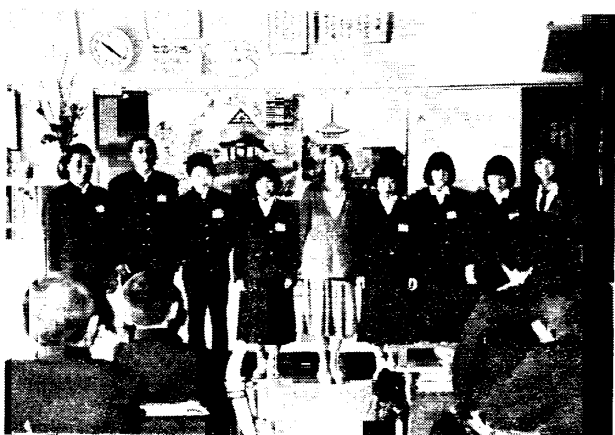


English Education in Ashikaga

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Within the past years, Japan has become one of the major industrial nations of the world. Its contact with foreigners has been increasing rapidly (approximately 10%) every year. Consequently, Japan will have an estimated one million foreign residents by the twenty-first century, compared with 840,885 foreign residents in 1984. With such a growing number of foreign residents, and with the

increasing number and importance of Japanese businesses abroad, the practical need of language study is also rising.

Already the average citizen in Japan has daily contact with a foreign language. Although foreign residents in Japan are comprised of a large variety of nationalities, the main focus of education, at least prior to the college level, is on English since it is quickly becoming the unofficial international language of commerce and cultural exchange.

Fortunately, Japan long ago recognized the need to teach its students a foreign language. Even now the average student in Japan accomplishes between six to eight years of English study, whereas his American counterparts only undertake between two to four years of foreign language study. Also, English is a major factor in many high school and college entrance examinations in Japan. Sadly, it would be rare in the USA to see foreign language testing allowed such a major role.

Obviously, English is already an important part of the Japanese education system. The fact that it is becoming even more important in daily life can be seen by the influx of English into such areas as advertising, business, and popular culture in the form of songs and T-shirt slogans. Such a rapidly increasing usage of English in daily nonacademic life has left the English education system struggling to keep pace with the practical needs of the students.

In Ashikaga, educators have continuously made attempts to sponsor progressive English education programs. The most recent and far-reaching example is the

installation of a new language laboratory. The laboratory should prove, in time, to be a great asset to the English program in Ashikaga. Language labs increase a student's opportunity to receive guided instruction without the pressure of the normal classroom situation. A student studying with a language lab is able to proceed according to his own ability. This is a very important distinction because one of the problems encountered in English classes, especially by the second and third year, is the large difference in ability between students. These differences contribute to the unwillingness of the students to participate, causing many to fall even farther behind the rest of their classmates. Hopefully, the correct use of the language lab will help many students keep pace with the rest of their classmates.

The language lab may also help another weakness in English education. Presently junior high school English classes meet three times per week. The limited time available to teach the required material, plus the fact that the timespan between classes makes it even harder to reinforce new structures or vocabulary, works directly against the efforts of both the teachers and the students. When class sessions are accompanied with regular language lab visits, textbook lessons will receive reinforcement. Students may have an opportunity to become more familiar with grammatical structures and new vocabulary after it is introduced in the classroom. Pronunciation drills may especially be reinforced outside the classroom, allowing the students much more time than usual to hear and practice English pronunciation. The language lab is definitely a strong sign of the progressive English education program in Ashikaga.

Another very important contribution to the progressiveness of the English education program in Ashikaga is the dedication of the teachers. The English teachers of Ashikaga have displayed a dedication to the city's English program both in and out of the classroom. Many of the teachers are directly involved with the language lab, and many also meet regularly to discuss teaching methods and lesson planning. The teachers have also striven in a variety of ways to continue their study of English. Besides the more fun methods of travel abroad, many teachers have told me of their efforts to study through textbooks, radio, television, newspapers, novels, and conversation classes in order to increase their fluency. I admire these teachers who are willing to devote so much time and energy to improve the English education system in Ashikaga.

A third example of the progressive structure of Ashikaga's education system is its participation in the Mombusho English Fellow Program.

Ashikaga is one of only three cities in the Kanetsu region (Tochigi, Gunma, and Niigata kens) which directly employ an MEF. This year marks the fourth year of Ashikaga's participation in Mombush's efforts to introduce native English speakers in the classroom.

According to Mr. Minoru Wada of Mombusho, the prime purpose of the MEF program is to motivate English education throughout Japan by bringing students and teachers into contact with native speakers. This role of motivator includes:

- showing English as a living language
- giving the students an opportunity to use English as real communication with a native speaker.
- showing that English is both fun and practical
- facilitating the elimination of students' psychological inhibitions

To some extent, the use of the MEF in the classroom does fulfill the above goals. During an MEF visit, students are introduced to living natural English and they often have the opportunity to use real English to communicate with the MEF. It is also often at this point that students first realize the practicality of studying English while trying to communicate with the MEF. I have even heard of many students who, although they had studied and learned the textbook well, were motivated to study beyond the textbook lessons after they realized that they were unable to communicate with the MEF as much as they would have liked. It also is noticeable that in classes which the MEF is able to visit more than once, the students are often much more relaxed and willing to work with a native speaker than in the "one-time" classes during which the students often seem to be hit with culture shock at suddenly finding a native speaker in their midst. Hopefully then, the past and continued efforts of both the teachers and the MEFs in the classroom will produce the positive benefits stated as the purpose of the program.

In an effort to increase the effectiveness of the present program next year will be the beginning of the combined efforts of Mombusho, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Home Affairs to sponsor the employment of native English speakers. As the MEF program is transformed into the JET program (Japan Exchange and Teaching), the number of employed native speakers will be increased from the present 240 to a projected 2000 in the next few years. Within two years, Ashikaga plans to be sponsoring two AETs (MEFs) to work in the city's junior high schools. This increase in native speakers in the classrooms will allow a great increase in the opportunities for contact between the AET(MEF) and Japanese students and teachers.

This opportunity for increased contact will certainly have many positive benefits.

Both English teachers and students will be able to become more comfortable working with a native speaker, which will allow the AET(MEF) to be of even more help in the classroom. The AET(MEF) will spend more time at each school and with every teacher, which should increase the effectiveness of the AET(MEF) visits. The new program will be able to reach many more classes, and therefore many more students than before.

However, although the expansion of the present program will certainly result in many such positive benefits, it is also possible that at the same time many existing problems will become amplified.

Increased contact will not always ensure an increase in effectiveness because contact is not always the same as involvement. As the contact between the AET(MEF) and the students increases, the work of the AET(MEF) and the English teachers may have to become more involved if it is to meet the needs of the teachers and the students.

This question as to the effectiveness of the AET(MEF) visits has already been asked at many different levels. In a similar education journal in another city, one English teacher raised the following questions concerning the imminent arrival of the city's first MEF:

"Some anxieties conceivable-Whether we are ready enough for his coming considering lessons or extremely busy chores and activities ; Whether it will meet the needs of students who sooner or later have to sit for the entrance exams will-nilly ; If you have such an enormous fund to employ an expensive gaijin teacher, we'd rather have... "

This English teacher has pointed out many difficulties that may be amplified with the increase of native speakers employed. One of the greatest difficulties that most MEFs have already encountered is the problem of over-worked teachers. Presently a Japanese teacher performs a variety of roles including educator, counselor, chaperon, and parent. Besides being responsible for a student's academic and moral growth during the school and club hours, most teachers must also take on the roles of counselor, chaperon and parent after school for all of their students. Unfortunately, if a teacher spends so much of his time chaperoning students who wish to play sports or go shopping after dinner, then there cannot be much time left for increasing his role as classroom educator.

Because of such hectic schedules, one of the most important roles of a teacher, that of classroom educator, must sacrifice important time to accomodate the other roles assigned to a teacher. A teacher must teach and control over 40 students per hour

everyday and hopefully he is able to awaken the minds of the students and actively engage them in the lesson. However, between the parenting, counseling, and chaperoning responsibilities of the teachers, there is little time left for teachers to continually create lesson plans, with or without the MEF, which will engage the minds of the students.

With 2000 native speakers suddenly in the classrooms, teachers will have more contact. Whether or not this will be more effective depends on whether the teachers will find it possible, considering an already over-loaded schedule, to become involved enough with the AET(MEF) in order to tailor the visits to the needs of the students. If the teachers are not allowed more time to involve the AET(MEF) with their teaching goals, then the increased classroom contact may become more of a conflict between real lesson time and real communication time.

Tailoring lessons to the needs of the students brings up the second point considered in the article : whether or not the AET(MEF) visits will really be effective for students whose primary goal must be sitting for the entrance exams. This is the second most common difficulty within the MEF program. The program was initiated in order to meet the practical needs of the students who more and more are being called upon to use English as a means of communication. However, the structure of the entrance examinations, which must inevitably decide the educational goals of students who wish to further their education, still must be the focus of English education. Since the exams still remain focused upon the theoretical side of English (grammar and translation) the English programs must also reflect this focus.

Because of the lack of time and the importance of exams, English is often taught as only theory, denying what English really is : a means of communication connected to a distinct cultural background. Again, it is probable that this difficulty will be amplified as more and more native speakers are employed to practice real communication with students who, in order to pass the exams, must concentrate mainly on theory. Eventually many of the existing difficulties, including over-worked teachers, exam pressure, and limited class time all contribute to the time conflict in English education between teaching required material and teaching real communication skills. The AET(MEF) who is employed to motivate learning by introducing real English in the classroom will have to become increasingly more considerate of the existing time conflict as the number of visits to a class increases. Such consideration will include becoming more involved with the actual teaching aims of the teachers and needs of the students, and consequently working more closely with the teachers so that the

AET(MEF) may become capable of preparing materials for each class which will exactly meet the present ideas and lesson objectives of the teachers.

Obviously however, the division between exam English and "real" English is not being solved by only introducing native speakers to the classroom. Many teachers in Ashikaga are working to bring "real" English (communication and culture) into the classroom without sacrificing too much time from exam English study. These efforts include classes both with and without the MEF.

In classes with the MEF, especially when there is only one planned visit, many teachers devote all or part of the period to "real" English. Different lessons which the teachers have prepared this way include :

- The MEF gives a speech as a hearing practice
this can involve conversations, planned or spontaneous, with the English teacher
- Students, as groups or as individuals, give speeches
- Students and English teachers ask the MEF questions about himself or his culture
- The teachers or the MEF prepares games which, by putting learned grammar into use, are actually review drills

Although there are many ways to introduce "real" English in the classroom using the MEF, there are also many ways which teachers have found to do this everyday !

Communication

The main problem is to show students that English is a means to communicate and not just a textbook lesson, so the best idea is to use classroom English EVERYDAY !

1. Besides the "Good-morning, How are you? ", many classes practice "What day is it today? " or "How is the weather? "
2. If a class is studying a certain verb tense, for example the past, some teachers try opening the class everyday by randomly asking about five students "What did you do yesterday? " If this is done all year, students learn to use verb tenses much faster and more naturally.
3. At the beginning of every year, students are given a list of the classroom English which the teacher EXPECTS them to understand. "Open your book", "please read", "please repeat", "do you understand? ". Use them from day one and the students are forced to understand quickly.
4. Students are required to use English in the classroom. ¹ This does not

need to apply to asking questions or difficult problems, but all students should be able and EXPECTED to use "I don't understand" or "I don't know". Students are not allowed to escape with Wakaranai or Pasu. (By the third day of my beginning Japanese class, everyone was expected to answer with "Wakarimasu" or "Wakarimasen" even though we had not even begun the study of verbs yet.)

5. When creative writing assignments are given, for example a student's speech about himself, try encouraging the students to experiment more with English, instead of only copy the textbook, by assigning two grades to the assignment. One grade would be for content and the second grade for grammar with the final grade being an average of the two.
6. Use English as communication in front of your students. For example, greeting and conversing with other English teachers in the school hall. This does not have to be a detailed conversation, but a simple "Hi, are you busy today? ". Students will appreciate the fact that their teachers view English as more than textbook material, and they just may be curious enough to try to understand !

All of these are only a few examples to show various ways one may introduce real communication in the English classroom without sacrificing valuable time from the textbook lessons. Especially with the rising need for the students to learn practical English, and with the increasing appearance of the AET(MEF) in the classes, the attention in English education given to real communication may have to become more incorporated into the everyday textbook lesson.