Opinion and Perspective

Legacy or Future Learning?
A case for meeting secondary and tertiary student needs in the 21st century

Julia Christmas

Miyazaki International College

Abstract

Educators at the university level in Japan face numerous dilemmas, all directly tied to a shrinking number of prospective students. Questions for institutions include how to compete (Kinmoth, 2005) as well as how to deal with decreasing academic abilities (Yamamoto, 2005). Societal factors leading to this situation are beyond individual teacher control; however, this essay offers several ways to cope with recent educational realities. Two major ideas will be discussed: relevancy and engagement. Relevancy refers to updating curriculum and teacher practices so that they are more real and useful to current generations of learners. One form of engagement is the kind that the aforementioned relevancy provides to those who are learning. The face of present-day classrooms include many who are not engaged, people whose attention spans have shortened and whose interests are not being met (Aspinall, 2005). Unfortunately, teaching methodologies have not changed with the times (Poole, 2005); thus, some institutions struggle to fulfill the role of helping youth to achieve their potential. Another aspect of engagement to be discussed is "learner-engagement" theory, namely, that more learning takes place when students are directly involved with what goes on in their classroom activities and schools. The author concludes that 21st century

Julia Christmas has an MA in TESOL and has been teaching at private and public secondary schools in the Kansai area for the last 20 years. She has also taught at commercial language schools. Her research interests are in vocabulary acquisition, TOEFL iBT and issues in secondary and higher education. She is currently teaching at Miyazaki International College.

instruction requires teachers to actively foster peer-to-peer and student-teacher relations, embrace new ideas and technologies, and address needs of present-day students in Japan.

今日の日本の大学の教育者は数多くのジレンマを抱えている。そのジレンマの全ては大学入学希望者数の減少と深く関係している。教育機関に課された問題は、「どのように競争するか」（Kinmoth, 2005）と、「どのように学力の低下に対処するか」（Yamamoto, 2005）である。このような状況を招く社会的要因は教師個人の力の及ぶ範囲を超えている。しかしながら、この論文では表面化した教育現場の現実との対応法のいくつかを紹介する。「関連性」と「関与」という主要概念を議論する。関連性とはカリキュラムと教育実践を最新のものにし、それらが現在の学習者世代にとってより現実味があり有益なものとなるようにすることを意味する。関与の一種としては、前述の関連性が学習者にもたらすものが挙げられる。今日の教室には授業に関与していない多くの生徒がいる。このような生徒の集中力の持続時間は低下し、興味は満たされていない(Aspinall, 2005)。残念なことに、教師の中にはその教育方法が時代から取り残されてしまったような者も存在する(Poole, 2005)。そのため、若者の可能性を最大限に引き出す役割を果たそうと学校は苦心している。ここで議論されるべき関与のもう一つの側面は「学習者関与」理論である。つまり、教室での活動や学校で行うことが生徒と直接関係がある場合により多くの学習効果があるということである。２１世紀の教育では、教師は学生間および学生と教員の関係を積極的に深め、新しい概念と技術を採用し、現在の学生のニーズに着目する必要がある。

Introduction

Bachnik (2005), Walker (2005), and others, have remarked that Japan has, until now, been famous for providing an education system that offers widespread literacy and sufficient educational levels to sustain a consistent population of workers. However, the situation is changing. According to current literature, (Kinmoth, 2005; McVeigh, 2002; Walker, 2005) the state of higher education in Japan is lamentable. The demands of the corporate world, the entrance examination system, and institutes of higher education are entangled together in a way that allows universities to function, but does not encourage a love of learning among students nor allow most of them access to a rich and robust tertiary education (Trefla, 1998; McVeigh, 2005). Entrance examinations in Japan still require students to memorize vast quantities

of facts rather than show other skills that are more difficult to quantify (Aspinall, 2005). Furthermore, many companies still continue to hire graduates with brand-name credentials (Teichler, 1997) rather than prefer recruits with more specific vocational knowledge (Walker, 2005).

In addition, due to the decline in the high school age population, student entrance to university has become more of a "buyers market" (Aspinall, 2005; Kinmoth, 2005) in that the ratio of seats available runs in favor of students rather than institutions. Thus, schools are scrambling to make themselves more attractive and able to pull in (and retain) greater numbers (Poole, 2005). Strategies are numerous and range from heavy PR or media campaigns to offering more diverse curriculum and student perks (Kinmoth, 2005; Yamamoto, 2005). Competition is fierce for the "sellers", which also means that students do not have to work quite as hard to get in: in many cases the entrance standards have to be lowered in order to fill quotas and maintain fiscal viability (Aspinall, 2005, p. 211). As a result, the actual ability levels of students—as well as the kinds of students who are now entering university also has begun to change (Kinmoth, 2005; Walker, 2005, pp. 176-177).

Although the above mentioned issues are very compelling and of great importance for all involved in education in Japan, the purpose of this essay is not to further describe and delineate the vast problems in the university system throughout the country. Much has been written regarding the problems facing higher education in Japan today. Unfortunately, many of the above mentioned dilemmas are beyond the scope of individual teacher control. Therefore it seems more useful, and efficient to focus on concrete ways for instructors to combat the obstacles facing them and many of their students.

From a teacher's point of view, one obstacle is students' apparent lack of motivation as demonstrated by their unwillingness to engage in classroom activities (the blatant use of cell phones, the application

of make-up, sleeping during classes and lack of attendance). While there are many students whose rigorous high school backgrounds and inclinations have primed them for university level studies, others lack preparedness—in terms of general readiness for academic study (Bachnik, 2005; Kinmoth, 2005; Walker, 2005). Among these are young adults who demonstrate an inability to come to the classroom prepared, e.g. no pencil, no textbook, or no completed homework.

From the students' point of view, obstacles to learning stem from a variety of factors; however, three in particular stand out: boredom, classroom anxiety as a result of pre-tertiary teaching practices (McVeigh, 2001), and a lack of perceived necessity for the subject matter (Gayor, 2006; Lee-Cunin, 2005). Teachers can use several strategies based on sound current pedagogical theories and practices in order to help students connect with the subject matter and with others in the classroom thereby allowing more learning to take place. Two main (and intimately related) ideas that this essay will address are relevancy and engagement.

Increasing Relevancy

The majority of students who continue to post-secondary education may believe that they will be able to get a better-paid job as a result of graduating from college. However, in many institutions, frequently students are there not because they have a burning desire to learn, but because their parents and society have stated that they should be at university. Post-secondary schooling has long been thought of as a safe and socially acceptable place for young adults to remain until they are ready to enter the labor force (Lee-Cunin, 2005; Walker, 2005). That does not mean that young people attending university are wasting their time or are incapable of learning. Rather, it means that the burden of making higher education meaningful falls to a large extent on the teacher's shoulders. Furthermore, it appears that the situation is not

static: parents are beginning to demand more than a "moratorium" from university education (Kinmoth, 2005) and although employers may still consider the "brand name" of the institution (Lee-Cunin, 2005), some are no longer happy to accept "untrained workers" (Aspinall, 2005). Thus, it is especially imperative that learners are able to connect with content and activities in the classroom.

It has been said that the strain of "examination hell" and pre-tertiary educational practices creates burned-out and apathetic freshmen (Berwick & Ross, 1989; McVeigh, 2001). As Rubrecht (2005) points out, for freshmen, study goals up until entering university have been about getting into higher education. Thus, the burden falls to the teacher to help re-motivated incoming students. In the case of continued mandatory English learning, "[i]t is also crucial for EFL teachers to create a comfortable classroom environment and to establish good relationships with their students, and thereby minimize negative anxiety" (Kimura, Nakata, and Okumura, 2001, p. 59).

Needs Analysis & Goal Setting

EFL teachers often encounter students who do not feel the subject is relevant in their current or future lives. It is therefore up to the teacher to help them remember their original personal goals, find new goals, and find a purpose for learning again.

One way for teachers to make their courses more germane is to offer needs analysis and goal setting at the beginning of the course and to keep the content and activities somewhat open for discussion (Koiso, 2005). The usefulness of surveys is two-fold: needs analysis allows the teacher to know what (if anything) students desire from the subject (e.g. if they have any personal goals or not), and to allow the students to initiate or further their goals related to the subject. In other words, needs analysis can help match the learner and the content (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001; O'Donnell, 2003). Students need to feel

like their time is being well spent. In addition, researchers have pointed out that learners also need goals to assist them in making progress and in knowing that they are making progress (Tremblay & Gardner 1995; Williams & Burden, 1997).

Negotiation of content is neither heresy nor extra work. The overall long-term goals and objectives of learning for the course will not necessarily change; however, students will feel that their needs are being met. They will be more likely to perceive classroom activities as relevant and see that the teacher is keeping them in mind when planning instruction. Moreover, they will better be able to see real world (e.g. their real world) application of the class subject and are far less likely to be bored or otherwise distracted during class.

Further Strategies—Engagement

Recently, a large number of schools in the United States have been looking to improve the quality of education by focusing on learner engagement (NSSE, 2008). Many universities are taking a school-wide approach, which ideally offers support and encouragement to faculty and fosters a positive climate on campus. This model is appropriate for institutions in Japan and includes tactics that individual instructors can utilize to help their students become more engaged.

As with the concept of relevancy above, involvement and engagement are seen as a vital part of student motivation (Astin, 1999). The term "learner engagement" denotes a holistic view of motivation that takes into account internal and external factors affecting the learning process. A pedagogies of engagement approach focuses on three key ideas: a) student-faculty contact, b) cooperation among students and c) active-hands-on learning (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). Although this theory as a whole has not been specifically examined in the realm of ESL learning, its three key ideas are consistent with separate veins of sound current thought in language

learning.

One example of a learner engagement framework that has been implemented extensively is Cooperative Learning (CL). By this, I am referring to the systematically implemented method of cooperative learning strategies, not simply the use of small groups or pair work. Properly conducted CL techniques allow not only for student-centered learning, but make it possible for students to have plentiful peer-to-peer contact, which is believed to have an impact on learning outcomes, student enjoyment in activities, and time spent on coursework (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002; Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005).

Classrooms at the tertiary level necessarily include students of different levels and with diverse educational backgrounds. As Aspinall (2005) pointed out, the diversity of the student population is likely to continue to increase and therefore, in order to meet a wider variety of student needs, course content must also expand. Thus, engagement of students means accommodating many learning styles, academic ability levels and English proficiency levels. Use of the Internet to meet student needs is one form of accommodation. Kasper (2000) maintained that teachers who make use of Internet resources in their classes offer real world, high-interest, skill-building material that accommodates a variety of learning styles. In addition, use of CALL activities promotes growth by providing rich input (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2003) and active student participation. In my own personal experience, Internet-based tasks have been an invaluable asset in mixed-interest and mixed-ability classes. The Web offers endless opportunities for listening and reading practice that in turn allows all levels of students to gain meaningful input and to encounter vocabulary repeatedly for learning, comprehension, and retention.

Alternative Forms of Assessment

Another example of what individual teachers can do to promote

student engagement is to provide alternative styles of evaluation. Traditional teaching methods (e.g., lecture-based, teacher-oriented) often lead to traditional testing (e.g., paper-based, multiple-choice). Especially in the realm of EFL, traditional testing can be problematic because it may not be actually testing students' knowledge of or ability in English (Moya & O'Malley, 1994; O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996). Alternative assessment refers to holistic, long-term, and transparent (in terms of expected standards) approaches that stem from and reflect actual in-class activities and ensure an ongoing approach to evaluating student progress (Brown & Hudson, 1998).

In my own classroom teaching I have attempted to utilize non-traditional assessment whenever possible. Three examples of this approach that have been effective with my learners are (a) "digital portfolios," (b) transcription and feedback (self and peer), and (c) periodic "testing" of small-group student-led discussions.

The first example, "digital portfolios" is a case in point where modern technology has allowed learners to do things simply and cheaply that were cumbersome and expensive in the past. The classrooms where I currently teach are equipped with computers that have digital mp3 recording and playing capability. Students are able to record speech samples and save them in files according to date and topic. In this way, it is easy to monitor progress in terms of pronunciation, grammar, fluency, rhythm, and intonation immediately as well as longitudinally in accordance with what is taught during the course term. In addition to being useful as a yardstick for measuring what has been learned, a technological record of growth offers invaluable feedback that is useful to both student and instructor.

Another method of non-traditional assessment is self or peer evaluation that can be culled from the transcription, examination, and feedback of the above-mentioned recorded speech samples. Students listen to and transcribe their own sample or one created by a peer. After transcription, learners evaluate the recordings and offer feedback

(written or oral) based on a rubric that has been specified and modeled beforehand and that is consistent with course objectives. Nunan emphasized the importance of strengthening learner meta-cognitive consciousness of learning roles and the development of learning skills (1988). Pre- and post-task discussion of the activity and results help to facilitate raised awareness in these areas.

A final example is periodic testing of small-group, student-led discussions. As students learn to carry on group discussions they are periodically and non-intrusively evaluated by teacher and peers as to their ability, vis-à-vis the criteria created for the course or activity (e.g. vocabulary use, content comprehension, skills with turn-taking, floor-holding, and other conversation strategies). Small and inexpensive USB-type recording devices are particularly effective for this type of activity. After the task each student can retain and analyze a computer file of the discussion that took place. Feedback from self/peer and teacher further promotes consciousness-raising of strengths and weaknesses.

These types of assessment are consistent with alternative testing in that they offer feedback and evaluation by self and peers and in that they are a direct derivative of course objectives and daily course activities. Students need to become conscious of their output errors in order to grow linguistically. Both internal and external sources of feedback can foster this type of growth (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Furthermore, the evaluation systems mentioned above encourage students to reflect on performance and production and in doing so require the instructor to be clear about criteria (Brown & Hudson, 1998). The students with whom I have used these strategies have expressed great satisfaction with these methods for tracking their own oral proficiency.

It is also important to note that not only students can benefit from using non-traditional forms of testing, but EFL or other language teachers as well. Instructors can make use of pair work assessment, presentations, student-led discussions, projects, or portfolios to help students demonstrate their mastery of skills and objectives (Armstrong,

2000; Brown & Hudson, 1998; Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002; Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005).

Student-Teacher Connections

A third systematic approach that fosters learner engagement concentrates on student-faculty contact. Research has shown that students' perceptions regarding the accessibility of faculty has great bearing on student satisfaction and engagement (Horstmanshof, 2004; Lee-Cunin, 2005; Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005).

One particular example of student-faculty contact that seems very appropriate for teachers and learners in the 21st century makes use of modern technology. Horstmanshof (2004), a lecturer working in Australia, details her use of cell phone text messaging as a way to offer extra support for her first year students. She explained that many of her students work and have family obligations as well. At the time of writing, Horstmanshof herself was working at more than one institution and had difficulty getting face-to-face time with her students—not an unusual circumstance in Japan. Thus she implemented the use of cell phone text messaging that allowed busy students to confirm due dates or arrange for the handing-in of late work under certain circumstances. She writes that student-teacher boundaries can still be maintained with rules and that student feedback to this system was very positive (Horstmanshof, 2004). Many students in Japan are not satisfied with the amount of contact time they have with their teachers (Lee-Cunin, 2005), thus it seems requisite that instructors take a pro-active approach to increase the amount of interaction they have with their learners.

Influenced by Horstmanshof's article, I began using text messaging with my first year students with good results. Students whom I consider somewhat "at risk" for failure were able to establish more regular contact with me and although my observations are extremely anecdotal, I feel that many became more involved in their studies.

Avoiding Bias & Judgement

Another important part of student-teacher connections involves perceptions. Research exists to suggest that teachers' perceptions of students and student behavior have a strong impact on student success in school settings. This particularly applies to "underserved" students or students from a different culture (George & Aronson, 2003). It is easy for teachers to judge students based on clothing, hairstyles, the company they keep, or the bags they carry. If they are not successful or do not seem motivated, teachers may cross their arms and pronounce: "It's their fault, they are not trying hard enough." Some teachers may be ignorant of the fact (a) that their teaching styles can be alien to students, (b) that the linguistic purpose of any given activity may be obscure (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996), or (c) that instructor-generated course objectives may not be the course outcomes that students would like to see.

A second kind of bias that may be cultural (LeTendre, 2000) or generational (Bachnik, 2005; Poole, 2005) is of the "it isn't my problem" sort. When students are floundering, in many cases teachers simply fail them. Teachers are often too busy to find out why learners are not doing homework or coming to class. This situation has been exacerbated by overloaded work schedules (Poole, 2005) and the non-cohesive nature of part-time adjunct lecturers in Japan (Kinmoth, 2005; Yamamoto, 2005). Instructors fail students by giving them a failing grade, and also fail them by not trying to be available to them (Horstmanshof, 2004; Sato, 1993). LeTendre describes the situation in Japan, explaining that high school students who misbehave or display discipline problems don't get sent to the principal's office. However, that is what happens in the countries where most native (part-time/contract) teachers are from. At the elementary, junior high, and high school level in Japan, rather than passing off the student to a school official who may not have a grasp on the entire situation, the homeroom teacher takes responsibility.

Japanese teachers are seen to hold more positive beliefs about their efficacy in helping straying students get back on the right track. Their counterparts, at least in the U.S., are less likely to feel empowered in this way. Thus, many native speakers of English often send students out of their classes, rejecting them for insubordination or laziness rather than trying to help them (LeTendre, 2000). Whether or not instructors support this arrangement is made moot by the fact that the students they are teaching have been brought up in the Japanese system and know no other. It is much more effective to be sensitive to this and flexible rather than aloof. Academic standards can be rigorous without being cold.

Conclusion

While it is important to recognize that a great number of individual teachers are doing their utmost to deliver top-rate schooling to their students, the status quo at many Japanese institutions of higher education is not ideal at all. Quite a few schools are attempting to make internal improvements, but quite a few of these are simply surface refurbishment designed to attract precious enrolments (Birchley, 2008; Kinmoth, 2005; Poole, 2005; Walker, 2005). The situation can be bleak for students who are inclined toward and prepared for post-secondary learning, when such students are saddled and stymied with classmates who lack motivation and purpose for studying (Walker, 2005). Gaynor's remarks succinctly capture what needs to be done:

> *Firstly, the English taught in the classroom has to engage the learner's attention and interest: it has to be made 'real' for them rather than simply being appropriated from an idealized and remote 'natives speaker' context. In other words, it has to have a relevancy to their lives as lived now, as third level students*

> in the English language classroom of a Japanese university.
> (Gaynor, 2006, p. 64)

There is much that remains impervious to change or beyond individual teacher control; however, there are ways to foster learning especially in the realm of subject matter, new technologies, methodology, student involvement, and student-student or student-teacher interaction. The suggestions offered in this essay are limited in scope, but I offer them nevertheless as a starting point for change.

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