外国語授業に見られる文化的問題

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Some Cultural Problems in the Language Classroom

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要　約

日本の大学や短大で教鞭をとる多数の外国人教師は、自分の学生が学習能力において一般的な標準に達していない、というように誤って信じこんでいる。こうした信念は、効果的な教授法や学習法を妨げることになる。

この問題については、恐らく次の二つの要因で説明できるだろう。一つは、多数の外国人教師が、日本の教室で現実に起こることを、自分が西洋の教室で起こるだろうと想像する状況と比較する傾向があるということである。もう一つは、多数の外国人教師が、世界中の大学や短大での教育や学習効果を測定する一般的基準があるのだと思いこむ傾向があるということである。

現実的には、異なる教育制度においては異なる目標を持つことは当たり前のことである。それに、たとえ同じ目標を持つとしても、それぞれ異なった方法を使って目標到達を試みることは正当なことである。

もし、日本の大学や短大でかなりの教育経験を積んだ外国人教師が、上記のような点に関して未経験な外国人同僚を手ほどきするならば、外国人教師が、自分の学生たちを非現実かつ不適当な基準で測定することはなくなるであろう。さらに、もっと現実的で適当な基準を用いることにより、もっと効果的な教育効果と学習効果を教室現場にもたらすことになるであろう。

KEY WORDS: *Teaching, standards, diversity, cultural differences*

Conversations with a number of Westerners teaching at Japanese colleges and universities[1)] have led me to conclude that many—perhaps most—such teachers believe that their students fail to measure up to the academic standards set by their counterparts in the West. The situation can be illustrated by three articles published in *The Language Teacher*, the monthly publication of JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teaching). In essence, Hywel Evans (1990, 1991) argued that the poor performance of students at Japanese colleges and universities could be attributed to the tendency of Western teachers to stereotype those students. Responding to Evans, John Honey (1991) argued that the poor performance of such students was the consequence of outside forces over which the Western teacher had no control.

Despite their disagreements over the root causes of the problem, both authors apparently believe that students at Japanese colleges and universities do not perform as well in the classroom as their counterparts do in the West. Both authors also believe that

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this constitutes a problem. It would appear that these beliefs are shared by many other Westerners teaching at Japanese colleges and universities.

Perhaps because they disagree as to the root causes of the problem, Evans and Honey disagree as to the solution. Evans seems to believe that, if we treat Japanese university students in the same way that we would treat students in the West, they will perform like Western students (1991: 33 and 35). In contrast, Honey seems to believe that we can come closer to achieving the goal of improving the performance of Japanese university students if we adapt our teaching strategies to fit the Japanese university student's culture (45, 47).

Neither of the strategies described immediately above guarantees success in bringing the performance of Japanese university students up to some ideal standard. And failed attempts to achieve such a goal can seriously impede effective teaching and learning. A teacher who sets such goals and fails to achieve them will feel frustrated—and frustrated teachers are seldom effective teachers. Similarly, students who recognize that they have failed to achieve the goals set by their teacher will also feel frustrated—and frustrated learners are seldom effective learners.

It is true enough that many students at Japanese universities fail to meet the standards set by some of their Westers teachers. However, trying to force those students to change their behavior is not the best way to improve the situation. A much better way is to reexamine the standards that we use in evaluating our students.

On a number of occasions, I have heard Americans teaching at Japanese universities say that students in America go to universities in order to get an education, while students in Japan go to university in order to play. I suspect that such comments are the result of careless thinking. It is true that *some* atudents in America go to university in order to get an education. But it is also true that *some* students in Japan go to university for the same reason. However, based on what I observed both as a student and as a teacher in America, most students in that country attend university for the same reason that most students in Japan do—to get a degree that will help them to get a good job. Provided that the student gets the degree he needs in order to get a good job, he doesn't worry very much about how much he learns in college. In other words, the attitude toward education exhibited by most American university students is not appreciably different from the attitude exhibited by most students at universities in Japan. If Westerners teaching at Japanese universities recognize this, they will feel less frustrated at the attitudes of Japanese students.

To some extent, the same principle applies when we compare the actual classroom performance of students in the West with the classroom performance of students at Japanese universities. I suspect that many Westerners teaching at Japanese universities subconsciously tend to compare the performance of the ***best*** students in the West, taking courses in their special fields of interest, with the performance of ***average*** Japanese students, taking required foreign language courses. When we make such comparisons, it is only natural that the student taking a course in his special field will do better than the student taking a required course. But if we compare the performance of an average American student taking a

French or German course because it meets a foreign language requirement, with the performance of a Japanese student taking a required English course, then the performance gap will narrow considerably.

It must be admitted that, even when we take the above factors into consideration, there is still a gap between the performance of students at Japanese universities and the performance of students at Western universities—when measured by Western standards. The gap is not so large as many Western teachers believe it is, but it does exist. This is particularly evident—and particularly frustrating—in the area of class discussion.

In the West—particularly in the United States, and especially in foreign language courses—teachers place a premium on class discussion. Most teachers believe that students learn more through a mix of lectures and group discussions—where the students express their own ideas—than they learn when they just sit quietly and listen to what the teacher has to say. Most Western teachers encourage their students to ask questions in class. And most language teachers in the West (at least in the United States, the Western country with which I am most familiar) believe that the only way to learn how to speak a foreign language is by talking. So many Western teachers are disappointed when they step into the classroom at a Japanese university and discover that their students are afraid to talk in class. And many Western teachers are puzzled when they ask a student a question that they think is very easy, only to find that the student will confer with his classmates before giving an answer (I remember the first time I asked a Japanese student to tell me the name of his favorite television program. He spent at least a minute conferring with other students before giving me his answer. An American student in a foreign language class would simply name the first program that came to mind).

The problem discussed immediately above is *not* the failure of students to speak in class. There are many ways of encouraging students to do so—Marc Helgesen (41—49) has many useful ideas on the subject. Rather, the problem is the way in which many Western teachers interpret the silence of their students. In the West, we tend to think that people who speak up in class are good students. If we apply the same standard to Japanese students who are reluctant to speak up in class, we will be inclined to think that they are bad students. If we get angry with out students because they don't speak up in class, they will become even more nervous and will be even more reluctant to speak.

In reality, the reason why Japanese students are less eager to speak in class than their American counterparts has nothing to do with anybody being a good student or a bad student. Rather, it reflects differences between university cultures in the two countries. In most classes at most American universities, it is considered "good" student behavior to ask many questions and express one's own ideas. But in most first and second-year courses at Japanese universities (that is, the courses that most students will take at the same time they are taking their foreign language courses), "good" student behavior consists, for the most part, in quietly listening to what the teacher has to say. So when we insist that our students ask questions and express their own ideas, we are really insisting that they behave differently in our classes then they are expected to behave in their other classes.

Under those circumstances, it should come as no surprise that our students are confused.[2] However, if we encourage our students to speak in class (instead of criticizing them for not doing so) most of them will gradually feel more comfortable doing so.

Even when we take into account all of the factors discussed above, there is still one factor that serves as a source of frustration for many Westerners teaching in Japan. This factor can be summed up in the following statement by John Honey (45):

> Once past the university entrance examination, Japanese university students give low priority to academic work, much lower than in any advanced country of which I [Honey] have knowledge, and this is reflected in the level and seriousness of internal university exams, especially in the first three years. Much higher priority than in the West is given to social life, to clubs, and to sports....

Many Westerners teaching at Japanese colleges and universities would probably agree with Honey's assessment. And Honey is probably accurate enough, up to a point (although, as I have implied throughout, I am inclined to believe that the difference between students in Japan and students in the West is not nearly so great as Honey's remarks might suggest). However, I suspect that many Westerners take a simple fact–that students at Western universities probably assign a somewhat higher priority to academics than students do in Japan–and use it as the basis of an argument that the fact does not support. That argument is as follows:

(1) Students at universities throughout the world should work as hard as students at universities in the West.

(2) Students at Japanese universities don't work as hard as students at universities in the West.

(3) Therefore, students at Japanese universities should work harder than they do.

I do not claim that Westerners teaching at Japanese colleges and universities *consciously* advance arguments along the lines of the one described immediately above. However, on the subconscious level, they must have some such argument in mind. Otherwise, they would have no reason to think that Japanese university students don't work as hard as they should.

If we phrase the argument in the terms used above, we can easily see the fallacy in the first premise. That is, if we ask *why* students at universities throughout the world should work as hard as students at universities in the West, we discover that there is no particular reason why they should. Indeed, we could turn the question around and ask why students at universities in the West need to work so much harder than students at universities in Japan. We might find out that the answer is that students in the West didn't learn as much in high school as students learned in Japanese high schools, so students at Western universities need to work harder just to catch up with Japanese university students.

Common sense suggests that different societies might use different methods to achieve the same goals–with the methods used in one society being just as effective as the methods used in the other. Curtis Kelly (180) suggests that high schools and colleges in Japan and the United States play reversed roles:

> In the United States, high school is generally the time for personal development and university the time for study, the opposite of Japan. Most likely, the reverse order reflects the reverse orientations of these cultures. In the United States, it is more important for a person to develop individuality in high school, and then later, learn how to meet the challenges of society at university. Japanese culture, with a sociocentric rather than individualistic orientation, has the priorities—and thus the phases—reversed.

If Kelly is correct, it is not unreasonable to suggest that in both the United States and Japan, one of the goals of the educational system is to provide well-rounded individuals who can make a meaningful contribution to society. In both systems, high school and college offer students opportunities to be educated academically and to develop as social beings. But in the United States, high school places a greater emphasis on social development and relatively less emphasis on academic learning, while in Japan, high school places a greater emphasis on academic learning and less emphasis on social development. In college, the situation is reversed, with American colleges places more emphasis on academics and less emphasis on social development than colleges in Japan. The two systems are different from one another, but one appears to work about as well as the other.

It is important for the Westerner teaching at a Japanese college or university to recognize the differences between the two educational systems that are described—admittedly in greatly simplified form—immediately above. If Kelly is correct, the first two years of life at a Japanese university do *not* constitute a time for engaging in rigorous academic study—that is something that Japanese students have already experienced in high school and (presumably) will experience again in their third and fourth year seminar courses. Rather than complaining because our students don't appear to work as hard as university students in the West, we should be delighted that both students *and* teachers are liberated from the need to adhere to some rigorous—and innately artifical—standard of academic excellence. In the absence of such standards, we are free to explore the areas of language acquisition and intercultural communication that we and our students wish to. In other words, the Japanese university setting provides the Western teacher with a splendid opportunity to engage in the real business of teaching and learning.

Much of what I have suggested above will probably be self-evident to the Westerner who has considerable experience teaching at a Japanese college or university. However, the Westerner who first arrives in Japan to engage in such teaching will probably be confused—even frustrated—by his initial experiences here. Hence, it is imperative for the more experienced teachers to help their junior colleagues to adapt to their new environment. If we do so, then our junior colleagues will soon realize that the Japanese university setting is one that actually enhances our opportunities to engage in meaningful teaching and learning.

Notes

1) Most of these conversations took place at international conferences of JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teaching). Such conferences are attended by Westerners teaching at colleges and universities throughout Japan.

2) For a more complete discussion of this point, see Fred E. Anderson, pp. 101–110.

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