

Teaching Japanese University Students Liberal Arts in English: Case Studies

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This paper will describe several examples of curricular design which combine linguistic and analytic tasks designed to engage Japanese students simultaneously in critical thinking across a variety of disciplines as well as in English language learning. These examples are drawn from class materials we have used at Miyazaki International College in southern Kyushu (MIC), where Steve teaches English and Debra teaches anthropology. The stated purpose of our educational institution is “to develop international citizens conversant in Japanese and foreign cultures and fluent in English” (MIC 2003). Therefore, we are faced with the need to present topics in an appropriate English-based discursive context and to find ways to engage students in such discourse.

The memorization-examination based training that the majority of middle and high school students in Japan receive creates specific challenges for these students as learners of English and Western-style liberal arts at university. Critical thinking, and the linguistic resources which aid its expression in English, are notably absent from the repertoire of entering students at our university. As educators, our goal is to meet this audience with effective methods of instruction to lead students towards greater understanding of English language-based liberal arts discourse. This creates the need for strategies that combine discipline-based content and EFL instruction with an understanding of the cultural and educational background of our students.

Teaching in English is probably the best understood part of our charge. But what does *liberal arts* refer to? Though it is usually glossed as *kyōyō kyōiku* 教養教育 in Japanese, it is perhaps more useful to consider that definition as a separate enterprise and concern ourselves with the Western definition of liberal arts. The dictionary states: “the studies (as language,

philosophy, history, literature, abstract science) in a college or university intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop the **general intellectual capacities (as reason and judgment)** as opposed to professional or vocational skills” (Merriam-Webster 2004, emphasis added). From this we see that the development of critical thinking is, in fact, an integral part of the liberal arts curriculum as we construe it. Specifically, at our institution the subjects covered are humanities (art history, communications, history, literature, linguistics, philosophy, religion) and social sciences (anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, sociology), as well as area studies.

Pedagogy and Rationale

We teach using a content-based instructional model (CBI). CBI involves “concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (Brinton, Snow, and Wessche 1989:2). When the goal is to mainstream students into classes with native speakers, ‘sheltered’ or ‘adjunct’ CBI frameworks are useful. In our case, ‘theme-based’ CBI is the most suitable framework. Theme-based CBI is taught to students with TOEFL scores usually in the range 350 to 500. These scores are lower than the TOEFL 500 score which is often the minimum requirement for students who want to study at universities in English L1 contexts. Because of the lower proficiency level of these students, any standard “mainstream” course would have to be redesigned if it is to be used in a theme-based EFL class. For example, complicated concepts can be made easier to understand by using posters and charts, (Mackenzie, 2000, p.108). Other adaptations to student proficiency include rewriting of texts to a manageable reading level, holding frequent quizzes to assess comprehension, and assigning group projects and freewriting exercises. Instructors can tailor a course to the specific needs of their students. In our lower division classes, we use team teaching wherein an English specialist and a content specialist cocreate and cofacilitate the class. Although upper division classes are taught by content specialists, the goals and methods are still oriented towards English as well as disciplinary learning.

The difficulty Japanese students often have with liberal arts classes

taught in English cannot be explained simply by referring to a lack of language proficiency. Rather, there appears to be a more basic difference in cultural approaches to acquiring knowledge and processing information. Though early education in Japan can be characterized as creative and student centered (Edwards 2004), middle and high school education shifts to a focus on memorization in preparation for high school and university entrance examinations. Rohlen describes exam questions thus: “Emphasis is on mastery of facts, control over details, and practiced skill in the application of mathematical and scientific principles...Science and math fit the short-answer mode comfortably, humanities and social sciences do not” (1983:95). A more recent quote from the *Asahi Shinbun* describes a situation that has changed little since Rohlen’s investigation: “Recently, it is said that improvement of the test contents continues; however, it is unreasonable from the start to expect many analytic questions on the in-school memorization-based tests that precede high school entrance examinations” (2003, translation DJO). This background may account for the problems described by Ueno Chizuko when she assigned evaluative essays to her students at the University of Tokyo. She had assigned a report at the end of the first term of her lecture course, in lieu of an examination. To her great shock and dismay, the student reports she read were not what she had hoped for: “When I saw the hundred or so pages of reports that had been turned in, honestly my mind filled with anger. From one report to the next, mere repetition—they were summaries of the things I’d said in class. Nowhere was there anything new or original. Almost nothing was added to my course. There were only summaries of things I had said” (2002:12-13, trans. DJO). This kind of response from students, however well it may reflect a memorization-based education, is clearly not suitable for the liberal arts classroom.

Cultural difference in explanation styles shows up very early when we compare Japanese and American schoolchildren. Watanabe (2001) used four graphic representations as stimulus for elementary students. Her chief finding is that “Japanese students have a strong tendency to state whole events in chronological order, while American students tend to state the result or effect first and identify causes in their explanations” (2001:346).

Watanabe states concern “that the difference in style is sometimes mistaken for the difference in the abilities of students from different cultural backgrounds” (ibid.). Indeed we at MIC do not find a lack of potential; rather we work to understand our students’ precollege linguistic background and cultural practice and try to apply this understanding in designing appropriate activities. Under the cognitive linguistics framework, language is “an essential instrument and component of culture, whose reflection in linguistic structure is pervasive and quite significant” (Langacker 1999:16). Cultural linguistics asserts the cultural element of cognition; it can fruitfully be applied to many previously perplexing issues in the second language teaching classroom. As Loveday says:

Whatever the specific objective of L2 teaching may be, one of its fundamental goals must be to impart an ability to comprehend fully and with satisfaction what the target community means in speaking and writing.. Moreover, .. language reflects and expresses the cognitive code of a particular community. If a teacher is going to provide an adequate explanation of the meaning of an item in the L2, this can only be done by referring to cultural knowledge. (1982:53)

Of course, not only words in the L2, but grammatical structures also need to be presented in an appropriate cultural context. Furthermore, the student’s first-language set of cultural linguistic models should be taken into account whenever possible when designing appropriate curricula for second language learners.

As Japanese students move into middle and high school, the stakes in what McVeigh (2002) has dubbed the “educatio-examination” system are raised significantly. The training that students receive at this level is strongly geared towards objective exams which require memorization of well-defined, isolated facts (closed-knowledge) rather than broad, interconnected systems (2002:100). As a result, students approach education with the expectation that the content of the day’s lesson is a packaged set of facts to be absorbed, rather than a situation necessitating analytic skills to make a discovery. Students entering the program at MIC often have difficulty with tasks such as making connections between

concepts or considering multiple interpretations of evidence.

Along with CBI and team teaching, we also use an ‘active learning’ format. This combination of strategies is labor-intensive but holds distinct advantages over the traditional lecture-based teaching model. Active learning is a pedagogical strategy which “involves the students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Bonwell and Eison 1991:2) It can include the following strategies:

- Students are involved in more than listening.
- Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing students’ skills.
- Students are involved in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).
- Students are engaged in activities (e.g., reading, discussing, writing).
- Greater emphasis is placed on students’ exploration of their own attitudes and values (ibid).

Let us now describe specific ways we employ these strategies in the classroom.

Steve’s Projects

This section describes three team-taught, content-based EFL classes. The classes are from three disciplines: humanities, area studies and social science. Each class usually has around 20 students of low-intermediate to intermediate English proficiency with approximate TOEFL scores in the range 250-450. The choice of class activities is based on a belief in the value of learner-centered education. Learner-centered education is, of course, an umbrella term that covers a variety of practices. Among these, the most relevant to the discussion which follows are the concepts of learner potentiality, group solidarity and the value of affective-based activities. To clarify these terms, belief in the potential of learners means that learner knowledge is viewed as an important resource, rather than something to be excluded from the classroom. Group work requires learner

cooperation, which is seen as better than competition. Affective-based activities refers to tasks with an imaginative-creative orientation. (For further discussion of learner-centeredness, see Tudor, 1996).

HUM 103 Introduction to Religion.

This class is offered to first-year students. The content goal of the class is to promote an understanding that religion consists of myths, beliefs and rituals. In doing so, we do not focus on detailing the specific differences between major world religions, nor do we proselytize Christianity as the only 'true religion.' Instead we familiarize learners with the conceptual framework of myths, beliefs and rituals and to encourage them, through a series of practical activities, to gradually deepen their understanding of this as they work towards their final group-work project: To create their own religion.

The language learning goals of the class center on developing proficiency in all the four skill areas, with a special emphasis on strengthening fluency and accuracy in writing. An understanding of content-specific lexis is achieved through reading, and through focus on selected vocabulary.

Throughout, students are encouraged to be 'active' learners. For example, they are required to use the library and other resources to conduct their own research into Shinto deities. Then they present the results of their research to the rest of the class. They are also required to actively participate in role-play and drama. As an example of this, after reading a number of Western myths such as the Biblical story of Job, or the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, students are placed into groups and given the task of using these readings as a basis for a short dramatic performance. This task means that they have to write a script and also decide which parts they will play. Then, after making any necessary props, they act out their version of the myth in front of the other students.

A similar approach is used in the final class project. Students, having been placed into small groups, first choose a suitable focus for their religion. They are then asked to write a myth, which accounts for the origins of the religion, to make a list of the important beliefs, and finally to perform a religious ritual in front of the other students. This ritual should demonstrate

some important aspect of the religion.

In the past, students have come up with a variety of creative and interesting religions. Perhaps the most memorable one was based on Hello Kitty, the familiar Japanese icon of mass-consumption. Interestingly, although Sanrio Inc., who first introduced Hello Kitty to the world in 1974, has created its own history of the character, the students chose to create a more sinister version on their own.

In this myth, Hello Kitty appears with a twin sister Betty, who is a force for good in the world. In a sort of quasi-Biblical Garden of Eden, humans and animals can communicate freely. In fact, human beings have been given tails by the Gods that help them to communicate with animals. Unfortunately Satan appears one day and kidnaps Kitty. He transforms her into an evil being and urges her to destroy the happy balance between humans and animals. Following Satan's evil bidding, Kitty decides to remove all the tails from the humans. But Betty intervenes to prevent this; and then, after a final armageddon-like struggle between the feisty felines, both cats fall dead from exhaustion. In a special religious ceremony, human beings are required to wear tails and behave like animals on December 17 each year. This will help human beings to more clearly understand how animals experience life on the Earth.

I have written about this project in some detail because I believe that it demonstrates how contemporary culture can be a valuable resource and also a catalyst for creativity in the classroom. Although many people often comment that the Japanese lack creativity, my experience has been that this is simply not the case. However, it is important that materials are always prepared carefully to ensure comprehensibility and that tasks are well-structured. Theory will be understood more effectively if it is reinforced through engagement in a variety of practical activities.

ESP 201 Japan/Great Britain Relations

This class is offered to second-year students in the spring semester. Although its title suggests a 'compare and contrast' approach, in fact the emphasis in recent years has been on studying British history and culture. In order to do this, the students are given a variety of readings that cover a number of topics. These readings are supplemented with mini-lectures,

comprehension questions, vocabulary work and quizzes. The students are usually required to write two or three papers during the course on designated topics.

In addition to this work, learners are also required to participate in a number of hands-on, student-centered learning tasks that are designed to strengthen their understanding of the material and to give them opportunities for self-expression. For example, after listening to a mini-lecture on medieval Britain, they are divided into groups and then build models of typical medieval buildings, such as castles and churches. Then they use the internet and the library to gather some more information, before making a presentation about their model to the whole class. Other 'alternative' activities that have proved popular are designing posters and making English scones. In fact, baking scones proved to be one of our most successful classes; it was given high points in our end-of-semester class evaluation and the scones were eaten by students, faculty and administration.

Although the class was going well, we were still asking ourselves a number of questions. We wondered whether there was any way of taking learning outside the classroom to involve other students and even other members of the community? Could we stage some kind of event that would satisfy these requirements and also encourage cross-cultural understanding?

The answer to these questions came with the idea of staging a British festival (Davies 2004). Our lesson planning soon moved on from the usual daily routine into a new dimension as we began to envisage how the event could be staged. Initially, we thought of just involving our own class. We decided that the festival would feature a cricket match between students from our class and those from another class called "British Thought and Culture." A budget was negotiated and cricket equipment was purchased using the internet. We also decided to have an egg and spoon race, a three-legged race and a sack race. A dartboard was obtained and the students practiced throwing darts. We also decided to contact a local stables to see if a horse could be rented for the day. In fact, both a horse and mule were made available to us. At a late stage in our planning, the student government asked whether they could combine the farewell barbecue party for the second year students with the British festival. (The second year

students would soon be embarking on a semester of studying overseas.) We readily agreed, as it seemed that a barbecue in the evening would be a good way to round off the event. It also conveniently solved the problem of whether to supply refreshments ourselves. We felt that there would be no need for us to do so with a barbecue planned.

The students were given class time to prepare for the festival. To begin with, they made posters to advertise the various events. Some of these were surprisingly creative and all of them were visually striking. They were then given an oral introduction to the rules of cricket. This was followed by some cricket practice on the sports field. Although cricket is a generally a game for men, we found that our female students were quite willing to participate in playing. Then, the students returned to the classroom and wrote a short passage describing the rules of the game so that we could check that they had understood them. So, in a nutshell, we were trying to achieve a balance between more 'formal' modes of instruction and freer 'learning by doing' activities. But we were not simply following procedures; the students had the benefit of knowing that there was a real goal ahead of them, an event whose success or failure would depend on their efforts.

Next, the students were asked to form small groups and to take responsibility for the various different events. They were responsible for obtaining any necessary items. For example, the egg and spoon race team bought eggs, hard-boiled them and obtained spoons. We also decided to run a few trial races to find out just how difficult they were to complete and the optimum distance for the course.

The first British Festival was held on a Saturday in July and it was better attended than we had anticipated. A large number of faculty came along and brought their children with them. The children, faculty and students enjoyed taking part in the races and playing darts. The horses were particularly popular and many students had fun riding them. Some students even decided to take riding lessons at the stables. Overall, we felt satisfied that we had organised a large-scale event that brought students, faculty and the public together. Significantly, the festival was also reported in a local newspaper which gave us valuable publicity.

SS 104 Introduction to Psychology.

Since a conventional Introduction to Psychology class contains material that is linguistically too difficult for our students, this class focuses on sampling some aspects of psychology. Although theoretical perspectives are included, the overall approach is practical. This is seen as appropriate since the discipline of psychology is grounded in empirical research and data gathering.

Here is the class syllabus:

- Unit 1 Introduction to psychology
- Unit 2 Types of learning
- Unit 3 Advertising and psychological techniques
- Unit 4 Counseling
- Unit 5 Psychological illnesses
- Unit 6 Project work.

Each unit takes from two to three weeks to complete. The students have two classes per week and each class lasts for two and a half hours. The students explore various themes systematically, while working towards the final goal of synthesizing their ideas into a final project. For example, Unit 3 begins with a reading followed by comprehension questions and a writing assignment. After this, the students are given some advertisements to analyze and also bring their own examples from magazines etc., for use in group discussions. The final small group project is to invent a product and then design a good advertisement for it. The group members then have to describe their product to the rest of the class and explain who the target customers are. Among the products that have been designed are a genetically engineered cake tree and a time-vision camera.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have described three different classes in some detail. One of the strengths of theme-based CBI is its flexibility because teachers can create individual units with specific learner needs in mind. The introduction to psychology class is an example of this process in operation. The Do-It-Yourself religion project requires students to draw on their

knowledge of contemporary culture and use some aspect of this to create their own religion. In doing this, they are required to demonstrate their understanding of myth, belief and ritual. The British Festival is an example of how a community event can also be a successful and practical way of learning about culture. It involves students in something bigger than themselves and also frees them, albeit temporarily, from conventional classroom-based learning routines.

Debra's Projects

I'm going to describe some projects that can work in both upper and lower division classes with minor adjustments. The first project focuses on an exercise about archaeology with very specific language- and content-related objectives. The second one is an interactive scenario which is designed to enhance overall fluency and expression as well as sensitivity to cultural and personal issues.

"Neanderthals may have been handsome"

In teaching CBI, there are areas where where English and critical thinking goals merge neatly. I've found one in archaeology which involves evidentiality and use of the modal + have+ past participle construction. Since this construction occurs frequently in naturalistic English writing about archaeological findings, focusing on it provides an opportunity to train both the form and the reasoning behind its use. Both of these are 'sticky points' for our students. A survey of teaching materials and other literature (Occhi 2003) indicates that their cultural schemata for learning about prehistory lacks the inferential component¹. The evidential resources of Japanese do not correspond cleanly to the English forms. Not surprisingly, in open-ended writing tasks they underproduce such modals where use of these forms is warranted.

¹ Japanese prehistory—and much of science for that matter—is presented in the Japanese educational system as received wisdom, to be memorized piecemeal in preparation for objective examinations (Habu 1989, Habu and Fawcett 1990, McVeigh 2002).

The following lesson plan has worked well to engage students in the use of these forms, and in the schema of inferential thinking that underlies this mode. I have used it in Introduction to Anthropology (lower division) and Archaeology (upper division) classes. I presented students with excerpts from a documentary film (Discovery Channel 2001, *A Neanderthal's World*), accompanied by printouts of the narrative. A handout focusing on construction of the modal + have + past participle followed. Students worked first with creating forms that express conclusions based directly from evidence, e.g., Neanderthal leg bones were short => Neanderthals *must have been* short. We then discussed situations appearing in the film in which combining evidence with greater degrees of inference (i.e. input from the analyst's cultural schemas) necessitates modal forms expressing lower levels of certainty, e.g.,

- Flowers were found with bones => Neanderthals *may have had* funerals.
- OR => The flowers may have been trash.

Students then practice discussing evidence with the [modal + have+ PP] constructions, creating sentences appropriately expressing their conclusions. We bring up the issue of inferential reasoning and examine the role of cultural input. In the example above, we may like the thought of Neanderthals having funerals if we feel a kinship with them because we conduct funerary practices using flowers. On the other hand, if we see them as quite different to ourselves we may conclude differently. One serendipitous bit of content in the tape reinforces this notion of cultural input rather by accident. In a segment discussing the difficulty of life and scarcity of resources for Neanderthals, we see the elder man discard a raw egg that broke in his hand. Though Americans are taught not to eat raw eggs due to fear of bacteria, Japanese do eat raw eggs. Seeing the juxtaposition of wastage with the discussion of scarcity points to the cultural input of the filmmakers and prompts a different conclusion for the students, namely:

“I would have eaten the egg”=>He might have eaten the egg.

From this practice, students can experience how this inferential schema connects physical evidence, logical reasoning, and cultural input to create conclusions expressing varying degrees of strength through their

grammatical construction. This kind of exercise forms the basis for other analytic discussions and is repeated throughout the course when appropriate. Students have commented that this exercise enhances their understanding of both the relevant grammatical and analytical points.

Webboard Electronic Exchanges

One example of a project that is applicable to several academic subjects is an email-like exchange project facilitated by a webboard, which I have used to connect students in several of my classes with college students in Iowa and in Maine. This project focuses on overall fluency along with exploration of positionality and personal values rather than the development of a specific grammatical form or a single point of disciplinary content. I have used this project in a lower division course on Japanese Popular Culture, and upper division classes of World Ethnography and Issues in North American Society.

Students log in during class time to read and respond to messages, while the instructor/s circulate to provide technical and English assistance. Of course, this project requires access to computers and willingness to engage with technology, as well as a willing instructor/partner in another university². However, the eagerness students have for this project and the experiences they gain from it certainly reward the instructors' efforts.

The Iowa project finished its third year in 2003. It is conducted in spring semester with students of a non-Western cultures course on Japan. My students are either in lower division Japanese popular culture or in upper division ethnography classes. Because of the schedule differences, this exchange only lasts one month, and is the focal exercise for that period along with inclass discussions and brief writing prompts about it. It is a free-form discussion with no intervention by the instructors.

The Iowa students have studied Japan for three months prior to the exchange, and feel that they want to know how individuals in Japan experience aspects of culture that they have studied. Though at first the emphasis is on *omiai* and other aspects of Japanese culture that Americans seem to find especially problematic, during the one-month exchange the

² Logistical issues are discussed more fully in Dunn and Occhi 2003a.

dialogue broadens and complexifies. Students on both sides become more reflexive in their discussions and sensitive to intracultural variation as well as cross-cultural comparison (Dunn and Occhi 2003a, b).

This project is ideal for curricular programs which incorporate study abroad in English-speaking countries. In our case, the second semester of the second year is spent abroad. Therefore, the lower division students find the e-exchange a useful preparation for the kinds of questions they are likely to face in the study abroad term immediately following the course. The upper division students enjoy the chance to compare this exchange to experiences they have had while they were abroad and to consider issues of cross-cultural difference and similarity more deeply. The exchange also forms a basis for inclass discussions of topics relevant to the course as a whole; for example issues of ethnographic methodology and the politics of interviewing in a class on World Ethnography.

With the Maine group, the webboard goes on weekly for the entire fall semester. 2003 was our second year of exchange. The Maine course is Introduction to Sociology, and our group is an upper division class studying Issues in North American Society. In this exchange we instructors provide a topical framework that meets our mutual course objectives and post messages of our own as well. Students discuss a variety of social issues and current affairs over a fifteen-week period. We dovetailed the e-exchange activity with a 'watch and report' activity (Lahar 1999) in which students report to their respective classes individually in turn about a current event of their choosing. Students then posted their reports to the webboard for comments and reflections. In this way students could discuss news topics between as well as within their classes.

E-exchange can meet a variety of educational objectives while providing unique forums for student interaction across cultures. Participants in each of the webboard groups in all classes have rated this activity as one of the most interesting and useful in terms of bringing course topics into a more tangible perspective. Instructors can observe student development as it occurs through dialogue. In analyzing what students write during these exchanges both on the webboard and in reflective comments about it, we see evidence for increased facility of expression and development of more nuanced understandings regarding culture and the individual. Of course, it

also helps to enhance English fluency as well.

Summary

In this brief overview we can only provide a sampling of appropriate pedagogies for enhancing content- and language-based understanding of an English-based liberal arts curriculum. We hope that these examples show how notions like ‘active learning’ and ‘content-based instruction’ can be implemented in various subjects of inquiry. We plan to continue inquiry into how to best meet our audience, or rather our co-participants in the classroom.

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