SELHi Classroom Perspectives

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1. Introduction

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiated “a strategic plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities” (MEXT, 2002). It recognized: “With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.” At the same time, the Ministry acknowledged the inadequacy of the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population and the fact that “this imposes restrictions on exchanges with foreigners and creates occasions when the ideas and opinions of Japanese people are not appropriately evaluated.” Thus, the Ministry undertook a concrete plan of action “with the aim of drastically improving the English education of Japanese people.” One part of the plan was the designation of 100 Super English Language High Schools (SELHi’s) by 2005. These model schools set their own goals over the course of the project period and seek to develop effective English teaching methods and curricula for achieving those ends. They receive grants of 3.5 million yen per year for the three-year program. There are three SELHi’s in Toyama prefecture: Toyama Minami HS, Fukuoka HS, and Toyama University of International Studies (TUINS) HS.

The purpose of this paper is to present my observations, reflections, and personal experience with the SELHi program at these schools as well as drawing on reports on the programs at numerous other SELHi’s throughout the country which have appeared in newspapers, notably The Daily Yomiuri. I myself have taught a weekly ninety-minute English class for the second-year International Course students of TUINS HS as part of their SELHi program since April 2004 and I am a member of the SELHi advisory committee for that school. In addition, I observed a total of eleven English classes at the three Toyama SELHi’s between November 2004 and February 2005, and had many hours of discussion with many of the English teachers at these schools about the lessons themselves that were observed along with many of the issues involved in the mission to advance the effectiveness of English language instruction at Japanese high schools. After the initial writing of this paper, I did follow-up observations of several classes at one of the Toyama prefecture SELHi’s in May and September 2005. My reflections and remarks on those visitations are included at the end of this paper. While the aim of this paper certainly is not to provide a teaching manual, along the way with my remarks I offer some specific classroom lesson ideas and methodological directions which I hope teachers also will find beneficial in advancing the effectiveness of their English language instruction and the successful outcome of the SELHi project itself.
2. Positive outcomes

Indeed, one of the most significant and beneficial outcomes of the SELHi program for the long term is the fact that Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) at these high schools have opened up their classrooms regularly for observations by fellow teachers at their own schools as well as visitors from other high schools, junior high schools, and universities, and also news reporters and others. The teachers I spoke with told me that rarely or never before did they observe each other’s classes or discuss instructional methodologies, materials, and other classroom matters. Now JTEs are talking with each other about English language teaching and learning. Sometimes even these discussions are conducted in English. Certainly the talks that I have had for many hours with these JTEs individually and in groups were entirely in English. As one teacher at Kawagoe HS (SELHi) in Mie prefecture stated to a visiting reporter (Matsuzawa, 2004b), the SELHi project is helping to break down a “closed” tendency among high school teachers. “We used to have few opportunities to have discussions” for sharing teaching ideas or improving classes, “but the project has made us have more of these discussions.” Acknowledging the same development at Sapporo Intercultural and Technological HS, the teacher in charge of the SELHi project told the same reporter (Matsuzawa, 2003b), “just this alone is great progress.”

In addition, both the English teachers and administrators at SELHi’s seem to be very conscious of their wider responsibilities to other schools in their area and to the public in general. Teachers at Okayama Joto HS told a visiting reporter (Matsuzawa, 2004a) that one of their major tasks is to inspire their local colleagues. As one of them said, “we have to come up with other ways to share with other schools in the prefecture the ‘educational assets’ we have built by the end of our three-year SELHi tenure.”

English has become the language of teaching and learning in SELHi classrooms. In all of the classes I have observed, JTEs conducted the lessons nearly entirely in English, using just an incidental amount of Japanese in mostly appropriate circumstances, such as reinforcing the meaning of some new English words and expressions. For the most part, they speak well in class, with good English, in a clear voice, comfortably and confidently. My observations in Toyama support the remark made by the vice-principal of Chuo HS (SELHi) in Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture to a visiting reporter (Matsuzawa, 2003a): “The students also regard it as a matter of course to take English classes in English.” In many cases, too, it seems the SELHi principals and vice-principals actively involve themselves using English in the activities at their schools. I witnessed this at the two-day English camp of one of the Toyama SELHi’s and concur fully with the comment of an ALT at Narita International HS (SELHi) on the impact of such participation. “It gives students massive encouragement when the principal or vice-principal walks into a class and starts talking to them in English” (Austin, 2003).

Also, it seems that the direct application of yakudoku methodology has been eliminated from the English lessons for classes designated as part of the SELHi program. In some cases, however, teachers still require that students write out a full Japanese translation of the English coursebook material for homework. Although this is very regrettable, at least these translations are not used in class for traditional yakudoku lessons, which all the teachers I spoke with stated they had conducted prior to the implementation of the SELHi program at their schools. Yet most or all teachers give their students translations of the English I and II textbook reading lessons that are provided with the teacher’s texts. It seems that this is done also at other SELHi’s, such as Kochi Nishi HS (Mizui,
3. Problematic matters

While the SELHi program has generated these important positive movements that can become the strong foundation for the continued growth and development of effective English language instruction, there are a number of problematic issues which JTEs are well aware of that need to be addressed and overcome in order to proceed successfully in this regard.

As they try to implement greater communicative language teaching (CLT) in their classrooms, many JTEs at SELHi’s seem to be very uncertain about what they are doing, why they are doing what they are doing, and how to do those things effectively. This should not be surprising. Browne (1998) reported from his investigation of high school English teachers in Japan: “In light of the fact that the vast majority of English teachers receive no formal training, that only... 33% of general high school teachers in the survey reported [emphasis added] making their own lessons plans, and that every Monbusho-approved textbook comes with a teacher’s manual that has detailed lesson plans emphasizing translation and drill-focused techniques, it is not surprising that a wide gap exists between... communicative goals... and actual classroom practice.” (See also Sakui, 2004, and Taguchi, 2005.) Indeed, as already mentioned, all of the JTEs I spoke to and others at SELHi’s visited by The Daily Yomiuri and other newspaper reporters acknowledge that yakudaku had been essentially the one and only teaching methodology they employed before the SELHi project went into operation at their schools.

4.1 English I and II Courses

It seems from my classroom observations of English I and II courses that teachers are working with a very limited repertoire of instructional approaches and materials related to comprehensive, meaning-based reading and interactive, productive activities and tasks that follow on the topical content of the textbook lessons. They stick mostly with the text of the lesson itself, working through it on a sentence-by-sentence level and using some straightforward teacher-made worksheets. Clearly they are having difficulty devising and implementing competently and productively some student-centered communicative activities and tasks that connect with the reading material.

Their expressed aims for the lessons they present fit the general statement of objectives for English I and II given by MEXT (2003) in “The Course of Study for Upper Secondary Schools”: “To develop students’ abilities to understand what they listen to or read and to convey information, ideas, etc. by speaking or writing in English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with everyday topics [in English I] [and] a wide variety of [other] topics [in English II].” However, my view is that the classroom lessons are largely failing to engage the students in a fruitful language learning enterprise by stimulating their genuine interest in the topics of the textbook lessons, motivating their inquiry into the topics, and allowing them to draw meaning from the reading text and to respond to it in a communicative manner, all within their cognitive and English language proficiency levels.
Following is a composite description of several representative lessons for English I and II from the Crown, Unicorn, and Pro-Vision textbooks, presented by JTEs at the Toyama SELHi’s, which I was permitted to observe, and some suggestions as to how the lessons otherwise might have been done with a greater focus on meaning and communication.

The teacher leads students in a short drill of new vocabulary in the given section of the text lesson for pronunciation and definition. Students also may work with a simple teacher-prepared vocabulary worksheet. Students listen to an audio CD of the given section of the lesson. The teacher leads a reading of the text sentence-by-sentence with all of the students repeating in chorus. Short pronunciation drills may be conducted during the oral reading exercise and the teacher may focus briefly on selected grammar items, words and expressions, and other language items that appear. All the students read the text of the lesson aloud individually at the same time and, in some cases, in pairs. With this approach, essentially JTEs are transferring their traditional methods from yakudoku instruction (Taguchi, 2005).

A number of different activities and tasks may follow. Students in pairs may memorize parts of the text, especially if it is in dialog form, and then recite it with their partners and then together to the full class. Teacher-prepared worksheets may include about ten comprehension questions on the content of the reading, most of which can be answered in writing with words drawn directly or indirectly from a sentence in the text itself. The teacher in some manner may ask such questions to the full class and call on individual students to answer orally or students in pairs may repeat to their partners the questions posed by the teacher and answer them to each other. A few questions may require an opinion or point of view to be expressed in one sentence. Students may do a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. They may write a very short summary of the content of the section of the lesson they have read. Students working in large groups of five or six may be assigned an activity or task, such as writing one good point and one bad point of modern medical treatment (for the “Patch Adams” reading lesson – see below), making a poster with the information, and then presenting very briefly the finished work to the full class.

From my own personal perspective I did not find that anything in particular in itself in these instructional routines was inappropriate, although often students’ oral recitation of the reading text itself was done in unimaginative and undirected ways, their memorization of parts of the text seemed to serve little purpose and thus wasted limited class time, and the repetitive pronunciation drills that I observed in some cases were robotic, mind-numbing and without benefit. Rather, I thought that so much more and better could have been done with the textbook lessons, relating principally to devising and implementing student-centered, interactive, communicative activities and tasks that focus on students’ drawing meaning from the reading text and responding to it in productive, communicative ways.

In addition, from a broader view, I believe that students are simply not learning how to read fluently and efficiently, in a manner that should be developed with material such as graded readers (see Porcaro, 2005), nor are they being prepared adequately in the comprehensive reading skills needed for grappling successfully with university entrance examinations. Almost entirely ignored in the lessons I observed is utilization of the background knowledge and experience, referred to as schemata, and imagination, of the students, including reference to the social and cultural environment of their lives.
Following are some specific classroom lesson ideas for the English I and II textbook lessons that have been referred to in this discussion.

4.1.1 “Living with Chimpanzees” and “Patch Adams”

Students in English I and II classes that I observed were assigned appropriately for homework to read in advance the sections of the textbook lesson to be used in class. For the first period with “Living with Chimpanzees” (Crown English Series I), as an introduction to the topic, students also could be given in advance a set of points, such as follows, to prepare for discussion in class in pairs with a partner.
1. Where in the world, outside of Japan, would you like to live and work?
2. What kind of work would you like to do there?
3. What are your images of Africa?
4. What animal would you like to be for just one day in order to experience such a life? Explain your answer.
5. Do you have any pets - or have you ever had any pets?
6. If yes, tell about the behavior of your pets.
7. Tell your general knowledge and impressions of chimpanzees.

Discussion points such as these would serve to stimulate students’ background knowledge and experience, and their imagination, in relation to the lesson content, prior to their working in class with the lesson text itself. The students in the English I class that I observed doing the “chimpanzee” lesson would have been fully capable of talking in pairs on such points entirely in English for at least twenty minutes or so. I know this for a fact because I myself had taught all of those students for twelve 50-minute periods four days in the summer, three months before the classroom observation I am now referring to. With simple training of the students in the process of interactive, communicative discussion, to which they responded very readily, and with the effective classroom management techniques that I employed, in my class these students in pairs discussed well and entirely in English for sustained periods of time as long as an hour or more various topics that I presented to them.

In none of the eleven classroom lessons that I observed - for both English I and II as well as Oral Communication - was there any purposeful, sustained talking, fully in English, by pairs or small groups of students. JTEs seem to be quite unfamiliar with such an instructional approach. Furthermore, my observations of their management of larger interactive group activities, involving usually five or six students, indicated that they are at a loss as to how to execute effectively such student-centered instruction. The large group activities that I observed were in fact charades - a term used for easily perceivable pretenses, false appearances, mere shows without reality. Often few students said anything at all, those who spoke barely used any English, and even that was limited mostly to sub-sentence level utterances of just a few words. Indeed, once when some JTEs observed me for the first time with my own TUINS HS SELHi class in which the students talked in pairs non-stop and entirely in English for about 45 minutes on two topics I had prepared for them, they remarked that they had never seen a lesson like that before. They said they did not know the students were capable of doing that, even though they were the very same students they, too, taught! Clearly, it seems to me, many JTEs even at SELHi’s lack a repertoire of communicative language teaching techniques and are ill-equipped with the skills and techniques they need for implementing such
instruction in their classrooms.

Getting back to the “chimpanzee” lesson, the opening discussions that I suggested would direct students’ minds to the content of the reading text in which Jane Goodall is interviewed about her first going to Africa to study chimpanzee behavior. Of course, at some point in the lessons on this text the teacher by all means should show the class some video of Jane Goodall with the chimpanzees that she studied in Africa. There are several such videos readily available from Amazon, for example, at low prices. Unfortunately, however, the English I teacher I observed did not make use of this wonderful instructional resource.

After reading section two of this lesson, students in pairs could be asked to summarize the specific similarities of chimpanzee and human behavior that Goodall mentions in the interview. Actually, this task is posed as a question in the textbook itself, but teachers must think “outside the box”. For example, pairs of students could be given the further task of discussing and listing ways in which they think chimp and human behaviors differ. This point is not at all presented in the text. The task would exercise and extend students’ critical thinking and expression on the reading topic. In this way students are able to respond to the content of the text they have read and construct greater meaning for it for themselves.

These are just a few ideas and certainly there is plenty of time to include such activities and tasks in the classroom lessons as it seems that English I and II teachers allot about eight or nine periods for each of the textbook lessons. Furthermore, as for the time it takes to acquire and prepare materials and lessons such as these and others discussed below, teachers know at the start of the school year the contents of the texts they will teach and usually more than one teacher has the same assignment. Teachers could collaborate and share the tasks of acquiring good instructional materials and planning lessons. Of course, all of these products can be used again or passed on to other teachers in following years.

Similar instructional approaches could be taken with the “Patch Adams” lesson (Unicorn English Course II). Initially, the discussion points for pairs of students could include their telling about any illnesses or injuries that they have had that required them to see a doctor or enter a hospital, with special reference to the manner of treatment they received from the doctors. Above all, the teacher must rent the wonderful and affecting “Patch Adams” movie video and show students at least some selected scenes of this renowned doctor’s comical manner with patients, especially children, that has had such an enormous impact on their health care. Pairs of students then could describe in oral or written English what they saw in the movie and reflect and comment on it. Unfortunately, in the class that I observed, the movie video was never shown and the teacher asked just one student if he had had an illness experience. He muttered something inaudible to the other members of the class and the subject ended there in about thirty seconds! Yet this class was the same class of second year students that I myself taught once a week for ninety minutes all year long as part of the SELHi project. Our lessons week after week involved these students talking in pairs on a wide variety of meaningful topics entirely in English and often fully sustained for more than hour.
4.1.2 “A Mason-Dixon Memory”

This reading text (Pro-Vision English Course I) deals with racism and discrimination against African-Americans in the USA in the 1960’s. Again, the classroom lesson I observed lacked any element that would bring the students to identify with the topic within their own society and culture and thus enable them to construct personal meaning from the text and provide the opportunity for them to express their personal response to it. I thought of several interesting and relevant items that could be integrated easily into the lesson.

I have already referred to video material in the previous section. Indeed, video can promote a deeper and fuller understanding of a subject. We are drawn to and identify with the real people or characters in the story and experience the emotional as well as rational aspects of the subject. Video has an impact that motivates learners to formulate their own personal meaning of the depiction and to communicate their own thoughts and feelings about it. For the “Mason-Dixon” reading text of this English lesson, I would recommend showing the class selected scenes from the Japanese movie Hashi no nai kawa, which deals with the historic discrimination of Japanese against other Japanese who were classified as the outcast “burakumin”. Most students are entirely unfamiliar with this element of their social history and the two or three million people who are still subjected to this discrimination. The movie has a powerful effect on students and concerns the same type of discrimination against members of one’s own society as does the text reading about the USA. (The movie is available at rental video shops.)

When I came home after observing the “Mason-Dixon” lesson, I searched the Internet for other material that could have been used in the class to illustrate the racism and discrimination that exist widely today in Japan against non-Japanese. I quickly found several interesting items. One was a photo of an actual sign pasted on a wall outside a Tokyo hotel stating in Japanese: “No entrance for foreigners, drunks, and gang members”. Another photo showed a sign in front of a commercial establishment stating: “Foreigners are not allowed to enter without a Japanese escort”. I also found a story with the headline “Racist Japanese bathhouse fined”, about a court ruling against barring entry to foreigners. With this item, for example, a short discussion by students in pairs, in English of course, could include their expressing the reasons the bathhouse owner might have had for barring foreigners, how foreigners might react to these points, whether the court decision was justified, how the students themselves would rule in the case, and how they might feel if they were barred from a commercial establishment while in another country because they were Japanese.

In addition, I came across a very short news article in English in the Asahi Weekly on the outrageous Supreme Court decision on a case involving a second-generation resident Korean, upholding the barring of non-Japanese civil servants from managerial posts. It would have been a very appropriate supplementary reading for the students in the class.

The point I am illustrating is that all of these readily available materials would give students the opportunity to construct for themselves meaning for the reading text of the lesson and to reflect on and respond to what they have read and seen. In fact, it is rather disturbing to me that JTEs are not doing much, or any, of this kind of thing in their lessons. Instruction involving the reading text is much too limited to students’ answering “comprehension” questions and one or two “opinion” questions largely by searching for and pulling words out of the appropriate
sentences within the text itself. Widdowson (1979) describes marvelously well what is wrong with this. “Comprehension questions... commonly require the learner to rummage round in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without regard to what purpose might be served in doing so... Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning.” Furthermore, such restricted reading instruction does not at all serve to develop students’ comprehensive, meaning-based reading skills that will prepare them for the demanding university entrance examinations, which are still, it seems, the ultimate rationale for all high school teaching and learning.

The teacher of the class did formulate a brilliant question near the end of the lesson but essentially threw it away. She asked the class: “Do you have a Mason-Dixon line in your mind?” However, she called on just one student to respond. He said “No”, and after a brief remark by the teacher, that was it! The students should have been given that question to reflect on for homework and told that they would respond to it in discussion with a partner (in pairs) in the next lesson period. After that discussion the teacher could elicit from some students, for the full class to hear, what their partners said on the point. At home I tried the question on my daughter, who was a first-year high school student at that time. She understood immediately the implication of the question and responded readily with several personal reflections on the point. A class discussion on that question alone would have been very productive and worthwhile. Yet, again, the idea of meaningful, sustained talk by students in pairs seems to be unknown and untried by most JTEs. Let it be said, too, that the notion that it cannot be managed in a class of as many as forty students is nonsense. I do it in my own SELHi classes with nearly as many students. JTEs simply need training and practice in the methodology, and commitment and courage to implement it. (This point will be addressed later in this discussion.)

4.2 Oral Communication and similar courses

The limitations of most JTEs trying to employ communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology with appropriate instructional materials and manage interactive student-centered classroom activities and tasks are most evident in Oral Communication and other-named courses with similar purposes, such as Current English and Global Education, which I have observed at the Toyama SELHi’s and about which I have read in reports of other SELHi’s around the country. The aims of the lessons for these courses are stated principally in terms of students expressing their opinions. Certainly that is appropriate. The problem for me, however, is that JTEs seem fettered to this one communicative function alone and taken up with the fetish of debate. Furthermore, it seems that they often present students with topics that are clearly outside their field of personal experience and interest, and beyond their cognitive level and linguistic capability to handle effectively in communication in English.

I was told by one teacher that the students in his class lacked intellectual curiosity and were not interested in serious issues. Indeed, the students in the class I observed were visibly bored and not interested in the lesson. However, when the topics they are presented to work with include, for example, the issue of whether or not Muslim girls in France should be permitted to wear headscarves in school and the extremely complex genocidal conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan, I suggest that the problems with the class lie not in the students’ attitude but in the teacher’s organization of the course.
In fact, “oral communication” in the class I observed was, again, largely a charade. Students in oversized groups of five or six with an ill-defined assigned task said little or nothing to each other or what they did say was almost entirely in Japanese. As this lack of productive performance did not draw the attention of the JTE or the ALT, it is fair to state that effective classroom management techniques as well were tellingly lacking in this circumstance. Yet, as noted before, the students in the class were the very same ones who performed so well in oral English in my own class several months earlier in the short summer course.

Another class that I observed for first-year Oral Communication uses the coursebook Impact Values, which the publisher (Longman) classifies for Intermediate - Upper Intermediate levels of English proficiency. In my view this is clearly much above the overall English level of the students using the book, as an examination of the language in each of the units makes evident. More significantly, however, while some of the topics may appeal to the mid-teenage students, many of them are simply uninteresting and/or inappropriate for these students. They include adult relationships in love and marriage, adult workplace situations, parenting, abortion, surrogate motherhood, and hackneyed treatment of issues on the environment and war and peace.

The problems with the coursebook itself are compounded by the way in which it is used and the general instructional methodology for the course. To begin with, for each unit students are required to translate into Japanese the entire one-page “situation” text which is in either dialog or narrative form depending on the unit. While, fortunately, the translations are not used in the classroom for yakudoku instruction, the assignment is a colossal waste of students’ time and effort. (SELHi JTEs’ continued misguided attachment to the unproductive and irrelevant use of yakudoku is a matter discussed later in this paper.) The lesson I observed was representative of the pattern followed for each of the units in this coursebook.

The topic of “parasite singles” was indeed one that could strike the interest of students and lend itself to some imaginative and productive “oral communication”. The problem is that this did not at all occur. The CD was played for students to listen to as they looked at the text, new vocabulary was reviewed, an assigned worksheet summarized the story content, students wrote some very brief points on the topic on the front board, and the assigned short exercises in the book were checked. At the end of the lesson, just three minutes were allotted for students in pairs to answer to each other the question, “In future will you live at home with your parents?” This lesson took place near the end of the school year and it was clear that the students had not been trained and practiced in even the simplest level of interactive “oral communication”. As in other classes I observed at all the schools, most students said little if anything to their partner and what they did say was mostly in Japanese. The failure of JTEs to implement meaningful, sustained, interactive talk in English among students is one of the most glaring deficiencies in their instruction.

With sufficient knowledge of CLT and practiced skill to implement the instruction effectively, the teacher might have devised the following role-play activity, as I offer here at least one alternative lesson idea. “A single, working adult child (‘parasite single’) in his/her mid-20s has been living with his/her parents but not paying any household expenses or doing any household tasks. He/she also lives there without following any parental rules. The parents have decided that this situation must not continue and they confront the adult child to negotiate new living arrangements. However, the adult child is determined not to accept any changes, while the parents are determined
that things will change or he/she will be kicked out of the house.” By the end of their first year in high school, especially a SELHi, students certainly should be capable of doing well an extended, spontaneous role-play skit of this kind as a product of much growth and development of their oral communication skills throughout the school year. It surely would be appropriate, appealing, challenging, productive, and very enjoyable for the class. But how many JTEs even know how to direct students to do role-play or have ever employed this fundamental language learning technique?

5. JTEs’ instructional repertoire

My impression is that most Japanese teachers at SELHi’s have a very limited instructional repertoire for English language teaching. While admirably they are now conducting their classes differently from the yakudoku methodology they may have solely employed previously and genuinely desire to do much more meaningful communicative language teaching, they seem to be struggling to find a direction and specific instructional means to achieve their aims. This predicament certainly exists beyond Toyama schools. For example, reporting on the SELHi program at Kawagoe HS in Mie, Matsuzawa (2004b) noted: “The whole point of becoming a SELHi would seem to be to embark on major experimentation with teaching English methods.” However, one of the teachers at that school described its first year as a SELHi as “a mess” and another teacher said frankly: “When it came to reading and speaking activities, I could only come up with a way to have students repeat after me. Now I realize that there is a wide variety of such activities out there.”

Teachers frequently state as one of the principal aims of their lessons that students will formulate and express their opinions on the lesson content from the coursebook. Certainly this is appropriate, but as I have remarked from my classroom observations, teachers are largely failing to achieve this aim. They are overly preoccupied with asking students to give their opinions about everything, often about topics which are beyond the experience of their personal lives and immediate social sphere as well as their cognitive and linguistic capabilities, and at the same time contrary to their affective state. Furthermore, they do not seem to realize that there is a much wider range of functional communicative discourse that is, in fact, a more normal part of life, which students should be engaged in, and which would serve students better for building up their basic English communicative competence as well as confidence. However, instruction in these areas would require teachers to create and develop their own instructional materials for lessons, which they are unaccustomed to doing. In addition, it would require them to employ instructional methodologies and classroom management skills which they are unfamiliar with, let alone skillfully practiced in.

Briefly put, students need to engage in oral and written expression that involves extensive and varied language use. Communicative activities need to include important, everyday topics. Students should have the opportunity to narrate in detail their own experiences and other happenings they know of; describe people, scenes, events, and circumstances; explain their experiences and observations; tell about their hopes, desires, and emotions; tell information and knowledge that they possess; and exercise their imaginations. The activities should be “achievable, engaging and purposeful” and should cover a range of types, including discussion, role-plays, problem-solving, etc. (Gairns & Redman, 2002). Blanton (1992, p. 291) advocates a “whole language” approach to English language teaching and learning. She notes that an instructional unit is likely to be successful if it meets the following criteria,
which may serve as guidelines for all teachers, including Japanese high school teachers of Oral Communication and English I and II.

1. The unit engages students’ interest.
2. It requires students to communicate meaningfully.
3. It surrounds students with language that they can understand.
4. It challenges students to think.
5. It provides students with the opportunity to interact with others.
6. It presents students with text-related tasks to perform.
7. It requires students to listen, speak, read, and write.
8. It is student-centered, while being content-oriented.
9. It integrates language functions and language skills.
10. It increases students’ self-confidence and self-respect.

6. The fetish of debate

It seems that a large number of SELHi teachers throughout the country are using debate in their instruction as the ultimate means for students to express their opinions and even making it the centerpiece of their project. Indeed, there seems to be a fetish of debate. However, I think it may simply have become a default activity for the reason that teachers cannot conceive of much of anything else to do. At the same time I think the use of debate is founded on a false and disturbing representation of Japanese students by their teachers. I have heard many times from JTEs that their students, as Japanese, are lacking in “logical thinking”. For example, a teacher at Yokohama Shogyo HS, which features debate in its SELHi project, stated succinctly to a visiting reporter: “Japanese students are not accustomed to critical thinking [and] speaking logically” (Mizui, 2003). A teacher at one of the Toyama prefecture SELHi’s told me that Japanese students lack a logical way of thinking and that it is necessary for them to acquire a logical way of thinking first in Japanese before they can talk (logically) in English.

Yet such a notion is absolutely unfounded and utter nonsense. Not a single piece of research in the literature of English language learning supports this notion. As Susser (1998: 50-51) makes clear, such a notion of inherent deficiency is untrue in any objective sense and is actually a part of “Japanese ‘self-Orientalism’, the Nihonjinron (the theory of Japanese identity) literature produced largely by and for a Japanese audience”, which “posits the Japanese learner as an Other, different from Western learners”, and thus serves to polarize and reinforce the belief that Japanese people are uniquely unique. Above all, the notion is entirely contradicted by the actual experience of countless teachers. I, for example, have taught English in Japan for twenty-one years and have never addressed such a notion of “logical thinking”, yet my students learn to speak and use English in all ways quite competently under my instruction. The fact is that JTEs cannot shift the cause of their ineffective teaching onto a false notion that students lack the logical thinking required of English language expression. Rather, they need to face the reality that they must reconsider many of the fundamentally flawed approaches they take to English language instruction and redirect their efforts toward acquiring and implementing much needed changes in their teaching ways.

On the pedagogical level, while debate certainly can be an effective language learning device in English classrooms
and may effect really successful outcomes in some SELHi programs, it seems to me that it, too, is just not working very well in many circumstances and thus may be an unwise and unproductive methodological choice even in a modified form. Indeed, debate is a format that is very hard for any group of students. Even in English-medium schools for native-speakers, debate is an activity considered one of the most rigorous and demanding of students’ cognitive, linguistic and personal resources.

At Takamatsu Daiichi High School (Matsuzawa, 2004c), for example, the topic for debate was global warming when an attentive reporter visited a class there. She noted, however, that many students in the class “seemed to have a hard time expressing themselves during the debate.” Indeed, the teacher in charge of the pilot project was startlingly frank enough to say: “This frustration has made some of the students demand that their English classes feature more discussion to help them with their communication skills.” It is clear in my view that the teachers at this SELHi should heed the correct and strongly expressed needs of their students and back off from debate as an instructional means to achieve their ends. Reports on debate classes at other SELHi’s, too, such as Maibara HS in Shiga (Sakane, 2003) and Itami Municipal HS in Hyogo (Mizui, 2005a) suggest to me that an honest and hard cost (in time and effort)/benefits assessment might lead to the same conclusion. I definitely would apply these comments to my observation of two classes doing “mini-debate” at a Toyama SELHi.

There were twenty students in each class. In one, the topic was whether parents should pay their children for helping with housework, and in the other, the right to die. Both were taken from the coursebook *Impact Issues*, which the publisher (Longman) classifies for Pre-intermediate – Intermediate learners. The former topic easily fits the experiential and cognitive realms of the students; however, the latter clearly does not, in my opinion. As I have reported on all the other classes I observed, in these as well during most of the fifty-minute period most of the students actually spoke very little, if anything, in English and many came to look quite bored by the end. In fact, according to the division of the class into groups, it seemed to me that half of the students really had very little to do as designated “judges”. Yet the students appeared quite genki at first. Indeed, I wrote in my notebook at the start that I would love to jump into the lesson and teach the class myself!

Although several good points on the housework topic were elicited and presented by individual students, whether within their groups or speaking out to the full class, their utterances essentially were limited to just a sentence or two – and the lesson took place in January, near the end of the school year! Furthermore, it seemed to me that the points were stated by the students first in Japanese in their groups and then worked out into an English translation. In fact, in the previous lesson a week earlier, students did this work on the same topics in Japanese! This procedure simply is not at all effective communicative language learning. Yet apparently it is commonly employed. Yokohama Shogyo HS (Mizui, 2003) students participated in the Yokohama Student Forum on the theme: “Modern Mass Media: The Influence of Information”. The discussion, however, was in Japanese, because “it is very difficult to conduct the meeting in English,” said the teacher in charge. Well, I say, of course it is with such a topic! Why, then, is such an activity that is conducted in Japanese presented in the guise of being part of the SELHi program for these students?

English language instruction needs to be within, or slightly stretch, the linguistic and cognitive levels of the students. Likewise, the lesson activities and tasks themselves must be within, or slightly stretch, the capability of
students to perform them productively. If a lesson is clearly well beyond the students' limits, it should not be implemented. This is common sense. I think that debate formats and many of the topics used with them are notably beyond the capacity of many classes and often beyond the methodological expertise and classroom management skills of the JTEs who employ them. This seems evident to me from my classroom observations and reports from other schools that are discussed above.

Having said this, however, perhaps appropriate for many SELHi classes would be a much modified form of informal debate that would be much more productive for students and better achieve the worthwhile objectives for debate discourse, namely, students thinking over an issue from both sides, formulating and explaining both supporting and opposing arguments, listening to those of others and responding to them.

Let's take, for example, the appropriate topic mentioned before - whether parents should pay their children for doing housework. First, students would be given the homework assignment to prepare for a discussion of this topic. In the following class, in pairs, students would be given ample time to discuss and explain in detail with each other both supporting and opposing arguments for the issue. Then they would decide from three to five of their best points for both sides of the issue and write these down briefly. Next, new pairs of students would be formed, with some pairs assigned specifically to support the point and others to oppose the point. The students in their new pairs would share and discuss in detail with each other the appropriate points that they bring to their new partner on the one side of the issue they have been assigned. It would be expected that each student brings some new points that the other did not previously consider with his/her first partner. Then the lesson could shift for a short time to a presentation mode in which the teacher elicits some of these points from some of the students. At this stage it would be appropriate and opportune for the teacher to focus briefly on some grammar, vocabulary and other language items included in the students' statements. In this way, then, for almost all of the class time each and every student is engaged in talking in English with his/her partner in pair work. The speaking time for all students is maximized. During the student-centered pair work, the teacher would move around the room listening, supporting and facilitating the discussions, but directly involving him/herself only at the absolute minimum if and when necessary.

To implement such a lesson, however, teachers must have trained the students over the course of the school year in how to engage in sustained, meaningful, interactive speaking and provided continuous opportunities in class activities and tasks for the students to develop their speaking competence and confidence to the level at which they could do well such a lesson as above or even a debate in a fuller format. In addition, the teacher must be practiced and adept in managing the classroom so that all of the speaking by students is entirely in English.

How, then, can Japanese teachers of English reach such a level of instructional competence?

7. Other English language skill areas in JTEs’ instruction

In this paper I have offered my perspective on SELHi classroom instruction based on my observations at the three SELHi’s in Toyama prefecture and discussions with teachers at these schools, teaching my own SELHi class, and other research that includes reports on activities at SELHi’s in other locations. In doing so, I also have suggested
some specific lesson ideas and instructional approaches that teachers might consider and incorporate in their teaching repertoire. However, this paper certainly is not meant to be a teaching manual and thus my contributions of that kind have been limited. I now will comment just briefly on English language skill areas that were not a prominent part of the lessons I observed.

I saw no evidence that students’ writing skills are being practiced much beyond sentence level. Worksheets and other assigned tasks involved written expression limited to a few sentences and no variety of genres. Instruction in paragraph development seems to be absent, and overall writing instruction does not seem to take a process approach in which students get their ideas, discuss them, write a draft, submit it to the teacher and receive feedback, and then re-write and edit the piece for final submission. In addition, my sense is that when students “research” for debate and other assignments they mostly (horribly) translate from Japanese sources or copy from English sources. As for other schools, I was disturbed again to read that at Kawagoe HS (Matsuzawa, 2004b) students in the SELHi program use 200 basic English sentence patterns with Japanese translations to write “essays” (from 60 to 100 words). Students are directed to replace words in the example sentences with their own. This is not communicative written expression and actually stunts students’ writing. Even the students seem to know this. One said to the visiting reporter: “The list often doesn’t have what I want and even when I try to use the listed sentences, I often cannot hit on the right words [to use in the patterns].” The lack of development of students’ writing skills is rather alarming given the increasing inclusion of a writing sample on nijishiken, the entrance exams made and administered by individual universities.

Oddly, too, teachers so concerned about university entrance exams seem ambivalent about relinquishing yakudoku methodology and I wonder if they will return to it in their instruction of third-year classes at the SELHi’s. The methodology, in fact, has little to do with teaching English grammar or reading skills. Mulvey (1999: 125) concludes from his exhaustive and careful research: “The content of [university entrance] exams can neither explain nor justify the extreme inadequacy of the [yakudoku] methodology currently used to teach English reading skills in the overwhelming majority of Japan’s junior and senior high schools.” Guest (2005) offers the following comment and advice: “The irony is that, despite some high school teachers’ belief that teaching students yakudoku will enable them to pass the entrance exams, such an approach may actually hinder the students’ chances. In fact, more pedagogically sound approaches to comprehensive, meaning-based reading, extending into interactive or productive skills, would seem to be the best formula for university entrance exam success.”

Finally, as for listening, with SELHi classes conducted in the medium of English, students are receiving a lot of aural input from their teachers during lessons. However, they seem to be getting little listening exercise in student-centered oral communication work because, as I have remarked repeatedly, there is little sustained speaking in English in these activities. Other listening work appears limited mostly to playing the CD of the course text and sometimes work on a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Approaches to teaching listening that include top-down and bottom-up processing, for example, seem not to be employed. Listening material is treated “as a set of discrete linguistic units, rather than connected, coherent discourse. As a result, sound discrimination and word recognition, rather than meaning decoding [are] emphasized” (Taguchi, 2005: 7) in the short practices. Again, I am surprised at the lack of more systematic attention to listening instructional because this skill, too, is increasingly included on nijishiken.
8. The problematic role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)

I believe that the Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) program should be abolished within the SELHi program as well as in the English programs at Japanese schools generally. I have discussed the reasons for this view in some detail in Porcaro (2004). Put briefly, they include the fact that almost all ALTs are inexperienced teachers of anything, let alone English as foreign language in the setting of Japan, and come here without expertise; there is no empirical evidence to support that their presence in classrooms since 1987 has effected any notable advance in students’ English proficiency levels or the quality of communicative language teaching (CLT); and their presence actually deters JTEs from assuming their responsibilities and exercising their potential effectiveness. One veteran JTE (Miyashita, 2002) who believes the ALT program should be abolished expressed his view compellingly: “It is we Japanese teachers of English who should take more responsibility for bettering English education in Japan. We are the ones who should study more about cultural differences, improve our skills in verbal English communication and do our best to be role models for our students. It is our duty to help students grow into mature Japanese citizens with healthy and balanced international viewpoints.”

In many or most cases, the role of ALTs is poorly delineated and problematic in many ways. To mention just one matter from my SELHi observations, they seem to be used mostly as live voice boxes for native-speaker pronunciation. Yet, I believe this is fundamentally wrong. It sends the message to students that their Japanese teacher’s pronunciation is not good enough, that only native-speaker pronunciation is proper. How inadequate, then, they are led to think, is their own pronunciation! Indeed, in the classroom JTEs put themselves in the position of students repeating after the ALT in pronunciation drills. That students should aspire to native-speaker pronunciation is wrong. English is an international language and students should be taught to understand what this entails, including the concept of ownership of the language. English is spoken by people around the world with literally thousands of native languages. (There are about 6,800 languages in the world!) Students must understand that there are many varieties of English in the world and pronunciation modeled after native speakers is unnecessary to say the least. Indeed, the definition of who exactly is a native speaker is itself arguable (McKay, 2002). Furthermore, as almost all ALTs are untrained and inexperienced EFL teachers, often, in fact, they are not particularly good classroom speakers. They are unpracticed in speaking in a moderated manner that is comprehensible and accessible for EFL learners, which involves such elements as vocal clarity, use of selective vocabulary and sentence structure, linear progression in presentation, and pacing that includes pauses and repetition.

9. What can be done for JTEs?

I remarked at the start of this paper that one of the important outcomes of the SELHi program is that JTEs are observing each other’s classes and discussing their English teaching as they had never done before. Yet it seems that among themselves JTEs may not be generating enough constructive critique of what they are observing and doing, along with creative and effective prescription as to how instruction could be done better. In addition, they may not be getting the necessary quantity and quality of guidance from other advisors. Indeed, the advice being delivered at some schools may give one cause for concern. At Maibara HS in Shiga (Sakane, 2003), for example, the
English teachers receive advice from four Japanese university professors who visit almost every week. However, one of them told the teachers “that it was imperative for students to hammer down the structural patterns by memorizing texts if they wanted to nurture skills for communicative English.” This is a clear-cut throwback to the audio-lingual method of decades ago and the antithesis of CLT. The Toyama prefecture SELHi JTE who told me about the need for students first to learn a logical way of thinking in Japanese before they could talk (logically) in English, said she had picked that idea from a professor who spoke at a SELHi meeting in Tokyo.

In the previous section I raised the issue of the problematic role of ALTs also because of the staggering expenditure of money (more than 30 billion yen per year) for over 9,000 JET and other contracted ALTs working in Japan. To answer the question I posed above as to how Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) can reach higher levels of instructional competence, I believe that the money spent on ALTs should be spent on JTEs instead. It would be far better invested in long-term, intensive training of JTEs in workshops, seminars, and courses throughout the year for which they could be paid for attendance. Instruction would be provided both to raise their levels of English proficiency and to develop their knowledge of and skills to deliver effective, communicative language teaching methodologies. First-rate, experienced, successful English teachers, both native English speakers and native Japanese speakers, particularly from within Japan, should be employed as trainers in such programs and especially to work with junior and senior high school JTEs at their own schools as long-term mentors. It is clear to me that meetings of SELHi advisory committees at particular schools that are held just a couple times a year and occasional SELHi grand forums held in Tokyo are grossly inadequate for advancing the instructional capacity and effectiveness of JTEs. In addition, with the money I refer to, class size could be significantly reduced and more well-trained English teachers hired in order to facilitate successful implementation of CLT. SELHi’s and all other schools would benefit enormously from such plans.

10. Conclusion

In recent years, Finland has enjoyed an international reputation for the high quality of its education system, which has produced top rankings in mathematics, science and reading in international student assessment tests. The principal of a comprehensive school in Helsinki stated to a visiting reporter the three reasons for her country’s educational accomplishments: “Teachers, teachers, and teachers” (Kaiser, 2005). Japanese educators really need to learn this lesson. It is indeed “teachers, teachers, and teachers” who will make all the difference in the quality of education for their students.

In this paper I have tried to present a hard and honest look at what I believe is happening and not happening in the English language instruction in the classrooms of the three SELHi’s in Toyama prefecture. I have tried to identify areas of the program that are having positive outcomes and also those that need serious attention and improvement. The Japanese teachers of English at the SELHi’s are very enthusiastic, committed, and hard-working individuals who have already achieved a lot for themselves and their students with the SELHi project. They are developing and using better and more effective ways of teaching English. They have demonstrated the courage to take the risks of trying new things in their classrooms and maybe sometimes not doing those things so well with their students. That is how we learn in this life and these teachers surely will continue to advance in the quality and effectiveness of their work.
On three occasions during the past year, after my earlier observations from which this paper developed, I made follow-up visits to the classrooms of several teachers at one of the Toyama SELHi's. Earlier in the year I was disappointed to see that after their initial accomplishments, which I pointed out at the start of this paper, the teachers seemed to have settled into a stagnant state of operations that was not yielding much further advance in effective English language instruction for the students. However, later in the year I was genuinely pleased to see significant progress. Several of the areas of instruction that I pointed out in this paper as needing serious attention and improvement have been addressed and are being done better and better. The JTEs are both catching up with the capabilities of the students and attending to their learning needs. The attitude and level of participation and performance of the students, correspondingly, have notably risen.

I sincerely hope that teacher development and instructional achievement will be on-going at all of the SELHi's, even after the end of the designated three-year term for each of the schools. I have some concern that only two of the eighteen high schools first designated as SELHi’s in 2002 have decided to continue the program in the so-called second phase (Mizui, 2005b). However, I am sure that individual teachers and the schools will not abandon their hard-worked-for accomplishments and their students, but continue to do more and better work. I hope that the analysis and the suggestions I have offered in this paper will serve the teachers profitably as an agenda and as guidelines for what they need to do to upgrade their teaching skills and English language programs. As a participating SELHi teacher and observer of these programs, I, along with other involved educators in Toyama, offer any assistance we may be called upon to render. I encourage the high school teachers to continue their serious and productive efforts to achieve the aims of the SELHi program and advance the English language education of their students. As the Ministry of Education has pointed out in its “strategic plan”, at stake is nothing less than “the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.”

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