研究ノート

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I. Introduction: Exploratory Practice Research in Progress—Initial Stages

It is the purpose of this paper to report on a classroom research project in its planning stage(s), and which is to be further carried out with student surveys in the very near future (i.e. in early 2014). This research aims to investigate the quality of classroom life of students as they experience their university English language study and learning at one university in Japan. In the course of this research, we hope to “find” some evidence of factors that either inhibit and/or enhance student satisfaction of their English language learning in class.

During our investigation of issues that impact either negatively or positively on the quality of life in the English language learning classroom at university, we also aim to gain validated insights into the overall conception and practice of university English language education, as exemplified at one such institution, and in particular within two departments of that institution.

We are hopeful that we can use data obtained in student surveys, and possibly to include interviews of selected students at some later point, that might give a more clear picture and make some greater sense of the presence of English language learning at one university. At this point we aim solely for clearer understanding of what may be problematical with English language university study from the students’ perspective. We do not yet wish to or aim to attempt to “solve” any such problems.

Understanding, Allwright (2003) believes, can in itself help dispose of a problem or puzzle, or at least provide the seeds of, a possible solution or solutions. Allwright and others recognize we classroom English language practitioners need a way of doing the research that does not, in any significant manner, interrupt the pedagogy and learning, but which actually helps it along. This requires a redefinition or reinvention of the notion of practitioner research so that it becomes part and parcel of the pedagogy and learning and not as an activity that is parasitic upon class study.

The criteria for exploratory practitioner research is:
1. understanding before trial-and-error problem solving,
2. promotion rather than disruption of language teaching and learning,
3. taking classroom life itself as a prime source of topics or issues or puzzles,

*Key words: Life quality, English classroom, exploratory research

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4. having the research agenda be a part of the class study and learning,
5. asking students themselves to “act” as observers of what is happening,
6. ensuring that there is sustainability and collegiality in the project,
7. focusing on the development of people and the learning

II. English for everyone in Japan, and for all university students?

Mike Guest, an Associate Professor of English at Miyazaki University, wonders whether English is the correct choice for everyone in Japan. He suggests a streamlining of the English study system where only those people who want or need to should study (in) English. He argues,

Those entering fields in which English communication will be necessary or advantageous should. This will mean better motivation, more goal-directed teaching and learning, and better teachers—both Japanese and non-Japanese—since the subject will no longer be monolithic and all-encompassing, but specialized and localized. (Guest, 2006: 15)

At Kwansei Gakuin University, a private university in Kansai, Japan, not all students actually want or require English study. Beale (2002) and Bainbridge (2002) point out one of the most pressing issues involving English language education in Japan is the lack of public airing of why and who exactly needs English study. McVeigh (2002) maintains that English study is a veiled way in which Japan can compare and contrast its national identity with “others.” Both Beale (2002) and Bainbridge (2002) contend that it has never been made sufficiently clear, beyond sloganeering such as, “English is necessary for globalization,” why English study is carried out in Japan.

In the Japanese print media in 2007 an op-ed entitled, “Japan’s Ambivalent English” in the Japan Times argued that the system of teaching and learning English is conflicted. The op-ed states,

Japan’s future standing in the world rests in large part on its ability to speak other languages. Too much really can be lost in translation. Countries with the best language ability will prosper most as globalization seeps more fully into everyday life . . . . . . Japan must learn other languages, then, not only to understand other ways of thinking and feeling, but also to understand itself. (2007: 12).

III. Reconsidering EFL motivation within the general context of university study in Japan

According to Kaneko (2012) English has become a truly global language necessitating serious reconsideration of students’ second language (L2) learning motivation. In the L2 (second language) Motivational Self System researched by Dornyei (2009), Kaneko (2012) reports that integrative (i.e. identifying with the target group users), and instrumental (i.e. studying and learning for purposes other than integration) are reformulated as a single and inseparable concept. Kaneko’s 2012 study examined how the motivation of Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) university learners can be influenced by opportunities to listen to lectures given by possible Japanese role models as students reflect upon their present and future self-images (2012: 3).

Her study indicated it is possible for the university, and its English language teachers, to help stu-
Students form a clearer image of their ideal L2 selves. This they can do by leading students to recognize the importance and usefulness of English and English study as an instrument for achieving something more practical or purposeful than, for example, doing translation from or to English, to or from Japanese, or analyzing English in order to do translation. It is students themselves, Kaneko maintains, who can best make the decision whether or not to (want to) belong to a global society, worldwide or more regional. With concrete and clear images of their present and future selves as members of a widespread target community of global English, it can be expected, she argues, that English instruction and learning may become more effective for Japanese university students who might otherwise not perceive any immediate need for studying and/or using English language.

The two researcher-writers of this paper, Alan Brady, a full-time English Sociology professor, and Paul Aaloe, a part-time instructor in a number of Kwansei Gakuin University departments (but not Sociology), have hypothesized possible institutional inhibitors of student English learning as follows:

1. teachers’ use or non-use of English in teaching,
2. focus on study about the English language as opposed to study that uses English as a medium of learning and communication,
3. English classes offered only in the first two years of university which may be perceived as a kind of “hurdle” on to graduation rather than as an integral component of graduation success,
4. large numbers of students in language classes making it difficult for a quality interactive sociocultural and socio-educational relationship between teacher and students, and between students themselves,
5. too much focus on testing, grades, and texts as opposed to teaching and learning,
6. insufficiently challenging and demanding classes,
7. lack of choice for students in language studies,
8. little institutional support for outside-class use of English on campus, including non-visibility and lack of use of English speech publically,
9. no explicit connections made between English language and discipline-area study,
10. continued (over) reliance and dependence on “Inner Circle” English teachers, which gives the impression that the institution may or does not (want to) recognize the pluralistic realities of English language use in Asia or in the world.
11. teachers’ beliefs and attitudes towards the study and use of English, which can influence how students study and want to or do not want to use English

What is it about the environment of study and learning at Kwansei Gakuin University, and three of its departments in particular, that influences student anxiety about studying English, and also student willingness to want to and actually use English language, and take its study and use as seriously as they do study in their native L1, Japanese? The researchers are concerned with how Kwansei Gakuin University English teachers can enable students to want to, if they choose, join one or another global English community.

University students have already developed beliefs and attitudes about English study by the time they arrive at university. What shapes learner beliefs about learning? Breen (2001), and Arnold (1999), argue pedagogy can provide opportunities and conditions within which learner contributions are found to have a positive effect upon learning, and also how learners can be more positively engaged in their
learning. Thomas & Harri-Augstein (1983) conclude that beliefs about learner capacity and personal models (i.e. personal “myths”) of their own learning processes are more central to understanding individuals’ learning performances than theories of learning.

There are three approaches to research on language learner beliefs. The first approach is normative—Likert-scale questionnaires (Horwitz, 1987)—where it was found that (a) learners underestimated difficulty of language learning, (b) learners held misconceptions about how to learn foreign language and (c) learners gave more value to accent (pronunciation) than teachers. The second approach is metacognitive which says that learners hold prescriptive beliefs which stresses: (a) the importance of using language in a natural way practicing as often as possible, thinking in the L2, living and studying in an environment where the L2 was used, (b) learning about the language, such as grammar and vocabulary, taking a formal course, learning from mistakes and being mentally active, and (c) the importance of personal factors like emotional aspect, self-concept, and learning aptitude (role of culture).

The third approach to research on language learner beliefs is contextual where beliefs are viewed as embedded in students’ (study) contexts. Benson & Lor (1999) discovered that in order to modify beliefs, the learner must also (first) modify those underlying conceptions on which the beliefs are based and must also pay attention to the context in which the beliefs function. Teachers need to know if students’ beliefs are functional or dysfunctional, and how dysfunctional beliefs might be changed.

Stevick (1980) argued that success in learning depends less on materials and teaching techniques than it does on what goes on inside (the head and the heart of) the learner. Bassano (1986) recognizes that students have differing needs, preferences, beliefs, learning styles, educational backgrounds. The imposition of change(s) upon all these factors can lead to negative reactions. There are six steps, she says, towards dealing with student beliefs:

1. become aware of students’ past classroom learning experiences and assumptions about language learning,
2. build students’ confidence
3. begin where students are and move cautiously
4. show students their achievement
5. allow for free choice(s) as much as is possible
6. become aware of students’ interests, concerns, goals, and objectives

Holec (1981) says that a de-conditioning process may be necessary (by teachers) for students to rid themselves of (what may be) their (i.e. students’) ineffective or harmful preconceived notions of language learning (p.27). To what extent, can and should various classroom intervention methods be applied to bring about change(s) in learners’ beliefs about language learning. To what extent are learners’ beliefs stable and resistant to change.

IV. Understanding first; problem solving, if at all, later

Allwright (2003) believes there are two ways of dealing with a problem, or as he labels it, a puzzle. One way is to conclude that we have only dealt with it when we have “solved” the puzzle or problem, or made it go away by finding a possible solution or solutions. This is what Action Research
in English as a second language (ESL) or EFL offers—a way of trying out possible solutions to a problem. This strongly implies, Allwright maintains, that solving a problem is more important than understanding it, or knowing better why it is a problem, and for whom it is a problem. Nunan (1992) summarizes the goals of Action Research (AR) pioneers Kemmis and McTaggert:

A piece of descriptive research carried out by a teacher in his or her own classroom (e.g. a survey or discussion that can inform a survey) which aims at increasing or understanding rather than changing the phenomenon under investigation, would (our italics) *not be considered to be action research.*

Following Allwright, we can take action for understanding at least as seriously as we take any subsequent action for change. The impetus for the present research is to generate hypotheses about possible causes for a puzzle or problem, all of which (Allwright, 2003: 18) says can provide a, rich spread of ideas so that it immediately becomes clear that some serious action for understanding is required before taking matters any further, and certainly before trying out any possible change.

The researchers in this project are interested primarily in the whole idea of life in the classroom, and what it is like for students and teachers to be there. Do people feel let down by their language study or learning and by their educational experience(s)? The language classroom, which may depend to a greater extent on interaction and communication than the L1 (first language) or L2 lecture or seminar, represents a socially stressful environment that, says Allwright (1998: 7),

is painfully real . . . the language classroom does not need to be brought to life; it is already too often too real. What it needs is an improvement in the quality of life, and to do so requires us to better understand what it is that happens before, during, and after study to make language classrooms socially stressful places and events.

In the language classroom, Allwright maintains, the notion that there might be social problems seems to be rarely explicitly acknowledged by either students or teachers. There is too little or no discussion of such matters. Students and teachers go out of their way(s) to pretend to themselves and one another that all is well socially. This is, claims Allwright and we agree, a sort of covert conspiracy which seems to revolve around the idea all must be pedagogically well if all is or seems to be well socially. Learners and teachers give each other excuses so as to believe that all is well socially—even if it is not!—to justify the supposed success of the teaching and learning. Our research seeks to unpack as much as possible, the underlying social problems that may exist in class, which can give the appearance of successful teaching and learning, but which may not actually be successful either socially or pedagogically.

V. The research design and preliminary conclusions

Weaknesses of survey research can result from (1) researcher(s) asking respondents questions...
which the respondents may not invest in or wish to be asked or answered, and/or (2) possible answers to said questions not being relevant (enough) to the respondents. The questions that are asked of students about their present university foreign/additional/other than L1 language learning experience (FAO experience) therefore should, from the initial stage(s) of survey planning, come from the students themselves as much as is possible to ensure they are the questions the respondents actually wish/hope to be asked, and which they (students) believe are most relevant in order for them to have a greater and more clear understanding of the language learning experience.

The researchers are presently at the stage now of having edited a number of student-made questions many of which we will ask those being surveyed to choose to better understand their experience of studying and learning English at Kwansei Gakuin University. Though any survey should, and does to some extent, take into account what those being surveyed think ought to be asked (i.e. the actual questions on the final survey), we believe this may be the first attempt ever to actually base a survey on explicitly and intentionally asking those being surveyed to comprehensively determine which questions most need to be asked and then answered.

The next stage of this research will be to narrow down on the finished survey to a manageable set of questions. Students will also from now be informally surveyed in a more qualitative framework what they think ought to be possible choice answers to the questions that will appear on the final survey version. We will then make choice answers to survey questions using the input we get from students on what they think may be possible answers to questions they themselves have posed. It is hoped that by adopting this combined quantitative-qualitative methodology (1) respondents will be fully engaged and invested in the questions being asked of them, and (2) also fully invested and engaged in responding to those questions with possible answers that make sense to the students themselves. It is further hoped that by adopting this methodology, respondents will more fully invest in the successful completion of the questionnaire.

In posing questions that now need to be sorted out and also narrowed down, we must be careful not to ask questions first posed by students themselves that are (1) double-barreled, (2) leading or biased, or (3) loaded. We also recognize that we should give students the choice of doing this survey or not, and if they choose to do so, they can respond in either their L1, Japanese, or in the L2, English, as they please. Thus, the survey that we will draw up will be bilingual. Hypothesizing what needs to be done after we administer the survey, we need to analyze how students’ responses give insight into the actual lived experience of their language classroom life. Thus, we must carefully choose from the questions we now have those that meet the above criteria. We also intend to continue more qualitative routes to this research by discussing with students their lived experiences in language classrooms, thru interviewing and other less formal discussion means.

In conclusion, let us quote from Davies (2006) in regards to finding out what students really want from their language coursework,

It is impossible to overestimate the value of what learners can teach us about themselves via class-specific questionnaire surveys. Of course questionnaires are not infallible instruments and the potential for teacher bias in item creation and learner misinterpretation of the intended meaning of items clearly exists . . . . . . But the fact remains that what is gained from the use of class-specific surveys is what is generally most often sought by teachers in their classrooms—a greater and more uniquely personal understanding of our learners, and an additional and reliable means
of assessing and effecting change where it is needed most. (Davies, 2006: 10)

References

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The Quality of Life in the English as a Foreign Language University Classroom: A Case Study of Two Departments of Kwansei Gakuin University

ABSTRACT

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