SELHi Retrospective: Reflective Practice and Teacher Professional Development

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Part I: Conceptual Framework, Classroom Observations, Advisor/Teacher Role

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 the necessity for Japanese to acquire competent communication skills in English in order to engage in the global affairs of the international community in the 21st century and to further the interests of Japan as a nation itself. At the same time, the Ministry acknowledged the inadequacy of the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population and the restrictions that this imposes on exchanges with the rest of the world and recognition of Japan’s contributions in all fields. 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 Super English Language High Schools (SELHi’s) as model schools which would 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 were to receive grants of 3.5 million yen per year for the three-year program. More than 160 high schools throughout the country have participated in the SELHi program. Toyama University of International Studies (TUINS) High School (富山国際大学附属高等学校) did so for two three-year periods from April 2004 to March 2010, having received from the Ministry of Education an extension of the program after the initial period of designation.

I served as a member of the TUINS HS SELHi Advisory Committee (SELHi 運営指導委員会) for the entire six-year period. In a previous volume of this journal, I published an initial report, titled “SELHi Classroom Perspectives” (Porcaro, 2006a), that included specific and detailed descriptions and analyses of, and recommendations for, instructional practices, based on a significant number of classroom observations at TUINS HS and the two other designated SELHi’s in Toyama Prefecture at that time. The observations were made in the fall of 2004 and during the following year, 2005. The report also drew on my many hours

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of discussion with the teachers at those three schools during that period of time. Later in 2006, I published a second report titled “SELHi Progress, Problems and Prescriptions” (Porcaro, 2006b), drawing mostly from further classroom observations at TUINS HS and discussions with teachers at the advisory committee meetings and during my other visits to the school. In the report I recounted the significant accomplishments within the SELHi program, primarily at TUINS HS, and addressed particular areas of instruction that required further attention and development. This paper is the third and final report on the program. It was completed in 2009 during the final year of TUINS High School’s designation as a SELHi. It is a retrospective consideration of the program based on action research and it recounts the noteworthy professional development that has occurred among the teachers at the school, framed by their active engagement in reflective practice.

2. Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is an essential element in the ongoing process of career-long teacher professional development (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Reflection draws on teachers’ actual classroom experiences and involves a systematic process of examination that guides their ongoing instruction. “Reflective practice occurs when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner, subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice” (Farrell, 2008, p. 1).

Han (1995) reminds us that “teaching is often an uncertain, dynamic and complex practice” and that “teachers must make constant judgments about appropriate goals, teaching methods and students' learning.” There are no fixed answers to the challenges and problems encountered in classroom instruction. Thus, teachers must constantly examine and evaluate their practice in order to improve their ability to make appropriate and sound judgments, and become better teachers. Han counsels that the reflective process takes teachers “into the center of the learning situation and into the center of their own doubts” and may leave them “frustrated, embarrassed or confused, and, finally, feeling at-risk.”

Teachers’ professional growth and development through the process of reflective practice involves transformational learning. Kohonen (2007) states, “Essential in this concept is that teachers emancipate themselves from their constraining educational beliefs and assumptions and work towards a professional
identity as an educator, designing new pedagogical solutions as appropriate.” He adds that “teachers need to share their ideas, insights and uncertainties with each other. They need to clarify and redefine their educational beliefs, images and assumptions. They need to work towards increased reflectivity by considering their goals and practices, judging their findings against empirical classroom-based evidence.” In this way teachers can acquire the capacity to succeed in doing transformative work in their classrooms.

Truly, then, in their reflective practice, the TUINS HS SELHi teachers have demonstrated remarkable courage and commitment in moving beyond the security of the old prescribed, and ineffective, *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) way of teaching in the medium of Japanese, in their determination to make meaningful changes in order to advance the quality and effectiveness of their instruction for the benefit of their students’ learning. Thus, it is very important that the community of practice, including both teachers and advisors, establishes and works within a supportive environment for reflective activities.

Kojima (2008a, pp. 194-195, citing Zeichner & Liston) lists the following integral features of reflective teaching: “A reflective teacher a) examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice; b) is aware of and questions the assumptions and values that he or she brings to teaching; c) is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches; d) takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; and e) takes responsibility for his or her own professional development.”

In his work promoting professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language, Kojima (2008a, 2008b) takes an approach that integrates the concepts of autonomy, reflection, and collaboration. He sees reflection and collaboration as strategies for developing autonomy, and states that genuinely successful teachers “have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of their teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers” (2008a, p. 192, citing Little).

To complete the description of the conceptual framework of Kojima’s approach to teacher professional development, he characterizes collaborative teachers as those who “a) share common goals, professional values and norms, b) have frequent conversation about teaching and learning, c) observe and provide
feedback for one another, d) work collaboratively on the curriculum, and e) teach one another about
teaching, learning and leading” (2008a, p. 198, citing Dornyei & Murphey).

A broad and very serviceable definition of action research is an “inquiry teachers undertake to understand and improve their own practices” (Mingucci, 1999, citing Winter). The purpose of action research, as a means for professional development, is for teachers to identify and resolve the practical problems and issues they encounter in their everyday classroom instruction. Mingucci clarifies the process by stating that it “involves defining a problem, making a plan of action, implementing that plan of action, reflecting on the results, and revising as a basis for further planning.” Reflective practice, with the aim to advance the quality and effectiveness of one’s instruction, is based on such action research. Furthermore, as Mingucci asserts, “it suggests that knowledge is created through reflexive and transactional modes of inquiry and the interpretation of such inquiries and their findings. The inquirer in action research is a full participant in the situation, because no outsider would have enough insight into the complexity of the social process being studied to analyze it fully.” Crawford (2004, p. 108) adds that this method of professional development “turns teachers into active creators of knowledge about themselves, their educational settings, learners, and teaching practices.”

As Stewart (2004) contends, it is highly important that the legitimacy of reflective practice gain greater recognition, acceptance, and reward. Reflective action research generates knowledge, and the scholarship of teaching, in fact, has come to be more and more acknowledged in professional journals and other publications, in teacher education programs, and within university faculties. Thus, the activities of the teachers at TUINS HS, as part of the SELHi program, bear significance not only for their own professional development but also as contributions to the base of acquired knowledge for the field of teaching English as a foreign language.

Finally, Gebhard (2005) encourages teachers, as part of their professional development, to go beyond reflection and action research seeking solutions to instructional problems or to improve particular points of their teaching. He asks teachers to “explore teaching” and to “see teaching differently” by deliberately changing certain behaviors and ways of doing things, even though successful, in order to see what happens and, thus, to have the chance to discover new things about their teaching. He suggests that teachers try some things in the classroom that they have never done before and learn from what happens as a result. For
example, teachers might change the configuration of classroom seats or their own position in the classroom so that they and students literally see the instructional experience from a different angle. TUINS HS English teachers could incorporate Gebhard’s approach into their ongoing exploration of their instruction and what works best for them and their students.

3. Community of Practice

The SELHi program at TUINS HS during its initial three-year period (2004 – 2007) was limited to the single International Course class in each of the three years of study. This seems to have been a wise plan in that it allowed the teachers to formulate instructional goals and strategies, devise instructional approaches, and develop requisite instructional skills to implement the program while working with classes of students who had chosen a course of study centered on intensified English language learning and had a relatively high level of motivation for such a program of study along with generally higher levels of English language proficiency than students in the other courses at the school. Previous reports (Porcaro 2006a, 2006b) have examined and commented on the TUINS HS teachers’ work during that period of years.

However, with the Ministry of Education’s designation of TUINS HS as a SELHi for a second period of three years (2007 – 2010), the school set out on a bold expansion of the program to cover all courses of study, which included, in addition to the International Course, the tokushin course (one class in each of the three years of study) and the “Frontier” course (five classes in each of the three years of study). While students enrolled in the former course have generally higher levels of academic discipline and achievement, those in the latter course are distinctly less academically oriented and motivated in their studies. Thus, the expansion of the SELHi program to those classes, in particular, entailed a major challenge for both teachers and students. In addition, the number of teachers then who would give instruction in the “SELHi way” expanded to several more.

As a member of the SELHi advisory committee, I felt that the principal task faced by the teachers in these circumstances would be teaching English in English effectively to the lower proficiency, less academically motivated students in the Frontier classes, who had never before experienced such instruction, and the critical necessity to bring those students to accept such instruction from the start. The teachers just beginning their work in the SELHi way of instruction, and doing so with these classes, faced a double
challenge compared with those teachers who had already been teaching the International Course classes over the previous three years.

3.1 Teaching English in English

From the start of the SELHi program at TUINS HS, during the initial three-year period when it applied only to the International Course classes, careful attention was directed at the English spoken in the classroom by the Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) as well as the one native English-speaking (NET) teacher. As one of the advisors, and a teacher of the second-year International Course class, I emphasized the point that teaching effectively in English is a skill acquired from training, practice, and experience. It does not manifest itself simply because a teacher has a high level of English language fluency. At the same time, teachers need to understand the rationale for teaching English in English to all levels of classes.

Simply put, English language learners need English language input in the classroom. Furthermore, understanding English to be an international language implies that ownership of the language is in the hands of non-native speakers as well as native speakers. Thus, it is essential that Japanese students see and hear their JTEs as models of successful English language learners. JTEs are potentially the greatest resource and motivators for their students. Only when JTEs themselves make the effort and take the risk to use English in their classroom instruction can they have the moral authority to expect and elicit from their students the use of English. Only when JTEs can show their own comfort and security using English can they make a comfortable and secure environment in the classroom for their students to use English. Only when JTEs themselves have acquired the tolerance to accept not being able to express themselves in English as fully as they would like to, can they pass on to the students in their classrooms this critical element of language learning. Moreover, JTEs demonstrated confidence in using English in front of their students inspires their students’ faith in their teachers, who then in turn are strengthened even more to feel freedom and assurance to do what they want to do to make their lessons more communicative and meaningful, more interesting and more effective.

Those TUINS HS teachers who had already taught the International Course classes during the initial three-year SELHi period understood well, and could confirm to the new teachers instructing the Frontier classes, that merely speaking English in the classroom does not equate with the skillful use of English to
teach the language effectively in the classroom. My contribution as advisor was to enunciate to the teachers the elements of effective use of English in the classroom, to remark to them on my observations of their use of English in their classrooms, and to open my own classroom with the International Course second-year class for their observation of my instruction.

As for the nature of those skills, teachers need to speak with great vocal clarity and with an appropriate volume. Especially with low proficiency students, they need to speak with a simple and limited vocabulary and syntax, and in a careful linear manner, without diversions or interruptions in the points they make. Points need to be expressed concisely and precisely. The content must be cognitively simple in order to fit students’ level of comprehension. Teachers must speak in carefully measured phrases, followed by pauses, and employ a judicious amount of repetition. They must speak with a suitable pace and rhythm. Finally, they must have tolerance that still they may not be understood fully by all students. One of the ways for teachers, both those new to teaching English in English and veterans of this manner of instruction, to develop and hone these elements is to rehearse what they will say in class and be exceedingly well-prepared to present their well-structured lessons.

The TUINS HS teachers did not consign or outsource the teaching of English in English to ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers), as happens at many schools from elementary to high school level. Almost all ALTs are untrained, unqualified, inexperienced, and ineffective as classroom teachers. They do not have the expertise to teach a class of Japanese English language learners merely because they are native speakers. As I have pointed out, it is imperative that JTEs be the principal instructors of Japanese students. They must not surrender their responsibility to teach their students in English.

In December 2008, the Ministry of Education announced proposed curriculum changes that would be implemented from the 2013 school year. These include a plan for high school English classes to be conducted primarily in English, although officials said that difficult aspects of instruction, such as grammar, could be taught in Japanese. TUINS HS teachers have much to offer other high school teachers in Toyama from their experience and success in conducting their English lessons in English for many years. I hope there will be opportunities for them in the coming years to engage with these teachers in a collaborative way to assist in implementing the ministry’s directives at their schools. Indeed, TUINS HS English teachers and administrators have always been very conscious of their responsibility as a SELHi to share with
teachers at other schools, in a wider community of practice, the educational assets they have acquired during the tenure of the SELHi program.

3.2 SELHi II (2007-2010) Observations

3.2.1 Teaching in English and Classroom Management

TUINS HS teachers succeeded very well in raising the quality of their classroom English speaking skills, so much so that one of their remarkable achievements has been the easy acceptance by Frontier course students of English lessons delivered almost entirely in English. The teachers’ skills to present their lessons in English comfortably, assuredly, and effectively were earned through hard, directed effort and their willingness to accept the constructive critiques of the members of the advisory committee after we had observed their classes. Indeed, I must confess that at one meeting I delivered a quite inappropriate harangue on one teacher’s manner of giving directions for a task to be done by the students in the class. I later apologized but the incident displayed the constant strength of the teachers and their commitment to the SELHi program over the years, even in face of sometimes harsh, though honest and well-meaning, remarks from some advisors. I think it is fair to say that a high level of mutual respect has always governed this community of practice.

The immediate and observable consequence of the teachers’ competence to teach English in English is their very well-managed classrooms. Effective and efficient classroom management is vital for teachers to be able to achieve their instructional goals and objectives, and to carry out their lessons with their methods and materials. Classroom management refers to instructional planning and the entire instructional process. It involves not only matters of discipline that may need to be addressed with students but also much more essentially the relationship between teacher and students. It includes, in fact, everything that happens in the classroom. Students in the TUINS HS classes of all courses are attentive, responsive, on task, mannered, at ease, and supportive of each other and the teacher.

Sakui (2007) points out the much more complex roles of students, as well as teachers, in communicative language teaching (CLT). In typical teacher-fronted grammar-translation classes, students are expected mostly to be silent listeners. Even if some are not attentive and do not participate when called upon, the instructional process is not jeopardized. In CLT, however, students’ roles are dramatically different. They
are expected to be active participants in pair and group work, to speak in English and express their thoughts, experiences, knowledge, and opinions. Moreover, they are accountable for their performance individually, and for that of the pair or group and the class as a whole. For effective communicative language instruction it is imperative that teachers make clear to students these roles and expectations, gain students’ acceptance of them, and manage smoothly all that happens in the classroom in the course of their lessons. TUINS HS teachers have achieved this exceptionally well, not only since the early days of the SELHi program with the International Course classes, but more impressively, and surprisingly rapidly, with the Frontier classes.

TUINS HS teachers have established successfully and thoroughly the legitimacy and effectiveness of their English language instruction as non-native speakers in the eyes of their students, among themselves and to all observers. Team teaching with an ALT was essentially eliminated from their classrooms several years ago as they and the school administrators do not buy into the “native speaker fallacy” that only native speakers can bring authenticity to classroom instruction merely through the perceived supremacy of their English. Lamentably, this fallacy operates in most secondary schools in Japan and in many circumstances leads JTEs into an unprincipled “surrendering [of] initiative and leadership” to an ALT before their own students in their own classrooms (Miyazato, 2009, p. 39). The TUINS HS English program should be a model for the wider community of practice within and beyond its prefecture.

3.2.2 Lesson Development for Communicative Language Teaching

During the second designated SELHi period, TUINS HS teachers also became much more adept at developing their own lesson materials derived from the content of the textbooks that they use, both for the International Course classes and those of the Frontier and tokushin courses. They have come to understand and accept the importance for students first to draw meaning from the topics that they read about in the textbooks and to construct their own meaning on the topics as well. The chair of the advisory committee, at a meeting in the earlier stage of the SELHi program at TUINS HS, remarked properly that an indisputable fact is the need to use textbooks in high school English classes, though they are incompatible with communicative competence. Ogura (2008), in fact, examined ten authorized textbooks for senior high school English Oral Communication courses and reported that they are mostly non-communicative in nature with only pre-communicative language practice, and do not provide adequate opportunities for
students to develop their oral communicative competence. It is clear, then, that teachers must exercise their creative talents and instructional expertise to devise a repertoire of lesson activities and materials that enable this objective. Clearly, it is a major challenge for JTEs throughout the secondary school system (Taguchi, 2005).

TUINS HS teachers, in fact, have become better and better able to identity appropriate themes and content points from the readings in the textbook units and to design lesson activities and materials based on them that appeal to students’ interests, fit within their cognitive domain, and elicit from them productive use of English in discussion, presentation, and writing. Constructing their own creative and effective lesson materials enables teachers to control the instructional process rather than be limited by the dictates of the textbook. Moreover, knowing precisely the thinking behind their own materials, teachers not only can deliver their lessons more soundly, but also with the passion they feel for the lessons. Students, who readily pick up on that, are apt, then, to respond more positively and genuinely (Bress, 2009). Such lesson materials should use content from students’ personal experiences and their own social and cultural setting, which facilitates, encourages and motivates their use of the language. The materials need to be prepared with great care and organized in appealing and easy-to-follow layouts. They should provide students with extensive and varied language use (Porcaro, 2003). Moreover, as TUINS HS teachers have come to appreciate, it is very important to master the mechanics of setting up and guiding student-centered work with these materials for smooth performance. This includes, for example, simply setting a minimum number of written words for a prepared presentation, having enough magnets for students to attach their illustrations on the front board, and organizing the classroom logistics for comfortable pair or group work.

To further advance this work, I have suggested that they also try more to “think out of the box”, that is, to develop the materials with such topical points that draw more imagination and critical thinking from the students, and thus more expansive and extensive use of English. The teachers have seen several of my own lesson materials that illustrate this advisement. In addition, at times I have brainstormed with some of the teachers in their lesson preparation meetings and, of course, remarked on their lesson ideas after observing their classes.

Furthermore, I have stated that I would like to see their students engage more in pair discussions on unit themes other than those discussions that relate to their findings from project research in preparation for
presentations to the class. Students need more opportunities to draw on their own thoughts, feelings, experiences, general knowledge, opinions, and imagination in such discussions. In addition, I have suggested, explained, demonstrated, and given specific examples how spontaneous role-playing situations derived from textbook unit content can be devised for students to enact in pairs.

These kinds of lessons would be suitable, still at this time, for the International Course classes of all three years rather than for the Frontier classes, which need highly structured speaking formats. However, one issue that may come into play to account for the limited amount of lesson work done as just described. As one other member of the advisory committee, too, has noted in the past, the TUINS HS teachers may differentiate their roles and those taken by me and another NET in our instructing the second-year International Course class (at the university for the first five years and at the high school itself in the final sixth year of the SELHi program). Interactive oral communication lessons as described above need to be employed by the JTEs as well as the NETs. Likewise, I would like to feel more liberty to include a greater variety of instruction in my own work with the International Course classes, knowing that the opportunities for students to engage in interactive oral communication is not so heavily dependent on my lessons.

3.2.3 Teaching Grammar

While the use of *yakudoku* methodology has disappeared almost entirely from TUINS HS teachers’ classroom instruction, the matter of how to teach “grammar” constantly arises in their discussions with the program advisors. First of all, it bears repeating that the *yakudoku* methodology not only fails to teach students communicative English, but also, in fact, fails to teach students an understanding of English grammar and how to use it well. It does not teach students how to read well or even how to translate well. Thus, ironically, it fails to prepare them properly for the English language part of university entrance examinations, which is its declared rationale (Guest, 2000; Mulvey, 1999).

It is a stretch at least, if not an illusion, for JTEs to think that merely because they speak in Japanese their students understand their explanation of grammar points. In fact, most students understand little about English grammar and certainly do not exercise much control of its usage. (The results of survey of senior high school students conducted by Benesse Corporation in 2006 indicated that less than 40 percent of the respondents could understand 70 percent of more of English lessons which were taught in Japanese
Indeed, as Murphy & Hastings (2006, p. 9) point out, it is “extremely difficult to understand or learn technical information about the grammar of any language, whether [one’s] own or any other.” They identify the problem for teachers of a foreign language that explaining grammar in simple terms is often, in fact, inaccurate and can lead students to confusion and errors in usage, yet attempting to explain its complexity is simply impractical.

While some explanation of grammar points, in Japanese or English, surely is desirable and necessary, clearly it is not sufficient for students in order to gain a good understanding and control of the application of grammar elements. Effective instruction for grammar points requires systematic and imaginative ways for students to use the language repeatedly in meaningful contexts. “The question is how should grammar be learned so that its intrinsic communicative character is understood and acted upon” (Widdowson, cited in Bruton, 2009, p. 383). Bruton adds, “the crucial, underlying point is that grammar is conceived in terms of meanings not forms, or rules.” Students must work with grammar in contexts that are real to them “so that the grammatical meaning takes on genuine significance” (p. 384). I have discussed this matter with TUINS HS teachers emphasizing that there does not exist a “silver bullet” – a single simple panacea - for this important and difficult aspect of English language teaching. A variety of instructional devises need to be employed to fit the particular elements of grammar being taught and practiced.

Swan (2006) and Azar (2007) offer eminently sensible approaches to teaching grammar. Swan (p. 5) advises well: “We know surprisingly little about how languages are learnt, and even less about how they can best be taught… This is nowhere more true than in the area of grammar.” Thus, most teachers are uncertain as to how to teach grammar, what grammar to teach, and how much of it to teach. Swan (p. 11) goes on to note with common sense that “grammar’ is many different things which are best taught and learnt in very different ways.” Teachers should not dismiss particular instructional approaches on doctrinaire grounds. A host of “traditional and non-traditional activities have their place, depending on the point being taught, the learner and the context.” The problem in the instruction of most JTEs, however, is that traditionally they rely almost entirely on explanations in Japanese, telling rules, using meaningless examples, and not employing any communicative practice that is interesting, relevant, and effective.

Azar (2007), like Swan, allows teachers the license to do it all: to focus both on fluency and accuracy, employ both inductive and deductive teaching, use both authentic and adapted language, work both with
sentence-level and connected discourse, have both open-ended communicative interaction and controlled response exercises, give both explicit instruction and communicative exposure, and attend both to awareness and performance. Importantly, she makes clear, however, that the grammar-based teaching (GBT) which she advocates “is not to be confused with Grammar Translation. There is not translation nor rule-memorization in GBT, instruction is not conducted in the L1 (even though the L1 may be included in the teaching, depending on the situation), and GBT focuses on spoken as well as written language, and has a listening and speaking component not generally found in Grammar Translation.”

Azar emphasizes concepts of grammar, how its components work to convey meaning, not rules. As for communicative methods, she stresses the importance of engaging students in communicative practice that centers on their own lives, including the context of the classroom itself. “Communicative practice means that real people are communicating in real time about real things in a real place for a real purpose.”

A specific example of communicative grammar work that I presented to the TUINS HS teachers came from a lesson of a student teacher at the school, which was observed by several teachers there and myself. From the textbook unit under study, the student teacher had presented to her class the structure “without (x), (subject) could not have + participle”. She gave the class a long explanation in Japanese along with a translation of the textbook sentence. Thus, I later pointed out, the students, in fact, were left to derive any meaning for the sentence from Japanese rather than from an experience with the language form in English. She could have told the class a short story about her student teaching with the class and then stated, “Without [her supervising teacher’s] help, I could not have taught this class.” Had I been teaching this point, one of my short stories would have been about my daughter who lives alone a long distance from home while at university, concluding with, “Without her mother’s help, she could not have learned to cook good meals for herself.” Students would readily understand these personally meaningful examples and then really want to share some stories of their own with a partner that would include practice of the target sentence structure.

TUINS HS teachers are acquiring more and more capacity to develop and implement such grammar lessons in their classrooms and a major focus of their work in 2009 was the development of an effective repertoire of concrete lessons ideas for specific grammar points.
3.2.4 Other Instructional Areas

In a previous SELHi report (Porcaro, 2006b) I pointed out the need to address the limited reading fluency of many students by fully implementing an extensive reading program with graded readers. At TUINS HS there is a considerable number of such readers, but I have urged the teachers to build up a much larger collection of very low level readers for use especially by Frontier course students. In particular, for example, I have recommended the excellent new Foundations Reading Library published by Thomson ELT (Cengage), which books are written with characters and themes for high school student readers. Moreover, I have urged teachers to devise and put into effect a systematic program of extensive reading for all classes of students.

4. The Role of Advisor/Classroom Instructor

The TUINS HS SELHi advisory committee included several university professors who were or had been also practicing classroom teachers of English. One of the aims of the committee was to stimulate, facilitate, and channel the high school teachers’ reflection process by means of the semi-annual classroom observations and follow-up plenary meetings with the teachers of those lessons and other teachers, and the committee members. The teachers whose lessons were observed prepared in advance for committee members an assemblage of papers to explain in detail the background of the particular lessons in the context of the full units of study, and the aims and procedures to be employed in the lessons to be observed, along with all of the instructional materials. At the plenary committee meetings afterwards, the teachers always at first were given time to comment on their own lessons before a roundtable critique from the committee members. In that sense, the advisors’ comments were both on the teachers’ terms, addressing the issues they raised and the points they focused on, and from their own perspectives.

Kojima (2008a, p. 199) lists some of the fundamental features of his own collaborative and reflective supervision as an EFL teacher trainer which were relevant as well for the TUINS HS SELHi committee. These aims were: “to help the teacher to develop professional competence and autonomy through practice in reflection and self-evaluation; to jointly engage in problem finding, problem solving, and trying new procedures, programs, curriculums; to have educational expertise, view teaching as complex work, and openly discuss the work and how it was done to facilitate effective performance; … [and] to engage the
teacher in the process of reflective teaching practice while fostering critical inquiry into the process of
teaching and learning.”

The members of the TUINS HS SELHi committee tried to provide, as Kojima (2008b, p. 24), “a
judicious blend of sensitive supportive and constructive challenge”, though I have already admitted to
sometimes crossing a line where my criticism could have subverted deserved support were it not for the
strength of the TUINS HS teachers and their understanding and indulgence for my passion and strong
manner of expression.

Indeed, I was not alone on the committee, especially in the first two years of the program, feeling
frustration, disappointment, and pessimism over the perceived lack of progress among the high school
teachers, who seemed to continue some lesson practices we abhorred and viewed as purposeless and
ineffective. Furthermore, committee members felt that the format of the classroom observations and
committee meetings was itself inadequate to yield substantial positive outcomes. As we had to observe
more than one lesson being conducted at the same time, and sometimes three or four, we spent a limited
time in each classroom. Then, within the ninety minutes of the committee meeting, each speaker had to
limit his/her time for comments to considerably less than ten minutes.

As for the classroom practice of the TUINS HS teachers, as noted throughout earlier sections of this
paper, by the third year of the program there were clear indications that it was advancing positively and that
the effort and commitment of the teachers was producing desired results. This progress continued with
greater momentum during the second three-year period of the SELHi designation, which included this
instruction for the tokushin and Frontier course classes as discussed above. I, along with other committee
members, recognized that in a community of practice ultimately the teachers themselves, individually and
collectively, would have to find out what works and what does not work for them and their particular
students. They would have to take responsibility for themselves and endure their own frustrations,
disappointments, and failings that would occur on their way to achieving greater and greater success and
satisfaction. At one time I remarked to another committee advisor, “It’s a career-long process, isn’t it?”
And he, in a later response stated wisely to “always keep in mind that all of us are learners.”

At the same time, I was in a unique position among the advisors in that I taught the second-year
International Course class on a weekly basis throughout the six years. During the first five years of the
program, the class came to the university campus on Fridays for two 90-minute lessons, one taught by me and the other by one of four other teachers who instructed those classes during those years. For the sixth and final year of the SELHi designated period, the classes were taught at the high school itself.

Before the final year, in addition, on five occasions I taught my class at TUINS HS itself so that my lessons could be observed by the high school English teachers. Thus, the JTEs and one NET could see my work on their home territory with the very same class that some of them taught. They could see the manner of my instruction and the instructional devises I employed, though my lessons, as remarked above, mostly involved students engaged in interactive oral communication in pairs. They could see the effectiveness, as well as the flaws, of my lessons and classroom practice. They could see the results of the training the students received in my classes and their performance under my instruction. They could see what they could expect from the same students in their own lessons and thereby the observations should have enhanced their own instructional capacity. In this context, referring to teacher education, DelliCarpini (2009, p. 42) observes: “By experiencing the method or strategy in practice, participants will be better able to build a sense of efficacy through vicarious experience; in other words, watching someone who is successful at a particular task successfully model that task in an authentic situation tends to increase the observer’s sense of their ability to also successfully complete a task.”

Moreover, I could experience teaching over the course of the same full school year the same students that some of the high school teachers taught. Thus, I could know what it was like to teach them. In fact, I thought perhaps there was a turning point in my role as advisor after two successive weeks in September 2005 in which I taught four 50-minute lessons at TUINS HS that were observed by several of the teachers. Previously just two of them had seen me in class with the second-year International Course at the university the year before. The experience may have validated my credentials and credibility in their eyes.

I also visited the high school by myself seven other times until 2009 in order to observe some teachers’ lessons and to have long discussions with them individually, in small groups, or at full staff meetings. Those visits also included brainstorming with the teachers in their preparation of lessons for upcoming units of study. In these circumstances, these activities overcame the inherent difficulties with the format followed on formal advisory committee meeting days and were enormously more productive. Furthermore, my
efforts to work with the teachers included giving them a number of articles to read from English language teaching journals dealing with very practical matters directly related to their classroom instruction.

5. Retrospect and Prospect

The TUINS High School English teachers and the advisory committee members learned immeasurably both professionally and personally from the experience of participating in a community of practice through the SELHi project over the period of six years, dedicated to advancing the quality of English language instruction for all students at the school. The TUINS HS English teachers’ growth and development has been most impressive and certainly their courage, confidence, and capacity will continue to drive them forward to greater and greater achievements in the enterprise to which they have firmly committed themselves.

Part II. Inside SELHi: Viewpoint of a TUINS HS English Teacher

In Part II of this paper, I (Lawrence Wan) will give an account of my observations as part of the TUINS High School SELHi development team. I joined the school’s English teaching staff as the only full-time NET during the second year of the first three-year SELHi period. This part of the paper is organized into two sections, the overall major effects that SELHi has had on the English department and the endeavors made by English teachers in the classroom.

1. The Right Attitude

Despite our many failures, whatever successes we have achieved must first be attributed to the level of motivation, cooperation and transparency reached by the English teaching staff. Not only is such a working environment desirable in any professional institution, but it is also essential in order to realize the ambitious goals we had set for ourselves.

This was more easily said than done. First, many experienced JTEs already had their own established ways of teaching, and even younger teachers had mostly only been taught in the more traditional yakudoku

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2 Part II of this paper was written by Lawrence Wan.
style themselves. They knew that that method of teaching, though not perfect, worked to a degree. Not everyone was convinced that Project-Based Learning (PBL) and/or communicative classes were more effective, or whether the teachers could pull off such classes well enough, much less all in English. Second, all of the English teachers, including myself, felt the vulnerability that came with opening one’s own classes to criticism. Nobody wanted to be the first, and nobody wanted to criticize each others’ work too honestly for fear of hearing harsh criticism about their own work. Third, the SELHi project was not the only item on the English teacher’s plate. Some teachers were worried whether there were sufficient time and resources for a good enough job to be done. These reservations were shared by not a few of the English teaching staff.

Fortunately, the team was able to come to an understanding on a few key points: (i) exploring new methodologies of English instruction has many benefits for both teachers and students, (ii) mastering new techniques will take time and the SELHi period is but part of a lifelong teacher development training period, (iii) progress depends on honest yet constructive criticism, and (iv) working together saves time and allows for more to be achieved. These points, though obvious for any well-functioning team, took some time to reach, owing not entirely but largely to the heavy resistance English teachers in Japan have against breaking from the traditional *yakudoku* style of teaching English. Once these points of understanding were reached, both at the individual and collective level, things started to change for the better.

One of the first things that changed was that meetings were conducted in English. JTEs now had a place to practice their English without inhibitions, and have at present acquired more confidence in using English than before being designated by MEXT as a SELHi school. JTEs also had a chance to experience an all-English conversational environment to know how it feels to require their students to do the same. The NET and the ALT could correct the JTE’s English, all without it being taken personally since to do so has now directly become part of the job directive. Cooperation and communication among the teaching staff increased as we listened more carefully to, and anticipated more alertly what each other was trying to say. Finally, the NET and ALT were able to speak up more about the kind of student-centered classes that we ourselves have experienced outside of Japan, which proved to be helpful in designing lesson plans. Communication was not smooth all of the time, and Japanese was heard on occasion, but as far as teacher development went, it seemed that the pros far outweighed the cons.
Another important change came in the form of redoing the entire English curriculum. Until then, the nature of the classes depended mainly on the textbook and the teacher’s style of instruction. The former was often chosen to suit the latter. However, when TUINS High School became a designated SELHi school, English classes could no longer stand alone as one-shot lessons. Classes had to link up strategically under an integrated approach to provide students with certain English and project-building skills. Similar content, vocabulary and grammar points were taught across different classes at around the same time to deepen students’ grasp of the material. The specific English skill to focus on, however, was decidedly different for each class, thereby changing the purpose and nature of each class. For example, whereas one class used the topic of the environment to practice paragraph and essay writing, another class would use the same topic to practice speaking in pair work activities and oral presentations. Therefore, students were given a balanced opportunity to practice all four English skills while working with similar content and vocabulary during a given period of time. And since the type of class, whether focusing on oral communication or process writing, was fixed in the curriculum, teachers were asked to step out of their comfort zone and to design original lessons to fit the new strategy. This, as can be imagined, took some time to iron out, but at the same time, directed most of the English meetings into discussing teaching methodologies far beyond the yakudoku style of teaching English.

Finally, the English teachers at TUINS High school put aside their pride to begin anew as learners of a new trade. Every other week, a teacher would open one of his/her classes to the entire English teaching staff, which was followed by a meeting. These open classes allowed us to work out teaching methodologies and other finer points necessary in order to deliver a successful class that fit our SELHi strategy. Items on the agenda ranged from class management and methodologies delivered in English to test design and grading. The next section will discuss in more detail about those specifics that we teachers had to work through regarding English classes.

2. In the Classroom

As per the TUINS High School’s SELHi theme, classes were not only to be carried out all in English, but also purposed to impart project-building skills to the students. Consequently, all classes must have a detailed syllabus, each linked to the other classes that are also to be taught to the same group of students.
The first challenge, the all-English routine, proved to be quite a daunting task. Years of speaking mostly in Japanese accustomed JTEs to rely mostly, if not entirely, on Japanese as the means for checking comprehension and understanding. Most JTEs started only with easy yet limited classroom English. Much time was taken to teach and orally repeat these classroom English phrases, even tested as part of the first quiz, only to go back to instructing and explaining in Japanese for much of the class.

The key to sticking to English as much as possible, from my observation, lay in (i) the understanding by both teachers and students that because the Japanese are not native speakers of English, everything need not be understood, (ii) the teacher’s attitude and ability to create a mandatory yet relaxed English speaking environment, (iii) the teacher’s choice of words and way of speaking in English, and (iv) meticulous use of modeling and examples following explanations to show students what output is expected of them. Points (i)–(iii) can be summed up as class management. Point (iv) is class preparation.

Regarding point (i), both the teacher and students of an all-English class must understand that for non-native speakers of English, 100% comprehension is not expected. That was conditioned from the yakudoku and grammar drilling classes, both of which require 100% accuracy or else students face the wrath of receiving a zero for a completely wrong answer. All-English classes are an experience from which students can draw meaning from every aspect of the class, be it the textbook, teacher’s instructions or the student-centered activities that may or may not require interaction with other students who are also speaking only in English. At the same time that 100% understanding may not be achievable in an all-English class, neither will students fail to understand anything at all. The challenge is to work with the words that one knows, to construct and guess the meaning from what is understood, and to experience and acquire English at one’s level and pace of language development accordingly by working in various activities. If the teacher understands this point well, and can convey this point convincingly to the students, that will help get one step closer to the desired mandatory yet relaxed English speaking environment.

Regarding point (ii), it is up to the teacher to mandate an all-English speaking environment, while also maintaining a relaxed atmosphere for the students so that the class can be student-centered. This is especially difficult for teachers who rely on a hard-handed style to maintain class management. Most JTEs, like teachers in other subjects, have been used to teacher-centered lecture-style classes which require students to be quiet and to scribble notes diligently. However, in an all-English student-centered class,
students must be motivated to want to interact in an all-English environment. Point (i) sets the stage, but after that, it is up to the teacher to keep it up. The teacher must not only speak just in English, but also warn and/or encourage students who are speaking in Japanese to speak in English. Cautioning students worked well in the beginning, but encouragement seemed to work better afterwards, and in the long-term. Moreover, the teacher must then show that when the students are playing ball (i.e. speaking only in English), the class becomes much more fun and interesting. As one can imagine, this requires more effort and more roles on the part of the teacher in student-centered classes than in teacher-centered classes. I am not sure that the other JTEs, or even I, have fully mastered this ability yet.

Regarding point (iii), Professor Porcaro has advised us much about using appropriate English to the target students’ level and manner of speaking. The appropriate level of English is a matter of experience. Some teachers have a better feel of it than others, but it tends to get better especially after a few classes when the teacher has heard some of his/her students speak and/or seen some of his/her students’ class work/homework. Another observation is that JTEs, who are Japanese themselves, sometimes seem to purposely speak very quickly using very difficult diction. Is it because they want to motivate students to reach a higher level by showing students how much they don’t know, or to show their superiority in English lexical knowledge thereby establishing their class authority? Personally, I do not know the effectiveness of that technique, but as Professor Porcaro has pointed out, understanding can be maximized by using an appropriate level of English and speaking clearly, in a logically and linear fashion without sidetracking, pausing strategically, and repeating important content words. These, as he also pointed out, are not skills that are automatic even to a native speaker of English. The English teaching staff, including myself, got better only after much advice from many open classes.

Regarding point (iv), every activity, especially ones that students have never tried before, must be meticulously modeled following the all-English explanation. In an all-English class, students may not understand all of the explanation. Modeling and examples help give an idea of what output is expected from them. This also requires lots of preparation. It is easy for the busy teacher to use Japanese, as that is more efficient in time, but less efficient for students in acquiring the English language. The teacher must rehearse and imagine the flow of the class beforehand. Even then, some students may still not understand what to do.
But by preparing the model and sample output, the teacher can proof check whether the design of the activity actually achieves what it is purposed to instill upon the students.

These four points seem to have helped our English department the most to stay on the all-English course. Teachers have had to change their style of how they handle themselves and the students during class, though some more than others.

The second challenge is class methodology, designing meaningful lessons that fit the overall SELHi curriculum strategy. Besides the all-English directive, the overall strategy attempts to use an integrated approach, particularly infusing communicative and process writing elements to currently employed techniques, in order to build projects in the English classroom. I will not go into the discourse of what constitutes a project, but rather, for convenience sake, simply define a project as an end product that requires several stages to achieve. In utilizing the PBL methodology, students experience a deeper meaning in their work beyond just practicing English by rote memory or patterned drills. The end product varies from reports to oral presentations.

The TUINS High School English department also has the daunting task of applying the PBL methodology to currently existing textbooks taught in the content-based learning (CBL) methodology. In other words, we are trying to turn a teacher-centered CBL class into a student-centered class. Student work that can be performed at home was now to be done as homework, while classes involved activities that could only be done in the classroom (i.e. quizzes, pair/group work activities, timed activities, multimedia, presentations, etc.). Furthermore, activities must be arranged in an appropriate and meaningful sequence to bring about a successful final output. For example, if the final output is a report, the project preparation stages would most likely include process writing activities (i.e. brainstorming, organizing, drafting, editing, etc.). For a presentation, oral delivery skills would also be part of the project preparation stages (scripting with the audience in mind, memorizing with or without note cards, voice clarity, visual aids, etc.). Each project, in turn, would focus on certain skills, as much as possible starting from basic to advanced. The following are some observations I have made concerning project design and setup.

One common difficulty is getting the design appropriate to the students’ level. Lower-level students progress with more ease when given highly-structured activities. Oftentimes, this includes catalyst phrases with blanks to fill up. At the pair/group work level, students may be planning in Japanese, unless the
teacher goes as far as structuring how the discussion should go as well. Final outputs tended to take cookie cutter shapes with little variety between pair/group outputs, with the exception of visual design. Higher-level students can work with more freedom and flexibility, and hence can produce more interesting, varied outputs, generally speaking.

However, within one class, there may also be gaps in the students’ level of English. Our general consensus is to mix up the higher-level students with the lower-level students during group work. In this way, the higher-level students can help the lower-level students. Not only can the lower-level students learn something new, but also the higher-level students achieve a better understanding of English by being able to explain each point as articulately as possible. The only caution is to make sure that the higher-level students do not get stuck doing all of the work themselves. Teachers can avoid this problem by assigning roles or specific rules. For example, each student must hand in a handwritten 50~100-word piece of writing for the first draft, or each student must speak for however many minutes during a presentation.

Another difficult issue was in deciding what project skills to focus on first. Generally, for reports, students were asked to write a certain length first. Most students, and teachers, think of writing as grammar, or filling in blanks with correct grammar structures. Free writing was a concept that took getting used to. Once the students started producing pieces of writing, other skills like mapping, outlining, editing (teacher corrections evolved from writing the correct English to using symbols to indicate what kind of mistake the students had made so that the students could correct it themselves), proofreading, peer-evaluation, etc. Paragraphs slowly turned into essays, while information-giving turned into supporting an argument. Presentations also evolved from recitation (memorizing to emoting) to presenting role-playing skits or original research reports, then followed by some presentation evaluation format. Visual aids also evolved from using posters to using PowerPoint. These are examples of general guidelines that came about, but then again, each CBL theme is different and requires that the teacher design from scratch what to do, and how to raise the level from the previous project goals. We are starting to get a feel for it, but it is still a difficult task that requires discussions during English department meetings to sort out a good project design.

A related problem was that of project evaluation. For example, during project presentations, the audience has very little to do if they are not listening intently. Various handouts have been designed to avoid this problem. For example, students may be asked to fill in the blanks, summarize, paraphrase in pairs,
rank, make comments, ask questions, discuss and/or give opinions after the presentation. The peer evaluation stage was easily overlooked, especially when pressed for time.

Last but not least, the grading system needed to be adjusted. Like most schools, final grades were simply end-of-term test scores. However, in a non-lecture-style class, such a system does not motivate students to perform well during class activities, unless the teacher is a very influential character. Students are motivated for various reasons, including to get a good grade, or simply not to fail. Beyond that, hopefully the classes that we have been aiming at also provide an element of fun, and a closer connection to real life. But the importance of class work and homework must also be worked into the grading system for the teacher to give a final grade that is true to each student’s daily efforts. This is a problem because (i) most JTEs are still not used to the idea of class work/homework accounting for more than 20% for the grade at our school, and (ii) some teachers find it difficult to give “subjective” grades. Many teachers were comfortable with grades on vocabulary tests and grammar drill assignments. With these, one can clearly mark what is right and wrong, resulting in a numerical grade. However, pair/group work discussions and presentations require a “subjective” grade based on the teacher’s expectations. Many teachers found it difficult to go beyond 50%, or even 20% of the grade based on the teacher’s “subjective” grade. Some teachers have bypassed this problem by meticulously translating their sense of the student’s level into numbers for each assignment. This problem, however, might be solved when the English teachers gather more experience and confidence in themselves to have the authority to give “subjective” grades, because by that time, they would be pros giving grades that are no longer considered to be subjective, but rather, grades that are based on a standard formed from years of experience.

The English department at TUINS High School is committed to continuing to advance the trends that have been successfully established even after the SELHi period expires. I have highlighted some of the major observations, but there are still many small details to iron out. The attitude toward self-development and teacher training that has evolved among the staff has proved useful for developing ourselves as better teachers in order to deliver more effective classes to our students.
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