

## 小人数グループ中心の授業：教育学における実験

### The Small Group-Centered Classroom : An Experiment in Pedagogy

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#### Introduction

The Garden of Eden known as the Japanese university's English classroom unfortunately is also the home of at least two snakes : language production and evaluation. There is always the question of how to deal with them. Should students be expected to produce language (in spoken or written form) in class, as homework, or both? If so, what type(s), how regularly and in what quantity should they be expected to do so? And how (and how often?) should that work be evaluated? There are probably enough combinations and permutations to bring joy to the heart of any mathematician.

To date the author's solution has been to evaluate each student's weekly oral responses in class (in the form of *karaoke*, as response to a teacher-generated question, or in dialogue with another student) as well as weekly written homework. Student attendance, classroom behavior, and the above have been totaled and the sum treated as each student's grade.

However, there is generally a problem with the amount of oral data per student, especially in a class with forty or more students. The amount of teacher-student or student-student interaction varies widely. Very simply put, the students in the front of the classroom get more attention than the students seated elsewhere. One reason for this is simply inertia : it takes little time and energy to move among the students in the front of the class. The students in the front of the classroom are also commonly those with a greater interest in the class and thus more likely to answer quickly and show enthusiasm.

It takes significantly more time and energy to go elsewhere in the classroom and the emo-

tional return is commonly less. It is also tacitly assumed by all that the students in the back of the class have no wish to be disturbed (or disturbed as little as possible). The result of this combination of factors is a great unevenness in data collected. By the end of the semester, the number of responses seems to be inversely related to the distance from the teacher's desk.

There is also the famous problem (or pseudo-problem) of shyness or anxiety, especially when confronted by a foreigner and the need to speak in a foreign language. Some people say this shyness or anxiety in the presence of strangers (or foreigners) is a Japanese trait. Whether this is true or not, it is true that some people are able to respond orally when asked and others are not. And it is also true that among those who reply, some are able to give a reply quickly and others are not.

It is also a common and documented practice that students will "step out of the loop" or "pause" when directly questioned by the teacher. "Stepping out of the loop" or "pausing" refers to the student practice of ignoring the teacher for as long as it takes to confer with a classmate or classmates about the meaning of the question or how to answer it appropriately. When this has been clarified the student "steps back into the loop" and replies to the teacher's question as if no time had elapsed. There was an article on this published about 10 years ago in an issue of JALT, by Rudolf Reinelt, an Ehime University professor of German.

Weekly written homework is one way to deal with this problem of shyness or anxiety. Students are asked to give their written comments or opinion on a topic. They have one week to produce the reply of their choice without pressure from their classmates or the

teacher. However, this also produces its own problems. Students complain that they are in a conversation class and expect it to be conversation-centered.

There is yet another problem connected with evaluation: it is the problem of student attempts at grade manipulation. It commonly occurs at the end of a term or school year. According to one variation, students will plead they have not done the work, come to class, etc. due to extenuating circumstances such as job hunting, club activities, study abroad programs, and the like. Therefore, because of these circumstances, they should not be given a failing grade, they should be given a chance to do make-up work, and so on. This occurs even when students have been clearly informed at the start of the term or year that all enrolled in the class will be treated equally and no special circumstances allowed. In the event of family emergencies or traffic accidents, the teacher is to be contacted immediately and special arrangements can be made.

According to another variation the teacher is asked to explain why the questioner, Student A, received such and such a grade and Student B (a friend of A's) received a higher grade. There is always a definite purpose involved. For example, Student A says he needs a passing grade or a certain level grade in order to graduate or to take part in (or continue taking part in) an honors or study abroad program. He may also plead that he has passed or has a sufficiently high grade in all other courses except this one. When such claims are investigated sometimes they are true, but at other times not. However, the general question of grade assignment is a valid one and needs to be considered by all teachers.

The present paper's attempt to deal with all of this has been to divide a class into small groups, have each group work at its own pace, and record certain standard data each week. The details of the experiment, some results, a discussion, and some implications are given below. The basic assumption in this experiment was that since the students grew up in the Japanese school system, with its emphasis on group work and cooperation, they would be more at ease, do more work, and learn more

English in a situation which made use of that experience. That is, they would learn better in small groups than they would in the more traditional teacher or lecture centered classroom.

### The Experiment

The experiment was carried out with a total of about 300 students. Approximately 200 of them were enrolled in Education, Economics, or Systems Engineering Faculties at Wakayama University. Approximately 100 more were from outside. The greater number were first or second year students taking General Education classes.

The first class of the term, students in all classes were told about general class procedures and requirements, shown the text, and then told that an experiment would be conducted this term. The text would be used as usual. They would do written homework as usual. But this time they would be working in small groups and talking with each other for most of each class period, instead of the usual teacher lecturing or questioning style. The only provision was that they would talk with each other in English. They would form their own groups of four to six people. When this was done, each group was given an A-4 sized notebook with a number or a letter on the cover and a model set of papers describing the information they were to list in the notebook and the format.

First, they were to write the class or text name on the notebook cover as well as the full names of the members of the group. Inside, according to the model set of papers, they were to list the group members' names again and then record certain information each week. By category they were to record: class attendance, vocabulary, vocabulary quiz results, textbook or related discussion, and written homework. The information for each category was to be recorded according to certain criteria (which will be listed below).

As a general procedure, homework papers were returned at the beginning of each class. Any handouts were also given out then. Group notebooks were set out and students assembled in their groups. They then followed the categories listed in the notebook: first taking atten-

dance, checking vocabulary, doing a vocabulary quiz, checking written homework, and doing discussion. The last 15 minutes or so of each class was generally devoted to watching part of a movie.

**Attendance** : names for members were to be listed in the order written on the notebook cover and each person's weekly attendance to be written as a percentage of class attended. Being present at the start of the 90-minute class meant 100% attendance, coming 10 minutes late was recorded as 90% attendance, etc. Since the students were required to have the textbook, a notebook, a dictionary, and a folder, there was simple notation provided on how to record such forgetfulness. Finally, the attendance page noted that each group was to have both a leader and a secretary and the job could be changed every 4 or 5 classes.

**Vocabulary** : each student was to have an A-4 sized notebook used only for vocabulary and record 30 vocabulary words in both English and Japanese. Each page was to be dated. The words could be taken from any source. The secretary was to record the number of words for each person each class on a separate page only for vocabulary.

**Vocabulary Quiz** : from the vocabulary total for the group, 40 words were to be chosen and studied for a 20-word quiz given the following week. As the standard vocabulary homework was 30 words per week, how to get a 40-word vocabulary pool required some kind of negotiation. In addition, although the words could be chosen during class time, they were not to be copied and shared during class time due to the time involved. Thus, they had to negotiate how to share the word list information. The quiz maker could make the quiz in any form and was to give it one week later. It was to be checked and the scores recorded according to the number of items correct. The quiz maker for the day was to be listed as QM in the records.

**Discussion** : as there was regularly assigned homework (usually involving one chapter of the text), the basic focus of the discussion was the content of the homework. The discussion was meant to be held in English and include their opinion of the content as well as how it related

to their personal experience. TV news, newspaper, and magazine stories related to the content could also be shown to the group and discussed. The secretary was to record participation in the discussion in percentage.

**Written homework** : the written homework was meant to be the framework for the class discussion, that is, a way to clarify their thoughts and opinions prior to the group discussion in class. Each assignment was meant to be one page in length (writing on every other line). One full page was to be recorded as 100%. The papers were collected and given to the teacher at the end of each class. They were returned the following week with comments, questions, and various corrections as well as a grade.

## Results

As this procedure was done as an experiment, the students were asked to give their opinion of the new class style midway through the term and again at the end. The general opinion of the 200 or so students from all three Faculties who took part was positive or very positive. The benefits of the new system were multiple : they could form the groups themselves ; they could make new friends ; they could make the vocabulary quizzes themselves ; they could have more English speaking time than in the usual style class ; they could exchange their views easily ; and they could increase cooperation. In general, the most common remark had to do with making new friends.

While the students worked in their groups, the teacher went from group to group : observing and commenting on activities and participating in discussion. The most notable feature of this style class was the amount of conversation and the concomitant noise level. The next most notable feature was that the conversation was generally in Japanese. Although the class as a whole was reminded to use English ("easy English") week after week, the observed conversation was largely in Japanese. A given group would change from Japanese to English when the teacher was in the group, but then revert to Japanese when he moved to another group.

Twice during the term the students were

also asked to do group data profiles, that is, to record on a single sheet of paper their attendance, vocabulary, vocabulary quiz, discussion and written homework profiles. The midterm and end of term profiles showed a high level of participation for all items. In terms of written work, they all did a lot: a weekly 30-word vocabulary list, a 20-word vocabulary quiz, plus a page of written work.

On the other hand, the students proved to have very poor time management sense. Basic tasks like recording attendance, vocabulary, and quiz data took an inordinate amount of time. The discussion that was expected to be the main feature of the class often proved to be a minor one. Students remarked that they did not feel comfortable talking to others in the group until they had made friends with them. And even when they had made friends, they did not feel comfortable talking in English (although they had stated they had much more speaking time in this style class). During the discussion period, students were often observed reading the text, being silent, or discussing matters unrelated to the text. However, the group profiles showed the students evaluated their group discussion abilities highly. And although each group was to have chosen a leader for the express purpose of avoiding confusion, no group formally did so.

During the early stages of the experiment, the teacher would tell other teachers of the experiment being conducted. At least one commented on how much easier it would be than doing a conventional class. It proved to be much harder for a variety of reasons. The noise level was a constant distraction. Moving from group to group meant that attention had to be repeatedly focused on what each group was doing. Each group had to be encouraged to use English.

It was difficult to remember student names. With the old style class, the students stayed in the same seats all semester and the teacher had a seating chart, so it was possible to remember names. With students in their own groups and movement from group to group, it was very difficult to associate names and faces. That problem was solved by the creation of a photo album, a sketchbook, with the pictures of the

students in each class and subdivided by group. They were allowed to choose photos of their choice, the only provision being that the pictures had to be large enough to identify them clearly. The assignment produced an amazing variety of photos and sometimes group unity. However, it also showed the poor time management skills of the students. Although they were reminded weekly, many delayed bringing their photos. The semester ended with some still not bringing them.

The biggest problem of all was the basic problem of letting go of the direction and supervision of the class and allowing students to develop at their own pace.

### Discussion

In almost anything one reads about modern Japanese society, one finds the comment that Japanese are group-oriented. Quite often this is contrasted with the individual orientation of Western societies. Whether this is true or not is naturally another question. However, no less an authority than Edwin Reischauer says: "The Japanese are much more likely than Westerners to operate in groups or at least to see themselves as operating in this way."<sup>1</sup>

This group orientation can especially be seen in Japanese education (and in books about education) from kindergarten through university. Lois Peak, for example, writes about how children in kindergarten must learn group activities. They must be taught to act as members of groups. Group activity does not come naturally to the small child.<sup>2</sup>

Anne Conduit and her son Andy write of their experiences as Australian parent and child in the Japanese elementary school system. Each had to be socialized in the ways of Japanese society and proper behavior.<sup>3</sup> Bruce Feiler writes of his experiences teaching as an Assistant English Teacher (AET) in a junior high school.<sup>4</sup> He learns, as the Conduits did, proper behavior and that it is the role of the school to teach students "discipline", that is, "how to behave properly both in school and out" because parents cannot be trusted to do such things. And that the spirit of cooperation "is systematically and deliberately taught in schools", espe-

cially through the *kumi*.

Others such as Thomas Rohlen, Shoko Yoneyama, and Robert Yoder write about the Japanese high school.<sup>5</sup> The systematic classroom grouping and discipline of junior high school continues at this level. As Rohlen puts it : "Because classes are all taken with the same homeroom group, and mostly in the same room, during every school day a student is a member of but one group" and "the social environment experienced by students is stable and intimate".

Shoko Yoneyama, however, points out some of the snakes active in this high school Garden of Eden. Because of the basic high school structure, everything is "extremely formal, rigid, and autocratic". Everything is hierarchical and conformist. As a result, "the peer relationship among classmates becomes not one of friendship and solidarity but of threat, competition and surveillance". As she tells us, this is due to the basic use of conformity as a tool of control : "Students mutually watch and check each other and punish the slightest hint of non-conformity by reproducing and emulating the ways teachers exert power over them". She continues : "Students learn to use collective violence (physical, verbal and psychological) to release stress in a social environment in which their power is extremely limited. *Ijime* is a phenomenon firmly rooted in the social structure of school".

Elsewhere in the book she talks about how increasing demands from the Ministry of Education to monitor all aspects of student behavior has led to intense psychological pressure. Students in a class bully each randomly—feeding off each other as it were—in order to survive the intense pressure from outside. One can see an example of this in the 2001 movie "Battle Royale". It is notable that although a sequel was produced, there was strong "guidance" from the Ministry of Education to have it banned (or at least not made available in VHS or DVD form) because of its violence.

Richard Peck is a novelist who specializes in writing about junior and senior high school students. He also spent eleven years as a junior and senior high school teacher. He extensively researches all his novels to be sure of their

accuracy. The 2005 movie "Mean Girls" describes high school cliques. Peck described a very similar situation in his 1987 novel *Princess Ashley*. Elsewhere he says : "The young want a more rigid class structure than adults could endure ;" "the drug of choice in adolescence is conformity ;" and that young people are "looking everywhere for the stroking and structure of family."<sup>6</sup> He mentions learning from his students that "the young look for a source of absolute authority before they can look for themselves. The young demand leaders they cannot reason with." And "that young people who cannot find a source of unyielding authority among adults will look elsewhere," that is, to each other. We can see the truth of this in the popularity of TV teachers like Kinpachi Sensei, GTO (Great Teacher Onizuka), and Yankumi. They are all strong and unyielding sources, yet caring.

Yoder's twenty-year study of youth deviance in Japan also talks about this problem of ever-increasing social controls and how it mainly affects lower and lower-middle class students who have been tracked to the low-ranking schools. Students from middle and upper-middle class families are tracked into the better public and private schools and treated with considerable indulgence. It leaves the status quo undisturbed.

If we look at education up through high school, we can see a strong emphasis on discipline and hierarchy. This applies to both students and teachers in class and during after-school activities. Rohlen talks about the whole socialization process being characterized by this. He also talks about the centrality of the textbook and studying for university entrance examinations. Much seems to be forgiven in the name of entrance examinations.

Are the poor soft skills (of time management, diligence, and lack of a can-do attitude) of students working in small groups due to the university entrance examinations? According to David Shipler : "The soft skills should have been taught in the family, but in many cases, the family has forfeited that role to the school. In turn, the school has forfeited the role to the employer."<sup>7</sup> Shipler is talking about people in the U.S. that have been in prison, had drug

problems, or been on welfare. He is not describing Japanese college students. Are the poor soft skills due to the hierarchical structure of the schools and clubs? Are they lacking because their parents freed them from all responsibilities at home so they could study for the all-important high school and university entrance examinations? Third year junior and senior high school (and often university!) students are typically freed from ordinary school and club responsibilities so they can study for entrance examinations (or do job hunting).

From junior high school, students are trained to listen quietly to their teachers and follow their orders. They are trained to obey their club *sempai*. But in the small groups, there is no leader, so confusion or silence often reigns. Teachers in all three Faculties have often commented on this type of paralysis. When students are put in small groups they cannot act, regardless of the language being used or the content of the class. They contrasted this situation with that of ten years ago and commented on the deterioration that has taken place.

Rohlen says: "Small groups become important refuges from the impersonal and hierarchical qualities of the general social context." This may be true for affect or interest-based small groups, but it does not seem to occur in the classroom. Economist Yuji Genda found that friends and an emotional support networks did have a definite measurable effect on people in a work situation.<sup>8</sup> And students did repeatedly comment that they were happy to make friends in their small groups and that they could not talk freely until they had made friends with the other people in their group. But they still would not generally use English when they were unsupervised.

A recent TV program featuring Nagoya showed Japanese students in a large English class at Nanzan University. There were "No Smoking" type signs on the walls that said no Japanese was to be spoken. Students were in small groups, as in the experiment being discussed in this paper. However, there were also a number of teachers or teaching assistants present who moved about in the room. They could both provide attention and supervision for the

members of each group. Perhaps this is the key to a solution. It is hardly unique. Harvard University professor Diana Eck mentions similar things in Hindu paintings of the god Krishna dancing in a circle with human milkmaids: he multiplied himself so that each milkmaid has Krishna as her partner.<sup>9</sup> Eck also comments that "a center does not exclude what surrounds it, but rather anchors and integrates the entire field of the circle." Somehow it has to be done in the classroom too.

### Conclusion

This paper has described a classroom experiment using small group-centered activities. It was found that although the students would actively participate, first they had to make friends with the people in their group. They enjoyed this style class much more than the regular teacher-centered English class and they would do large amounts of work. However, they generally would not use English. Japanese teachers using small groups for other subjects also experienced difficulties, especially student silence.

This seems due to general trends in Japanese education and society. Memorization-centered classes, preparation for entrance examinations, trends in supervision, and classroom dynamics tend to military levels of discipline. Club activities follow the same patterns. Self-directed small group activities are thus largely alien to university students, yet these are what they need for emotional maturity. And for this to occur, the teacher must relinquish most supervision of the class. Yet a clear structure and pattern of authority must be in place for the students to feel the emotional security they need. A group notebook with clearly defined activities is one way to provide this structure, but the teacher must also spend time with each group to provide emotional support. Written homework with clear teacher feedback is also necessary. However, it is labor intensive for all concerned.

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#### Notes

- 1 *The Japanese*.
- 2 *Learning to Go to School in Japan*.
- 3 *Educating Andy*.
- 4 *Learning to Bow*.
- 5 Rohlen's *Japan's High Schools*, Yoneyama's *The Japanese High School*, and Yoder's *Youth Deviance in Japan*.
- 6 *Invitations to the World*.
- 7 *The Working Poor*.
- 8 *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*.
- 9 *Encountering God*.