Perspectives on Teaching in Japanese Higher Education from Business

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This article reflects upon the author's experiences working in Japanese tertiary education coming from a background in a business environment. As a Canadian, the author shares both work experiences, as well as the inclusive cultural differences, that are part of working in different industries and cultures. It is quite uncommon for tertiary English educators in Japan to have work experience in the business world, as many of them have been employed within the educational sector since graduating from college/university. This article expands on the theme of the transition from working in a corporate office environment in the home country to working in a classroom setting in a foreign country, and the inherent differences, challenges, and observations involved.

この記事は、ビジネス環境出身の著者が日本の高等教育機関で働いた経験を振り返ったものである。カナダ人である著者は、異なる業界や文化の中で働くことの一部である、包括的な文化の違いだけでなく、仕事の経験も共有している。日本では、多くの英語第三教育者がビジネス界で働いた経験を持つことは非常に珍しい。本稿では、母国でのオフィス勤務から外国での教室勤務への移行というテーマについて、その本質的な相違点、課題、考察を展開する。

Switching careers in your thirties can be seen as risky but at the same time a chance to take another direction in life. Wherever this occurs, both opportunities and challenges can arise. This is even more applicable when transitioning to another career and life in a foreign country, disparate from one's own. Working in Japanese tertiary education may not only expand the horizons of foreign English educators with different work backgrounds than education, but at the same time, students can benefit from learning about different industries outside of Japan. This article describes the perspectives of the author living and working both in Canada and Japan and the subsequent career differences not only between national cultures

but working cultures as well.

Working at a Canadian Insurance Company

The author was employed full-time at a Canadian insurance company for almost seven years. During this time, business skills learned on the job were honed and applied over the tenure of the position. In fact, as the job entailed business analysis, frequent communication with both internal and external stakeholders, spoken communication skills, and time management were considered vital skills needed for the position. Furthermore, the author gave presentations to management over recommendations the author developed from assessment and analyses of research on various topics, such as the policies and regulations used in different jurisdictions. As teaching essentially encompasses planning and communication skills, to name a few, these could be transferable from previous work experiences (Tigchelaar et al., 2010). In the author's case, these skills were developed as an analyst in Canada. Just as a boardroom presentation needs to be planned and presented, in a classroom, lessons similarly need planning and presenting to the class.

Working in Japanese Higher Education

Seeking to take another direction in life, the author left the insurance company to work as a university lecturer in Japan. The author wanted to try something different in life and with a graduate degree already in hand, job opportunities in tertiary education were explored. Furthermore, as the author had an interest in working and living in Japan, it was only logical to apply for employment at Japanese universities, which he obtained soon after. In this section, several themes will be commented on, in adapting to a new career teaching in Japanese higher education and differences between the two countries observed.

Language

With the author being a native speaker of English, communication difficulties were next to non-existent in the Canadian workplace because he was familiar with common communication styles. Canada is one of the cultures with Western European roots that rely heavily on low-context communication (Hooker,

2012). Low-context communication is more direct, and Westerners, including Canadians, tend to be franker, with disagreements openly resolved by objective criteria (Hooker, 2012). For example, in Canada, eye contact, one example of body language, is used by individuals when speaking to one another (Hooker, 2012). On the other hand, Japan is a collectivist culture where group harmony is important and people "tend to use high-context communication more because people rely on relational and contextual clues to convey meaning" (Moriizumi and McDermott, 2017, p. 26). In contrast to Canada, eye contact is less common and eye contact avoidance in Japan during conversations "may be a sign of deference or respect" (Sue & Sue, 1977, p. 426). In addition to non-verbal cues, how something is said can have a different meaning between the two cultures.

At the Japanese university where the author was employed, very few individuals spoke English at a conversational level aside from the other English lecturers. Even though the author could communicate in limited Japanese, the intricacies of the high context communication style were a challenge in being careful not to inadvertently offend someone. For example, if a Japanese person is unable to do a work task due to time challenges, it is considered rude to be direct (i.e., saying "No"). Rather, saying "sore wa chotto..." ("that's a little...") is considered more appropriate (Yamada, 2015). Foreigners at the university generally were forgiven for these cultural misunderstandings, but it was clearly advantageous to understand this part of Japanese culture, called "kuuki yomeru" (reading the air). In other words, reading social cues in Japan is important because communication is generally more indirect and "the choice of words, tone, and timing are all laden with minute complexities, and misunderstanding or misinterpreting these cues can lead to communication breakdowns" (Shen et al., 2024, p. 63).

Communication Styles with Colleagues

In Canadian workplaces, small talk, meaning casual conversation on basic and generic topics, is important because it shows others modesty and mellowness (Adolphe, 2013). Naturally, this can depend on the workplace culture, with companies having differing degrees of formality. The culture at the author's

insurance company was generally relaxed, and analysts worked in a professional setting, with a typical hierarchical work structure. The workplace relationships were casual, with colleagues engaged in small talk on a daily basis, and usage of first names was common. In fact, calling someone using a courtesy title such as Mr. or Ms. was perceived as too formal. In addition, during meetings, defending your points of view was not considered discourteous and in fact, actively encouraged, rather than just accepting what was said at face value from senior staff. Management would also "rarely make decisions without consulting their subordinates" (Sun, 2022, p.16).

On the other hand, Japan places strict importance on the "hierarchical nature that permeates Japanese society" (Donald et al., 2004, p. 110) with "kohai" (juniors) showing respect to their "sempai" (seniors). While the foundation of the sempai-kohai relationship starts in school, it applies through one's working life as well (Donald et al., 2004). In general terms, kohai "are made to show obedience, respect and basic submissiveness to their seniors on various levels" (Konraosson, 2012, p. 18). As a junior lecturer at the university, showing respect to other colleagues was the norm, especially to senior academic staff. Unlike in Canada, during meetings and discussions, it would be considered disrespectful to question what they said. Of course, there would be some exceptions, but the general unwritten rule still stood.

General Office Tasks

At the Canadian insurance company, general office tasks were usually completed by the individual, or in some cases, the departmental secretary. For instance, filling out forms, sending out letters and packages, creating memos, and scheduling meetings were tasks that the author did on a consistent basis, in addition to the regular workload of business analysis. Many of these tasks could quickly be done on computers, the company intranet, and internet. There were seldom any hitches, aside from rare technical issues. As the company wanted to save on paper use, many documents were sent electronically.

In contrast, high-context societies, such as Japan, may require greater paperwork and bureaucracy due to the necessity of close supervision in Japanese

bureaucracy, which is exhibited in multiple layers of bureaucratic checks (Hooker, 2012). Indeed, this was a fact at the university where the author was employed. Many documents submitted by the author to the university administration went through multiple checks prior to approval. Unlike Canada, in Japan, "hanko," or personalized ink stamps with your name, are used as a signature rather than writing your signature using a pen or pencil (Gent, 2020). Many formal documents need a hanko, including some attendance logs at the university.

Course Syllabi and Teaching Life

As a new university lecturer, class syllabi needed to be created and textbooks chosen before the start of the academic year. During the author's time as an undergraduate and graduate student in Canada, reviewing a syllabus was one of the tasks of the first class. However, as a lecturer, developing a syllabus was a new experience, especially in a new country. Having read articles about overall English proficiency being low in Japan (Margolis, 2020), it was a challenge to choose textbooks and other teaching materials that would be appropriate for freshmen and sophomore English classes at a Japanese university. As the English proficiency was considered generally low at the university, English materials that were not too difficult and just above what they had learned in the national secondary school English curriculum were chosen. Textbook samples were obtained from various publishers and were chosen based on their recommendations and textbook reviews. Based on the experience with these materials, if they were either too easy or too difficult, adjustments could be made in the following academic year.

Furthermore, based upon conversations with other English lecturers at the university, the consensus was that English levels were a little higher in some departments than others. Thus, the overall approach was not to use difficult materials. Also, it was important to also utilize the blackboard for those students who had difficulty listening and/or understanding what was said. Therefore, care was taken to speak at an appropriate speed and to make sure students understood what to do for certain activities, such as pair work speaking activities.

Lessons were planned using the Communicative Language Approach

(University of Louisiana Monroe, 2021). Rather than teaching grammar, reading, and writing only, emphasis was placed upon both speaking and listening, as these were the English skills freshmen students had lower proficiency with. In fact, it was the first time many of the students had a solo foreign teacher teaching them English, since native Japanese teachers typically taught them English during their time in both junior high school and high school. Also, rather than lecturing, the author made classes interactive and focused on communication with other students as a large component of the class. Many students enjoyed the communicative aspect of the classes because it was a far cry from learning grammar drills in secondary school English classes. Students were also taught about culture in various English-speaking countries from around the world, including the author's home country of Canada.

Although Japanese university students are taught in a lecture-style where they passively listen to teachers or read course notes for the entire class (Takanashi, 2004), in the author's English classes, there is more collaboration going on with students. Classroom activities have to be demonstrated, and assisting students with difficulties is another aspect of the job. At the Canadian insurance company, work was more of a solo nature, compiling research, communicating with stakeholders, and writing reports and research papers. There were weekly team meetings and occasional presentations for management, but for the most part, the job of an analyst was more or less independent.

In Japan, teaching at a university consisted of primarily of teaching classes of 10-60 students, as well as interacting with students and administration over the course of the two semesters during the academic year. The author had to make sure the students understood assignment details. Therefore, communication with students over e-mail was more common, as their reading and writing skills were comparatively better than speaking. Online translation programs could be used if they did not understand something as well. The author also had to alter the level of English spoken depending on the student level, and in some cases, Japanese was used when the student really struggled with English communication. In contrast, in Canada, there were very few communication issues with colleagues, due to no language barriers.

Other Interesting Observations

When one teaches, they are responsible for keeping the class in order. Thankfully, there were no serious problems, other than a few students talking at the back of the classroom or students often checking their smartphones. Compared to an office job where one focuses primarily on one's own duties and those of the team, as a university lecturer, classroom management is an important part of the job. With students from various backgrounds, managing larger size classes can be challenging due to "big differences in the students' ability" (Baker & Westrup, 2000, p. 2). Therefore, research on class management was critical to ensure that any potential problems were minimized for smoother-run classes.

When it came to addressing university lecturers, Japanese freshmen students were unsure on how to address the foreign lecturer. Although they addressed their Japanese teachers with courtesy titles and family name, this was often not the case with foreign lecturers where the author taught. In Canadian workplaces, individuals tend to be "more relaxed with their colleagues and immediate supervisors" (Adolphe, 2013, p. 83). Colleagues refer to each other on a first name basis, although using formalities may be used during initial introductions or formal settings (Rivermate, n.d.). In Japan, non-Japanese workers noted that their Japanese colleagues struggled to find the most suitable address-form for them and that it was common for them to be called either by their first name or first name plus "san" (Okamura, 2009). The author made sure to stress to students on the first day of classes that this was generally considered inappropriate outside Japan and to err on the side of caution by addressing someone using courtesy titles and honorifics, especially during initial meetings. Some students mentioned that they were unaware of this as their Japanese teachers had taught them to only call non-Japanese people by their first names. This could also be due to the prevalence of American media (e.g., movies, TV shows, etc.) in Japan and the casual nature of how individuals are addressed in them.

Takeaways from the Transition in Career and Culture

Working in two different work environments and cultures has been both challenging and rewarding. There are many different types of occupations and

cultures around the world, and knowledge of cultural differences beforehand can make adaptation smoother. Some countries and cultures have many similarities, for example, Canada and the United States, while others, such as from my experience in both Canada and Japan, have wider cultural gaps both in language use and workplace culture.

In an office setting, while working in a small team environment at the Canadian insurance company, we were practically left to our own devices and worked independently, save for occasional team meetings and presentations. On the other hand, the transition to a classroom setting in Japan was challenging in the sense that the author was the sole lecturer responsible for a classroom of students and for tasks including teaching, creating assignments/tests, grading, and classroom management. In addition, working in a high-context culture like Japan presented cultural differences that were at odds with Canadian culture, such as a stricter hierarchical society.

On the other hand, a transition to a new career can be rewarding as well. Although working in an office can have its own merits, working with young minds in a different culture gave the author a broadened perspective on the teaching profession and working in a different culture at the same time. The author felt a sense of fulfillment in helping students understand a foreign language and about the world outside of Japan. For instance, some students were surprised to learn some of the differences between Canada and the United States, as many students had assumed they had similar forms of government. Simultaneously, the author learned about a new culture and the flexibility needed to adapt to it.

Conclusion

As a Canadian living and working in Japan, the current work environment has given the author time to reflect upon the differences between careers and cultures. Effective communication is one of the hallmarks of both working in an office setting and in the classroom. The main differences are the power dynamic, contextual cultural differences, and classroom management involved in a classroom. As it is uncommon for lecturers at Japanese universities to have work experience outside of academia, students can benefit from learning about

different industries outside of Japan from lecturers with business work experience.

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