The Culture of Learning and the Good Teacher in Japan:
An Analysis of Student Views

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1.0 Introduction

Most experienced EFL teachers have well-articulated beliefs about what makes good teaching and good teachers. Richards and Lockhart (1995), in commenting on this "culture of teaching" say:

"Teachers' belief systems are founded on the goals, values and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it. These beliefs and values serve as the background to much of the teacher's decision making and action . . . " (p. 30).

However, few foreign teachers in Japan can speak with equal conviction about our students' educational beliefs and goals. From what background do they make their decisions? How do their values differ from teachers?

This paper reports on the first stages of a cross-cultural ethnographic research project in the Niigata Prefecture. The stated purpose of this part of the project was to discover what qualities Japanese college students feel are important in good teachers.

2.0 Research Considerations

Before reporting on the actual project, it would be appropriate to discuss the ethnographic research tradition, and where it fits in the spectrum of other research disciplines. The reliability and validity of this research both external and internal, will be discussed.

Chaudron (1995:13) highlights four well-documented traditions in L2 research: Psychometric, Interaction Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and Ethnographic. With regard to these traditions, Nunan (1989) says, "each of these research methodologies has a different focus and function, and it is not possible to say that one is necessarily better than another without knowing what it is that the researcher is trying to find out . . . " (p. 4). The

two main traditions commonly associated with L2 research are the psychometric and ethnographic traditions.

Psychometric research is concerned with *quantitative* results. It employs experiments, statistical tests and control groups to " . . . collect facts and studies the relationship of one set of facts to another. They measure, using scientific techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions" (Bell, 1995:1). Psychometric research is often used to statistically measure the improvement of students' test scores after being exposed to a different teaching method, technique or teaching materials.

Ethnographic research deals with *qualitative* (or interpretive) results. It uses surveys, systematic observation, and journals to " . . . seek insight rather than statistical analysis" (Bell, 1995:2). Ethnographic research " . . . observes, describes and interprets the classroom in ways similar to those employed by anthropologists when they study unfamiliar cultures and societies" (Nunan, 1989:4). Ethnographic research is often applied in research on the classroom "culture" or some other aspect of the students' learning experience.

Psychometric research then, to use Long's (1983a) terminology, is a *theory-then-research* approach interested in data, while ethnographic research is a *research-then-theory* approach interested in knowledge. While there is some debate about which type of is more valuable to L2 research, Nunan's (1989) advice is to " . . . acknowledge that different projects will have different purposes and audiences, and that it is these purposes and audiences which should determine the research methodology and design" (p. 10).

The division between these two traditions is essentially

ideological. As Grotjahn (1987) documented in his eight research paradigms, most research projects use a mixture of psychometric and ethnographic research techniques. This research project used an open-ended survey design which fits squarely in the ethnographic tradition. Grotjahn (1987:60) would identify the technique as a Paradigm 6 (Exploratory-Quantitative-Statistical) or Paradigm 7 (Exploratory-Quantitative-Interpretive) research instrument, depending upon how one interprets the data collected from the survey. The open-ended survey design has a non-experimental design, and produce qualitative data that can be analyzed either statistically or interpretively.

2.1 Reliability and Validity

These concepts are central when considering a research instrument. Bell (1995:64-65) defines reliability as " . . . the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions", and validity as " . . . whether an item measures or describes what it is supposed to measure or describe". The two are commonly separated into internal reliability, external reliability, internal validity and external validity. Nunan (1992) defines internal reliability as "the consistency of data collection, analysis and interpretation", and external reliability as "the extent to which independent researchers can reproduce a study and obtain results similar to those obtained in the original study" (p. 14). He defines internal validity as "the interpretability of research", and external validity as "the extent to which the results can be generalized from samples to populations" (p. 15). If no precautions are taken, any research is vulnerable to unreliability, but ethnographic research often has a larger burden in protecting itself from such threats.

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) say the internal reliability of ethnographic research can be strengthened if more than one

researcher works on the project, others are conducting the same
research in similar settings, and if the data is systematically
recorded in some manner. The external reliability of rep grids
can be strengthened if the researcher carefully details the
subjects, process, conditions, form of analysis, and form of data
collection. Nunan (1992) comments on LeCompte and Goetz, saying
that protections against threats to reliability " . . . can be
summarized in two words -- care and explicitness . . . if one is
careful in the collection and analysis of one's data, and if one
is explicit about the way the data were collected and analysed,
then one can reasonably claim reliability for one's
investigation" (p. 62).

Nunan (1992:59) adds that if one is not looking for casual
relationships between variables and is not concerned with
generalizing the results to represent a larger group, then
validity will not be a pressing issue. As long as there is no
bias about which subjects were chosen for the research,
ethnographic research by design can claim to have a high level of
internal validity.

Ethnographic research such as an open-ended survey design can
make reasonable claims to external validity not through
generalization, but through comparability and translatability:

"Comparability requires that the ethnographer delineate the characteristics of the
group studies or constructs generated so clearly that they can serve as a basis for
comparison with other like and unlike groups . . . Translatability assumes that
research methods, analytic categories, and characteristics of phenomena and groups
are identified so explicitly that comparisons can be conducted confidently.
Assuming comparability and translatability provides the foundation upon which
comparisons are made" (Lecompte and Goetz, 1982:34).

That is to say, if other teachers identify similarities in their
own students after reading the published report, then some claims
to external validity can be made. Guarding against these threats
is challenging, but if the appropriate care and rigor is applied,
higher claims to reliability and validity can be made.

As many of these steps as possible were taken in an effort to strengthen the internal/external validity and reliability of this project. We will now proceed with a study of the subjects, survey procedure and an analysis of the results.

3.0 Subjects

A total of 165 Japanese college students (ninety-nine males and sixty-six females) participated in the project. It was necessary to limit the number of subjects because the more complex research instruments used in successive stages of the project required a smaller sample. The subjects included eighty-nine first year students from Niigata University. Seventy-six third year students came from Keiwa College, a private four-year liberal arts school.

More than half the students came from Niigata Prefecture. The rest were from various prefectures in Honshu or from Hokkaido. A total of six classes took part in the study, with student majors representing one of the following departments: International Studies (Keiwa College), Pre-Medical, Agriculture, Elementary Education, and Economics (Niigata University). All were enrolled in the required English courses at their university. Each class met once a week for ninety minutes, and was composed of disparate numbers of strong and weak learners.

4.0 Method

The survey was designed to be open-ended, and give the students as much freedom as possible to express their views. All answers were analyzed according to text frequency and descriptive statistics. The research question was formulated as: "What is a good teacher?"

To protect against threats to the reliability of this type of

survey, special attention was given to instruct each class the same way (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Every step of the procedure was first explained in Japanese and then in English. Before commencing, all instructions were verified with the stronger students. These students would then double check with the weaker students. The stronger student's explanations were carefully checked to confirm there were no misunderstandings. Students started work on the survey only after everyone was confident about what to do. The subjects' behavior was observed and recorded in a journal for later reference.

5.0 Procedure

Each class was told they would participate in a research project, the results of which would be read on a larger forum. The research question was written in English on the blackboard. Students were asked to brainstorm on eight or more attributes that best described a good teacher. They were assured that no part of this research was a test consisting of right or wrong answers.

Before starting, the subjects were advised not to misinterpret the question by writing: 1) what they personally thought of the teacher conducting the research, 2) answers which they perceive the researchers might like to read and 3) avoid writing down qualities they felt applied only to good *foreign* teachers. They were encouraged to write about attributes that would apply to any teacher, Japanese or foreign.

Due to the large number of weak learners in each class, the subjects were asked to express themselves in Japanese. If time allowed, they were free to translate their answers into English.
  Only a few in each class wished to work alone. The majority asked to work in groups of close friends. I felt that insisting on individual work would implicitly create a test-like

atmosphere, which would negatively influence the subjects' responses. It was also believed that responses produced by these groups would represent the cooperative effort of like minds.

The entire class period was given to formulate their responses. Many students asked for examples of what they should write, but no hints were given to avoid contaminating the survey results. Individuals and members of different groups were asked not to confer with each other on their answers during the survey procedure.

What is a Good Teacher?

Text Entry:	Frequency	Text Entry:	Frequency
KIND	40	OPEN-MINDED	6
FRIENDLY	27	UNIQUE	6
IMPARTIAL	25	CLEAN	6
UNDERSTANDABLE	18	SERIOUS	6
CHEERFUL	17	DOESN'T GIVE TESTS	6
PUNCTUAL	13	GIVES CREDITS (EASY PASSER)	6
FUN	12	WON'T FORCE OWN OPINION	5
ENTHUSIASTIC	12	GOOD CHARACTER	5
HUMOROUS	11	RELIABLE	5
NONVIOLENT	11	INTERESTING LECTURES	5
KNOWLEDGEABLE	10	TELLS STORIES FROM HIS LIFE	5
WRITES IN BIG LETTERS ON BB	10	ACTIVE	5
SPEAKS IN A LOUD VOICE	10	CONSIDERATE	4
WRITES CLEARLY	9	SYMPATHETIC	4
SPEAKS CLEARLY	9	DOESN'T TAKE CLASS ROLE	4
NOT TOO MUCH HOMEWORK	9	STRICT	4
GIVES EASY TESTS	9	EXPERIENCED	4
HUMBLE	9	CLEAR EXPLANATIONS	4
INTERESTING	9	HAS A SENSE OF HUMOR	4
GOOD STORYTELLER	9	LIKED BY STUDENTS	3
GOOD TEACHING METHODS	8	FAIR	3
TELLS INTERESTING STORIES	8	EASY EXPLANATIONS	3
INTELLIGENT	8	TALKS ABOUT EXPERIENCES	3
HONEST	7	TEACHING HAS VARIETY	3
EASY TO TALK WITH	6	INTERESTING LESSONS	3

Due to the newness and challenge of the task, most subjects took

between seventy and eighty minutes to decide upon their elements.
Most stated having neither the time nor the linguistic ability
to translate their responses into English. All the responses
were collected, translated into English, and textually analyzed
for response frequency. The most frequent responses can be found
in Table One. As with most ethnographic work, this research is
data rich. It is not possible to list all the responses that
occurred once or twice. However, most of the unlisted responses
represented different aspects of the elements listed in the
table.

Despite the cognitive strain of the task, students were observed
to be very upbeat and enthusiastic about expressing their
opinions. The opportunity to express themselves in a
nonthreatening atmosphere was observed to be very empowering for
them. An unexpected result was that some classes whose previous
atmosphere could best be described as "chilly" became very warm,
cooperative and responsive after participating in the survey.

6.0 Analysis
The subjects' general portrait of a good teacher is that of a
kind-hearted, friendly individual who is open-minded, sympathetic
but impartial in student relations and class decisions. He never
resorts to physical violence or forces his opinion on an issue.
She is punctual for class and is fun to be with. He should not
only be very understandable but understanding. She focuses on
the needs of her students, not on tests or homework. The good
teacher is knowledgeable and experienced, but humble. Whatever
other teaching methods that he uses, the good teacher is a
storyteller who shares real-life anecdotes of interest to his
students. Her enthusiasm for teaching, sense of humor and
cheerfulness will encourage students to participate with her in
class. The good teacher is one whom the students look up to,
believe in, and depend on.

This depiction of a good teacher complements the Japanese *sempai* approach to leadership. The bond between *senpai,* literally meaning "companion ahead and *k_hai*, meaning "companion behind" is an important one in Japan. This model for "up-down" relationships is essential to successful cooperation in Japanese companies, organizations or institutions. It is natural to expect therefore, that Japanese students would seek out these ideals in their teachers. Rohlen (1974) describes the relationship in this way:

"Ideally, the sempai will represent, advise, console, teach and discipline their k_hai. K_hai, in return, will confide in, listen to, depend upon, follow, and respect their sempai . . . there is an implication that leadership should be as sympathetic, protective and unselfish as good sempai" (p. 23).

This may be one of the reasons why students mentioned storytelling as one practice of a good teacher. Wright (1995) says that storytelling involves a closeness between the speaker and listener. The subjects in this sample seem to support Wright's plea for teachers in Japan to give the technique of storytelling more of a place in their classes.

However, the issue of nonviolence as one of the top ten responses came as a surprise to us. We have personally encountered only a few teachers who openly speak about striking college students during class. Bullying from teachers has had a long history in Japan (Murakami, 1985 and Horio, 1988). This sample implies that much more violence goes on than we as teachers may be aware of.

The responses in this survey show a striking similarity to other "good teacher" studies conducted with Japanese college students (e.g., Shimizu, 1995). We feel this strengthens the validity of this and related studies. The results seem to suggest that Japanese students are not concerned so much about what their

teacher can do; they are more interested in who the teacher is. Character issues far outweigh any skills or abilities the ideal teacher might have.

7.0 Implications for Teachers

This study does not necessarily suggest that foreign teachers should simply conform to all the student expectations of a good teacher. The research also indicates that students are looking for something unique in their teachers. For that reason, a major advantage of being a foreign teacher is to give Japanese students that unique opportunity to interact with a representative of the target language. Possibly some will then be challenged to make allowances for good teachers that do not easily fit into the *sempai* catagory.

However, it is hoped that the information in this paper will give interested teachers some help in how to adjust their approach (when necessary) to facilitate learning. For example, we now keep the results in table one with us while we teach. Before we make certain teaching decisions, it has been helpful to look over the list and consider how our actions might be interpreted by our learners. Especially on those days when students, for one reason or another, will not respond at all, keeping this list close at hand has saved us from pedagogic disaster.

8.0 Conclusion

More research which enhances our appreciation for the Japanese "culture of learning" is needed. A variety of approaches, using different research instruments, should be taken in an effort to deepen our insight into the our learners' affective filters. In anticipation of this need, the second part of this project will use the personal construct repertory grid procedure as a means to further grasp the mental constructs supporting Japanese student attitudes towards teachers. Research on the values that

teachers, both foreign and national, adhere to should be investigated as well.

This research encourages increased awareness for foreign teachers, as they consider the issues which concern their students. Tempering our teaching strategies with this knowledge is not only personally enriching; doing so will also enable us to bridge cross-cultural boundaries. The added rapport will aid us in facilitating better learning opportunities for our students. And in the long run, students will take our efforts to aid in their learning experience much more seriously.

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