

# An action-oriented teacher training course on teaching English at the graduate level: A trial of *kyooshoku jissen kenkyuu*

大学院におけるアクション志向の英語教員養成科目—「教職実践研究」の試み—

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## I Introduction<sup>1)</sup>

To educate secondary school teacher candidates or in-service teachers to be able to teach English well is no easy task, given their students' widely diverse developmental stages, needs, and socio-economical environments. There seems to be, however, a certain consensus on what needs to be taught as an introduction to English teaching (i.e., English as a Foreign Language or EFL) at the undergraduate level. Many books are available for use as textbooks in such an introductory lecture course (e.g., Takahashi & Takahashi, 2007, Ishida, Koizumi & Furuya, 2013). Furthermore, since MEXT (2009) requires a minimum of 12 credits on pedagogy to grant teaching qualifications for the lower secondary school level (6 credits for the higher secondary school), teacher training programs normally offer, on top of the aforementioned introductory lecture course, at least one practicum-type course in which pre-service trainees practice how to teach English through some mock teaching.

When it comes to EFL pedagogy courses at the graduate school level, however, course contents seem to vary from program to program. Depending on the expertise of the available faculty as well as the characteristics and/or the strength of the programs, such course(s) can be practical or theoretical, with the latter tending to be more prevalent than

the former. Even though this pertains to teaching in general rather than applicable specifically to English subject teaching, the Central Education Council recommended MEXT to start a new practical and action-oriented course at the graduate school level to heighten the quality of teacher education in 2012 and MEXT has explored the issue (MEXT, 2013).

Given the situation above, the author designed a graduate course (*Kyooshoku Jissen Kenkyuu I (English)*, literally “teaching practice research (English)”, KJKE hereafter) with new, more action-oriented content and taught it in the spring semesters of 2014 and 2015. Ritsumeikan University Graduate School of Letters made a substantial reform of the whole graduate program in 2014, which offered a good opportunity for the creation of this course as part of such an overall innovation. This paper is a report on what content this course included, why such content was selected, what the course participants were asked to do, and how the course can be evaluated upon reflection.

## II Background to the choice of the course content

MEXT clearly states that the primary goal of foreign (English) language education at secondary school is to develop students'

communication skills using the target language (MEXT, 2008, 2010). Most teachers and researchers would agree with this goal setting by MEXT as long as the word ‘communication’ is defined as including both spoken and written modalities as well as covering both social and academic/technical discourses, rather than, as is often misunderstood, just simple oral conversations which require minimum linguistic knowledge and skills.

As for the pedagogical approaches/methods to accomplish such a goal, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been promoted and accepted fairly widely in Japan and elsewhere, although how and to what extent CLT is being realized in the classroom varies (Brown, 2007; Butler, 2011). *The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* defines CLT as an approach which “emphasizes that the goal of language learning is COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE.” (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 48, emphasis original). In order to clarify what this approach really is, Brown (2007, pp. 46-47), for example, presents a summary of the characteristics of CLT as the following : (1) overall goals of teaching focused on “all of the components of communicative competence” by intertwining the organizational (formal) aspects of language and the pragmatic aspects, (2) designing teaching to realize “the functional use of language for meaningful purposes”, (3) viewing fluency and accuracy as “complementary”, (4) preparing learners for using language in real-world contexts, (5) developing learners’ “autonomy and strategic involvement” in learning, (6) defining the teacher’s role as a “facilitator” and (7) the students’ role as “active participants in their own learning process”.

The concept of a task or task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been extensively researched and discussed (Ellis, 2003;

Matsumura, 2012; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2012; Skehan, 2014; Robinson, 2011; Willis & Willis, 2007) over the last two decades. As was the case with CLT, the definition of what a task is varies among researchers (Butler, 2011, p.38). Furthermore, it is rather difficult to adopt tasks as the main units of study in secondary school English courses. However, tasks are incorporated into both junior and senior high schools, especially when students practice speaking and writing (e.g., introducing themselves or others, describing Japanese cultural artifacts, recommending a good place/book/movie, making a school newspaper to report their school trip).

The field of ESL/EFL has also been discussing content-based language teaching (CBLT) or content and language integrated learning (CLIL), which incorporates and integrates content (mostly academic subject contents) when a language is being overtly or covertly taught (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Watanabe, Ikeda, & Izumi, 2011).

Although the general principles of CLT have been stated as the desirable pedagogical rules to follow in the current MEXT Course of Study guidelines (MEXT, 2008, 2010), CLT has not necessarily been adopted at every secondary school and/or by every English teacher in Japan. Butler (2011, p. 36) enumerates the sources of difficulty in implementing CLT in Asian contexts, by pointing out the “conceptual”, “classroom-level”, and “societal-level” constraints. As an EFL teacher trainer for about two decades, the author believes that not only the concept of CLT but also how to cope with issues pertaining to the classroom level (e.g., the students’ varied cognitive and study skills, their needs and motivation levels, resource availability, and the teachers’ English proficiencies and other abilities) should be the targets in an advanced pedagogy course like

those offered at the graduate level. In other words, what Kumaravadivelu calls “particularity” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 171) should be addressed at this level of teacher training courses.

Considering the many variables that influence actual classrooms and the inadequacy of the concept of a method as a ready-made package, the concept of “postmethod” has been discussed since 1990’s (Kumaravadivelu 1994, 2006; Brown, 2007; Bell, 2003). The author believes that a basic knowledge of methods along with their historical backgrounds, as well as a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, is indispensable as initial teacher training content. However, graduate students who already have that basic knowledge need to be given opportunities to face the diversity of the classrooms in a professional manner. As an alternative to such methods Kumaravadivelu (2006, Chapter 8) claims that postmethod pedagogy should be guided by the parameters of “particularity”, “practicality”, and “possibility” and those parameters “have the potential to provide the organizing principles for the construction of a context-sensitive pedagogic framework” (p. 184). Brown (2007, Chapter 4) discusses how a teacher can teach by language principles for learning and teaching, and he lists cognitive, socioaffective and linguistic principles. Long (2009) also provides a list of principles which are selected based on either empirical evidence or theoretical/logical argument regarding their effectiveness in second language acquisition.

Given the educational situation in Japan and the proposed solutions discussed above, the author decided to offer the KJKE course in which she exposed the participants to some selected theoretical frameworks as tools to analyze their lessons and asked them to identify the issues that they wanted to focus on

during the course and conduct a small scale action research on their classes. The ultimate goal of the course was to equip the participants with the ways to view, analyze, and improve their own classes focusing on one or two issues of their choice among miscellaneous real life variables. The course project was meant to let them experience the action research process under the instructor’s supervision so that they could repeat such an action to improve their class in the future. The details of the course are described in the following sections.

### III Course content

The class of KJKE met once a week for 90 minutes at a Ritsumeikan graduate school satellite classroom near Kyoto Station, so that teachers working full-time could have easy access to the class. As a result of such an adjustment, two full-time teachers and two full-time graduate school students with part-time teaching positions signed up for the course with a few auditors in 2014. In all, three participants completed the assignments for credit (Participant 1, 2, and 3, P1, P2, and P3 hereafter). Two participants did so in 2015, but this report concentrates on the initial year, i.e., the academic year of 2014.

#### 1. Theoretical frameworks

The class read Kumaravadivelu (2006) to familiarize themselves with the concept of postmethod in the initial few class meetings. At the same time they reviewed some concepts in second language acquisition and teaching. The participants were then introduced to the following frameworks (Table 1) for possible use as the analytical tools of their class.

#### 2 Procedure of the participants’ action research

Through the initial sessions described above the participants understood the concept of

postmethod and gained the knowledge of the frameworks presented above at the level in which they could not only understand what they are but also apply them to their classrooms. Equipped with those theoretical tools, all the participants (including the auditors) shared their teaching situations and their thoughts about them in a relatively general term at this stage.

In the next stage, they were asked to explain the following in details: the class that they taught (when multiple classes were being taught, they were asked to choose one of them), the students' needs, levels, attitudes toward class, what the instructor taught, how things were going, and most importantly, what were the issues that the instructor wanted to focus on, and which were good candidates to become the themes of their action research for the course. The participants were asked to present such information with video clips or audio recordings so that the other participants could have a maximum amount/quality of understanding of the class situation. The course instructor (Yukawa) visited one class that each of the participants taught except for one participant's class because of schedule constraints.

Table 1 *Frameworks to Use for Analysis of the Classes*

Author & Year of publication	Model/Claim / Proposal	Notes by Yukawa
1.Kumara vadivelu (2006)	Three different views of language: (1)Language as system, (2) language as discourse, (3) language as ideology	Regardless of the teacher's personal view of language, sometimes he/she is forced by his/her working institution to teach according to a different view. This model was presented considering the possibility of such a case.

2.Long (2009)	10Methodological Principles (MPs) for language teaching: Motivated by 4 criteria (theoretical, logical, empirical, based on the well-established notions in other areas)	These MPs (e.g., "Use task, not text as the unit of analysis", "Provide rich input") were expected to be used selectively considering the Japanese context.
3.Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991)	Input modification: Linguistic Modification, Conversational Modification	Making input adjustment at the discourse level requires high English proficiency. However, the course participants' English was good enough to use this type.
4. Littlewood (2004)	Two dimensions of communicative tasks: Dimension 1-focus on forms – focus on meaning continuum Dimension 2- degree of learner-involvement	It is sometimes hard for novice teachers to judge which activities or tasks are communicative and which are not. Littlewood's two-dimension model is handy to find where each activity can be found in the space demarcated by the two axes.
5.Nation & Newton (2009)	Four strands of activities: (1) learning through meaning-focused input. (2) learning through meaning-focused output, (3) language-focused learning, (4) becoming fluent in listening, speaking, reading, and writing	The model of the four strands is relatively easy to use. It is a tool to analyze most English classes to see which types of activities a teacher, without awareness, overuses or underuses.
6. Dörnyei (2001)	35 motivational strategies (MS) in the language classroom, which can be divided into 4 categories	1) creating the basic motivational conditions, 2) generating initial motivation, 3) maintaining and protecting motivation, 4) encouraging positive self-evaluation. The course participants can use only a part of the strategies.

The course participants discussed various aspects of each case: the situation of the class including its regulations/limitations, suggestions for improvement, suggestions on the choice of the “issue” to take up for the course, intervention to the current teaching, suitable data as the means to detect any change after the intervention, and predictions of the lesson outcome.

After that each participant started to make a plan of their action research, and the instructor (Yukawa) met the participants individually and gave guidance to their plan.

After deciding on what action research they would conduct, each of them orally presented a formal report of the pre-intervention state of the situation with whatever data they collected to describe the current state (the first round of presentations on their action research). Then the participants tried their “new” activities/arrangements for a few weeks. They then presented the final report on the post-intervention state of the class. In order to show the types of the action research conducted for the course and the improvement in their teaching, the next section presents brief summaries of the three action research studies conducted for the course.

#### IV Participants’ achievements

##### 1. Summary of the three action research projects

Table 2 below shows the course participants’ profiles, the classes they taught, the issue(s) they chose to focus on for the course, the interventions, and the analytical frameworks they used. This is followed by a short summary of what resulted in each class due to his/her actions.

**Table 2 Course Participants’ Action Research**

P1: Full-time graduate student, part-time teacher at a junior high school 2 years of part-time teaching experience			
The class he/she taught	Issue(s)	Intervention	Analytical Framework
Private junior HS, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year students	Lack of English use in class.	Try using English with various input modifications	Long’s input modification
Slow learners’ extra class taught after school twice a week	Lack of students’ concentration.	Change the class activities into more attractive ones	Dörnyei’s strategy No.18
P2: Full-time teacher, Has an M.A. in teaching English, Taking this graduate course to train herself further, 5 years of teaching experience in schools and 15 years more in a private language school			
Private primary school English activities  Once a week for 45 minutes per time, Fourth graders	Lack of students’ concentration	Examine the activities using the relevant frameworks and a questionnaire and modify them accordingly	N. and N.’s four strands of activities  Dörnyei’s strategies, No. 15, 17, and No.18  An original questionnaire on preference of activities and concentration in class
P3: Full-time graduate student, part-time teacher at a college, This year being the first year to teach part-time in a school/university setting			
Private junior college, TOEFL preparation course 90 minutes per time, once a week	Lack of meaning-based activities  Lack of English use in class	Use of a new meaning-based activity, i.e., the Box Exercise  Increased use of English by the teacher	N. and N.’s four strands of activities  A questionnaire on the two activities done in class,  Count of teacher’s utterances in class

## 2. P1's project

P1's students are junior high school students as shown in Table 2. One of the identified issues was that his students had a hard time concentrating on the work at hand even when an outsider, the author, was there to observe the class. Although P1 had made many interesting and elaborate slides as his teaching aids, all that the students were doing, however, was learning forms in one way or another, i.e., new (and previously taught) words as a word quiz, sentence structures and grammar rules using his slides and the grammar exercise book they had. The lesson looked monotonous despite all his efforts. In addition, he did not use his excellent English at all in class assuming that his students would detest his use of English.

Through class discussion, P1 was encouraged to insert some meaning-oriented exercises which had relevance to the students' lives by his fellow participants who had longer teaching experience. The idea was further enriched by Dörnyei's strategies. He was also reminded that he should try using some English when he could and see if his students would reject it.

P1 compared his use of English in April (pre-intervention data) and in June (post-intervention data). His use of English in class increased from zero in April to 10.6% in June. The actual utterances were analyzed using Long's two input modification types (linguistic versus conversational modifications). He also asked the students how they evaluated the three activities, namely, (1) the traditional grammar book exercises they had been doing since April, (2) Listening activities and (3) Communication activities which were newly introduced. Even though he was able to witness in class that the students were much more engaged than before, he wanted to ask the students to evaluate each of those activities using the Likert scale of 1~5 with the

perspective of the 10 techniques under Dörnyei's strategy No. 18: Make learning stimulating and enjoyable for the learner by increasing the attractiveness of the tasks. Generally speaking his students gave higher scores (i.e., more challenging, more interesting and fun, more fresh, etc.) to communication activities. The difference between the other two was not so large.

The extra lessons for slow learners like this class tend to consist of only quizzes and grammar exercises. It was eye-opening to P1 that he could add something that led the students to become more engaged and that it was possible to insert some English when conducting his class even with a group consisting of only slow learners. There was no way at this point to know the effect of such changes at the affective and behavioral levels on the students' term exam scores, but the students' involvement in class activities is undoubtedly the first step toward learning.

## 3. P2's project

P2's students are fourth graders in a private school. They have been taking the English Activity class since they were first graders. P2 was bothered by their lack of concentration in class because students in the other grades are better behaved and more engaged in class. P2 noticed some possible sources of distraction in the classroom environment and thus tried a number of different classroom settings (e.g., changing the classrooms, seating arrangements, etc.). After having done her best as to the physical environmental conditions, P2 tried to find any further changes she could make in the class activities.

In deciding how to modify her activities, P2 borrowed ideas from Dörnyei's list of motivational strategies (strategies No. 15, 17, and 18). She also obtained the pupils' views

(whether they liked it or not) via a short questionnaire on ten different activities she used in class. Furthermore, she analyzed her class before the intervention using Nation and Newton's four strands of activities, which revealed that she spent only 9 minutes in giving meaning-focused input, and 5 minutes in giving meaning-focused output out of the total 45 minutes. This encouraged her to seek ways to squeeze some more meaning-oriented activities into her class

Based on all this information P2 made some changes in the activity itself, its complexity, its English level, and the number of students taking part in the activity. For example, rather than letting the pupils write alphabet letters by themselves to learn them, P2 let them work in groups to manipulate the alphabet cards (choosing the right card, moving them in the correct alphabetic order, etc.).

As a result of such modifications, students' self-reported concentration levels in some activities increased, which was in accordance with P2's own observation.

#### 4. P3's study

Japanese universities often offer English courses to prepare for some high-stake standardized tests such as TOEFL, or TOEIC. These courses are attractive and motivating if the students have specific reasons to use those scores (such as applying for going abroad or jobs) in the near future. However, if that is not the case, the lesson tends to be rather monotonous. P3 found himself in such a situation, and he wanted to make the class more attractive by inserting some meaning-based elements in it while keeping the class functioning to prepare for TOEFL to the maximum extent.

P3 also noticed that he could increase English despite the students' low level of

English proficiency. It was suggested by the other course participants upon listening to his initial description of the class and some audio recording.

P3 added carefully chosen texts relevant to the students' lives and gave them as reading materials. Each text was given to the students with a task, which was to fill the provided boxes with relevant information from the text and elsewhere as instructed by a note in each box. In other words, this Box Activity was an advanced comprehension check and at the same time opinion-giving task.

The students looked much engaged while doing this Box Activity, but when P3 asked their opinions on this task as well as a traditional study with word lists (e.g., their usefulness, desire to do it more, their value as an English activity), students' responses did not show any difference between the two activities; they gave high scores to both. As to English use, an utterance count of sample class excerpts from one pre-intervention and one post-intervention class recordings showed that when P3 was checking the students' text comprehension he used more English than before, whereas when he was teaching grammar, the ratio of his English use did not differ from before.

P3's teaching situation did not have much room for modification in terms of the teaching materials and activities. However, he was at least able to analyze his own language use and improve it.

#### V. Conclusion

Teachers, especially novice teachers, tend to become bewildered by the gap between the theory they learn in teacher training programs and the practice at their work places ("reality shock" by Farrell, 2003, 2006). Such a gap may look bigger to them if they lack skills to reflect

upon their lessons juxtaposing them with theories.

The importance of reflection for teachers' life-long professional development has been stressed for some time in the field of foreign language education (Farrell, 2013; Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Not only in foreign language education but also in education in general, on-site reflective learning has been recommended especially in Professional Schools for Teacher Education (*kyooshoku daigakuin*), which the present author thinks is a sensible and necessary move for teacher education. (See for example the example of Fukui University's "School Based Method" in Matsumoto, 2013).

Having said that, however, the trial of this KJKE course made the author realize that developing the participants' skills to reflect on their particularities and to analyze them for possible and practical solutions required much more guidance and input from their instructor than she had expected. Akbari (2007) quite wisely points out that "(p)roblem identification needs trained eyes" (p. 199). This means that even though teachers or pre-service teachers who have some part-time teaching positions should experience and learn from actual teaching, and yet they need to be guided to systematically analyze their own lessons. They need to be equipped with useful theories as analytical tools to examine their teaching, and they should not be left alone to reflect on their teaching at least at the beginning of their career. They need support to identify problems, let alone, to find suitable pedagogical modification for better learning by their students. In that sense, the KJKE course reported in the present paper has potential to give the optimum opportunity to teachers and teacher trainees.

After teaching the action-based course on pedagogy, the following advantages became

clear. One is that the course participants have come to realize that there is something that they can try if they want to improve their teaching (rather than feeling that they are trapped in a dead-end) as long as they have theoretical tools to analyze their classes and a group of interested people to aid their thinking process.

Another merit is that because they have to choose and apply some models to their actual teaching situations, their insufficient understanding or misunderstanding of those concepts is detected and corrected along the way and their knowledge becomes more solid than would be the case of learning them in a lecture course.

We have to keep in mind, however, that what one can do in this small scale action research is limited as was seen in the case reports of the three participants. P1's or P2's study revealed the students did increase involvement or enthusiasm but its influence on their English acquisition is unknown. Nevertheless, the author believes that this type of small-scale success experience, irrespective of the scale of the project, can empower teachers for future trials.

On the other hand, an action-based class has shortcomings as well. First, graduate students who do not have any teaching site cannot fully participate in this type of course; they need access to a school via, for example, some internship or volunteer work. Secondly, it is asking a great deal to get acquainted with theoretical tools and design an action research study within a semester. It would make more sense to do it over the period of an academic year. Thirdly, it is desirable to have a group of teachers with miscellaneous teaching experiences in order to secure fruitful discussions. At least one or a couple of teachers who have more than a few years of experience

(other than the course instructor) seems indispensable for this type of course because of the importance of group discussions. In 2014 we were fortunate to have such participants and auditors, but it is hard to predict who will sign up for the course each year. The total number of the participants for one semester influences the course process, too. Too few or too many participants make class presentations and discussions difficult.

Even though there are some hurdles to clear for a desirable course on EFL pedagogy, the author believes that an action-oriented course is possible and worth experimenting further in the future.

#### Notes

- 1) I would like to thank all the participants who took or audited *Kyooshoku Jissen Kenkyuu I (English)* in Spring 2014 for their contribution to the course. I would like to thank P1, P2, and P3 in particular for their permission to share their projects in this paper.

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