003-01-31
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10457/2724
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EFL 授業を考える

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The EFL Classroom in Japan Today

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要　　旨　この 10 年間で，少子化などの社会問題がどのように大学の授業に影響を及ぼしているか。今後授業をするのにどのような対策が考えられるか EFL，及び社会言語学の観点から考察を試みた。教師の役割，タスクの選び方について，ethnographic 法を用い，新しい授業の提案をする。

INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days when Japanese youth boasted the highest achievement in mathematics and science, and schools were known for their disciplined and orderly classes. Japanese education used to be the envy of Western educational circles and educators around the world marveled at the effectiveness of the Japanese system. The situation has changed dramatically especially in the last two decades. Today's Japanese classrooms, from those in elementary schools to even the best of universities, are rife with problems reflecting the great social changes that have taken place in recent years.

The mid to late 1990s is when the high quality of Japanese education started to crumble. Today the repercussions are felt everywhere. *Shoshika* (the decreasing number of children), *gakkyu hokai* (classroom collapse), *gakuryoku no teika* (the declining level of students' academic ability) —these are the buzzwords of modern Japanese education and are factors with which educators at all levels of the educational strata need to come to terms. And this includes those involved in tertiary education in Japan : junior colleges and universities. (Hereon the term "college" will be used to refer to both junior college and university.)

How, as college educators are we to uphold educational standards when the classrooms are comprised of students from the new youth population? Personally, as a TESOL trained instructor, year after year, the grandiose theories regarding second language acquisition and innovative methodologies in ESL/EFL become less relevant when there are more pressing concerns in the classroom. In this paper, the author reviews the realities of current Japanese

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youth, and goes on to suggest what might be considered effective in EFL classroom in Japanese colleges. Although these suggestions are made from the perspective of EFL teaching, the issues here concern teaching in all subject areas.

Enrollment Crisis

In Japan, college bound students are referred to in terms of 18 year olds, and thus in recent years, the oft mentioned phrase when discussing demographics is *jyuuhassai jinko no gensho,* (the declining 18 year old population) and *shoshika* (the decreasing number of children). In 1992 there were 2,050,000 18 year olds, and the numbers have been steadily declining ever since. By the year 2001, high school graduates seeking entrance to 2 year colleges and universities had plummeted to 880,000, 70% of the numbers in 1992, 1,210,000. Anticipating a greater number of students seeking entrance to tertiary education around 1992, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) actually increased the quotas for enrollment at colleges and universities at that time. This was also the height of the bubble years and in those heady times when organizations were flush with capital, new institutions were established, and programs were expanded at existing institutions. These institutions continued to accept the same number of students in the following years, and consequently, with the decrease of available 18 year olds, there were more and more places available in tertiary education.

MEXT estimates that in the year 2009, the number of available places in 2 year colleges and universities will be equal in number to the number of high school applicants, meaning that if the entrant is not choosy, he or she is guaranteed a place. Since MEXT's estimate includes all colleges and universities in Japan, we can see that this has already started to happen at some schools, that is, automatic entry for all applicants. Even at present, virtually any high school graduate, provided that finances are not a problem, may go on to post-secondary education.

Consequently, colleges and universities, especially those that are not among the ranks of the so-called "prestigious" institutions, have had to lower their standards just to stay afloat. Thus, college and university teaching staff are facing an influx of students, whom 20 years ago would most likely not have considered education after high school. Contrary to the myth surrounding Japanese education, many students nowadays, do not go through "examination hell" in order to get into college.

A Relaxed Approach to EducationE

Yutori Kyoiku

College educators all over Japan lament over the poor quality of academic skills which students exhibit in the classroom. The most glaring examples are seen in the area of mathematics. From 1998-2001, Tose and Nishimura conducted a nationwide survey examining the academic skills of students attending private and public universities and found that the appalling deficiency in mathematical skills applied to those majoring in mathematics and science as well as those that were majoring in other subject areas. (Tose & Nishimura, 2001)

It is said that the primary culprit of the decline in academic ability is *yutori kyoiku*, translated loosely as "a relaxed approach to education." Instituted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in the 1980s, as an antidote to traditional exam-driven education, it was supposedly an innovative approach which encouraged individuality, and an international outlook. (http://www.mext) In the belief that dishing out less knowledge manifested the "relaxed approach". MEXT virtually slashed pages of textbooks and drastically reduced the number of hours spent on certain subjects. As a result, the children of Japan today use among the thinnest textbooks in the world and spend the least amount of time for core subjects in school. (Tose & Nishimura, 2001) At about this time, English education, criticized for not producing people who could actually speak English even after 6 years of English in junior high and high schools, implemented more "communicative" teaching. Textbooks allegedly used more communicative tasks and the JET program, employing native speakers of English to team-teach with Japanese English instructors was instituted. (Asahi Shimbun)

Classroom Collapse

Kawakami (1999), a junior high school teacher of 30 plus years writes about the emergence of a "new breed of child." The professional teachers' group with which he is affiliated, began noticing a drastic change in their students from around the late 80s.

Although the group of teachers had had much experience dealing with what plagued some schools in the 80s, *konai boryoku*, or school violence, the teachers mused that the current situation was inherently different. Kawakami interprets that the instigators of school violence had a political agenda, much akin to the student demonstrations of the 70s, a voice challenging the "school society" of Japan. The teachers understood what they were up against, and were aware of where the students were coming from. He contends that difficult as they were, those students initiated communication with the teachers, while the "new breed of child" lacks this fundamental skill. Other characteristics apparent in the "new breed of child" include a marked deficiency in discipline, lack of initiative, and apathy towards education and society in general.

Shigo—The meaning of chatting

Another phenomena, related to the above, characterize classrooms nationwide—the prevalence of *shigo*. A word that was not commonly used until fairly recently, *shigo* refers to the talking that goes on between students in the classroom. Although the word is used commonly nowadays, neither students nor instructors seem to agree to what actually constitutes *shigo*. Shimada (2002) says that *shigo* can be qualified as :
1) all talking that goes on between students in a classroom
2) talking among students which is disruptive
3) talking which is irrelevant to the subject matter of the class
Shimada mentions that this phenomena was first noticed at women's junior colleges in the mid

60s, and by the 70s could be seen among male students in four year universities. However until the mid 80s it was not considered to be a social problem, but rather as an enigma exclusive to university education in Japan. The general consensus was that "the *shigo* problem was one that concerned certain universities, certain instructors, and certain students." (p.5) From the mid -80s *shigo* was rampant in all university classrooms and for the first time was legitimized as a social problem.

Traditional Japanese college or university education

Even before the current demographic crisis, Japanese tertiary education has traditionally been considered to be a playground for students, a lull between the grinding "examination hell" they had previously been through to get into the university, and the time after graduation when they would have to fit into the rigid ranks of corporate Japan. Even the university teachers didn't expect much of the students, and absenteeism and poor academic achievement have always been endemic.

> ...for two years in a junior college or university, Japanese youths are allowed to do almost whatever they want. They experiment with work, travel, romance, and self-titillation ; they search out their interests and alter their lifestyles. They are placed in classes, but are not really expected to study, and sometimes, not even to attend. (Kelly, 1993 : 173)

The EFL situation

The reality that educators face on a daily basis is that teaching in a college today is more about motivating apathetic students, classroom management, and dealing with poor academic ability than it has ever been in the past. Educators irrespective of their field, are finding it increasingly difficult to teach what they are supposed to teach in their respective subject areas because they are hindered by such factors in the classroom. The effect is particularly profound in the English language classroom since the accommodation of affective and personality factors is particularly crucial for language learning. (Stern, 1987 ; Ellis, 1986)

Discipline and structured learning

As can be seen from the discussion above, today's Japanese youth lack initiative and in dire need of structure and discipline. How should this be dealt with in the EFL classroom? What needs to be considered to insure even some degree of success? In the Japanese college setting, the time has come to re-evaluate learning and teaching, and go beyond theory-bound research to really look at what is going on in the classroom. As Brumfit (1984) aptly puts it in his introduction to methodology in language teaching : "generalizations and principles must be capable of being related directly to existing teaching conditions, including teachers as they really are, institutions as they actually are, and resources as they actually are" (p.1)

A variety of tasks are necessary to accommodate different learning styles. (Rubin, 1975 ;

McGroarty, 1989 ; Naiman et. al., 1978) Research done among Japanese university students (Burden, 2002 ; Reid 1987) show that they exhibit a wide range of preferences. The value of using project work in the ESL/EFL classroom has been exhibited by Fried-Booth (1986) and Famularo (1996). Keeping in mind that today's new Japanese youth lack initiative, this is a task, if managed efficiently, has potential for success. Projects, by nature, are highly structured. Students are required to bring materials to class, create a goal, and work with other students in order to reach their goal. The "new breed of child" may essentially be uncooperative, but at the very least, even college students will take action if an appeal is made to their sense of "guilt", or rather the type of guilt particular to Japanese as explained by Doi (1973). The Japanese sense of guilt is best demonstrated "when the individual suspects that his action will result in betraying the group to which he belongs." (p.20) in this case the members of his/her project group.

Another advantage of projects is that they allow students to work at their own pace, since college EFL classes in Japan are more often than not, comprised of various levels of ability. And in this day and age, due to the decline in basic academic abilities, levels are as varied as ever.

An ethnographic approach to language learning

Raising the motivation of apathetic students becomes a central issue that must be overcome. Gardner explains motivation as "a complex phenomenon, and although the reasons or the goals are part of it, is the motivation that is responsible for the success (of language acquisition.)" Although the situation with today's Japanese youth differs from that of American minorities, the realm of EFL teaching in Japan today can surely benefit from some of the techniques that resulted in success in raising the motivation among African American schoolchildren in the 80s. Studies such as Heath's (1983) comparative study on the socialization process of children in the primarily African American community of Trackton and the neighboring white community of Roadville showed that compared to the white children, the African American were not equipped with the interactional skills necessary to be successful in school. A rich source of information resulted from undertaking ethnographies of communication of the mainstream community, where the teachers came from, the respective communities of the students, and in the classrooms themselves. Teachers were then able to use this knowledge in their classrooms, making way for some very ingenious and motivating classes catering to the special needs of these students. The results were quite remarkable : students began to take initiative for their learning, and teachers marveled at how much could be accomplished.

The Significance of the Teacher

Gaies (1991) is one proponent of adopting an ethnographic approach to language learning and teaching. He questions the assumption that applied linguistic research translates into insights for those who deal with the realities of the classroom, i.e. language teachers and

program designers. He goes on to mention that although there has been a multitude of research on second language acquisition, the majority of it has focused on the learner and scant attention has been paid to the teacher. The best of methods and materials may be available, but success is dependent on the teacher.

> Teachers can make bring to life the most stilted materials, as well as cause even the most exciting materials to seem lifeless. ...Qualities such as rapport...turn out to, so it seems to be very relevant, more so perhaps than many of the behaviors that teachers are trained to perform. (p.17)

Administrators need to take into account such factors as personality, gender, and age when assigning teachers to classes particularly because of the nature of college students today. For example, female and male students have been seen to have different expectations of their teachers and will behave accordingly. (Makarova & Ryan, 1998) In the classroom this may mean that what may have worked for a male teacher may not necessarily result in success if the teacher were female.

Feedback is essential if effective language teaching with the focus on the teacher is to take place. Richards and Rogers (1986) mentions that in addition to addressing the effectiveness of a particular program, "evaluation may be concerned with how teachers, learners, and materials interact in classrooms." (p.158) Evaluation is a helpful tool, but not necessarily if performed in the traditional sense, by classroom observations by administrators, which tend to result in subjective, often negative feedback, thus undermining its usefulness. Aleamoni (1981) explains that the learners themselves provide the best feedback, and thus should be a source of information.

Although there is no single prescription for the current crisis in Japanese college classrooms, reevaluating the importance of the teacher, utilizing structured activities, and incorporating ethnographic techniques are some options worth considering. If concrete steps are not taken, college educators, including those in EFL, will crumble under the effects of "classroom collapse."

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