

研究ノート

Notable Changes in the English Conversation Classes at Hakuoh University Junior High School in Ashikaga

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Starting in April of 2015, I have been team teaching with professor Jeffrey Miller in four special English Conversation classes at Hakuoh University Junior High School in Ashikaga. The classes are held on Thursdays during 1st and 2nd periods for second year students, and during 3rd and 4th periods for first year students. Although the lessons and homework assignments are all planned by Mr. Miller, we both teach and interact with the students in every class. As a result, I have learned much about teaching English as a Foreign Language in general, and teaching English in middle school in particular. Actually, this has been my first experience teaching English to junior high school age students.

Both classes are quite small as they were specially designed for students who will be going on to Hakuoh University High School, and the classes only continue for grades 7 and 8. As the assistant teacher, I have had time to make a few observations of academic changes among the

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learners. First, I have witnessed the academic maturation and coming together of the 8th grade class. However, at the same time I have seen an opposite move towards separation among the classmates in the 7th grade class. The difference between the two classes became especially apparent in their second term and is quite remarkable.

(For general background on the classes and program, please refer to my earlier paper *Observations from Junior High English Classes at Hakuoh University Junior High School in Ashikaga* published in Hakuoh University's Hakuoh University Journal in September of 2015).

Overall Changes in the Classes

The 8th grade class began their second year of junior high school as a rather closely-knit group. After having spent a year together in their first year in junior high, they had become familiar with each other and the workings of the school. Also, they were used to the schedule and how each day and term progressed.

The 7th grade class, on the other hand, entered last April with more questions than answers. Coming out of their final year of elementary school, where they had spent six years (some of them at different schools), and were the oldest students; they were now in this totally new environment, where they were the youngest. Everything from the school itself to the classmates they were spending everyday with was new. This obviously is the case for all students, and all children must go through this in due time, but it was the striking difference in the students attitudes and demeanor that caught my attention.

Where the 8th grade students would take some risks, and were not unusually afraid to be put on the spot in front of their classmates,

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the 7th grade students became totally silent, and in fact looked afraid any time they were asked to venture even the simplest answer. This striking difference is obviously the result of the 8th graders having that one year of English experience in the classroom, and it being the first of many experiences in their new situation for the 7th graders. For this reason, I was not totally surprised. As I stated before, this was my first experience at the junior high school level, and I as well, was experiencing many things for the first time. These differences in reactions and abilities are very much the same as what I had experienced in my kindergarten and elementary school classes. First year students struggling in places where second or third year students were able to continue smoothly.

The point that stood out most in my mind was not the fact that there was a difference in ability and willingness to try, but the sheer size of the gap between the two groups of students. Where there would be a moment or two of silence while a student in the 8th grade class was pondering an answer, it seemed to me that if left alone, the students in the 7th grade class could easily wait out the remaining time in class without venturing an answer. The silences often became so long, that they were uncomfortable. I had heard from my friends who taught at this age level about this being something that happens often in Japanese junior high school classes, but the difference in the two classes was more than I could have imagined.

In the second term, the second year class came together even more as a group. They got back into the routine they had begun last year, and became even more comfortable with each other. Where in the first term there was still a bit of stiffness between some of the students due to the new school year, there has been cohesion that has led to a growth in their camaraderie. Laughing and joking became a larger part of the

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classes than in the first term. Some students are more close to certain students than others are, but in general everyone gets along well as a tight knit group.

The 7th grade class has also settled into a routine, having completed one term at their new school, and getting accustomed to their surroundings and schedule. There is camaraderie between the students and there is a friendly, joking atmosphere in general. The most interesting thing about the class, is that they have broken into groups.

While the 8th grade class has some students who spend more time with certain students than they do with others, there is still a general acceptance of all students. With the 7th grade class, there has been a division into pairs. One pair consists of one of the students with the strongest English abilities, and a student with one of the weakest English abilities. The other pair combines the student with the most improved English abilities and a student with weaker English skills.

The third pair is unusual, as it consists of the student with the strongest English ability and a student with weak English skills. While the other groups talk together while doing pair work, this pair does not. The weaker student sits waiting to discuss the assignment, but the stronger student will not engage her. The stronger student finishes the assignment herself, and usually leaves the weaker student to do the work on her own. In addition, while the other pairs always leave the classroom to socialize in the hall during break time, in the third pair the student with stronger English skills joins them in the hall, while the student with weaker skills remains behind, alone in the classroom.

This division of the class has made things a bit awkward for Mr. Miller and myself, but appears to have no serious effects on the class as a whole so far. We have not observed any emotional breakdowns or

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Changes in Individual Students

With the small class sizes, I was able to observe students closely and therefore, for the purposes of analysis in this paper will identify each learner with a letter. These letter designations range from the most accomplished student to the least accomplished student in relation to their performance in their respective classes. Because there are seven students in the 8th grade class, I was able to assign them A through G. Likewise, as there are six students in the 7th grade class, I was able to designate them A1 through F1 following the same criteria (using the number 1 to represent the fact that they are in their first year of junior high school). Another interesting aspect of this class is that while the 8th grade class consists of both boys and girls, the 7th grade class is all girls.

As could be expected, in the 8th grade class, the A and B students kept their first term status as the top students in the class. They continued to perform in the second term at the same level which we had come to expect of them from the beginning of the year. Not only were their answers grammatically correct, but they were also able to naturally expand on those responses.

While these two students were able to do this, the remaining students were not able to accomplish this feat in the first term. However, the second term saw improved results. Students A and B continued their dominance, but the remaining students showed more gumption than they had shown before, and they began to attempt more on their own.

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Perhaps the greatest change in the entire 8th grade class came from student E.

In the first term, student E would often drift off to sleep during class. When called upon to answer, student E was eventually able to answer but only the simplest of questions. However, when not called upon for some minutes, the individual would drift off to sleep again. When I inquired about this, I learned that student E often stayed up past midnight, but woke up before 5 a.m. every day, hence the individual's sleepiness. Because of this sleepiness, answers were often difficult to elicit. Whenever called upon for something other than a straightforward answer, it often took over a minute to complete the answer.

The student's performance in the second term however, has improved. While still often sleepy, student E rarely fell completely asleep in class. Upon inquiry, I found that the morning routine was still the same, but student E was making more of an effort to go to bed a bit earlier. Realizing that going to bed late made every day difficult, student E made the decision individually to finish homework earlier, and go to sleep earlier.

Perhaps a result of going to bed earlier, the most noticeable and impressive change came in student E's classroom participation was the total increase in English ability. While answers were difficult to construct and took a long time to vocalize in the first term, not only did answers come more quickly, but the quality of the answers significantly increased. Vocabulary usage, correct spelling and pronunciation all improved. Along with this, and perhaps most encouraging, is the increase in student E's confidence. Answers in the first term were delivered quite sheepishly. Answers in the second term come with a feeling of assuredness that makes me feel that with continued study and practice, student E will be

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able to become an accomplished English speaker.

In the 7th grade class, the students with lower skill levels have all improved to a certain point. They are becoming more familiar with the patterns in English, and are beginning to use some of the more simple patterns on their own.

Student F1, despite remaining isolated from the class during break time, has made some improvement. The isolation does not seem to effect the student's learning or willingness to attempt an answer. Lack of vocabulary and ability make answering some questions more difficult, but student F1 always shows the willingness to learn what cannot now be answered. As a matter of fact, the isolation at break time appears to be of student F1's own choosing. Sitting at the desk, reading or doing homework is how student F1 usually spends her break time. Upon inquiring with the homeroom teacher, Mr. Miller learned that student F1 has friends in the larger 7th extended grade class of 14, including three boys, but not in this special English conversation class and, simply chooses to remain in the classroom rather than go into the hall and talk with these classmates.

Students A1 and B1, clearly were the most able in the first term, and have remained that way in the second term. In the first term, both were able to answer most any question. Both were able to demonstrate understanding of spoken English, as well as being able to produce English on their own using various patterns. At the beginning of the first term, answers came easily and in a loud voice. As the first term wore on, the answers started to take more time, and the voices began to become weaker and harder to hear. By the second term, it was as if they had regressed, and were unable to answer even the simplest question.

This was especially true with student B1. In the first term, questions

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were answered in a weak voice, but the questions were answered. In the second term however, it is a grueling task of coercion to elicit even the simplest answer. Even when the answer was vocalized, it was said in a voice that was almost inaudible.

Another trait that has become common procedure is conferencing. When asked anything, student B1 will instantly turn around and confer with the student seated immediately behind, or with student A1. There was a bit of this in the first term, but in the second term, it has become a pattern that happens every time. Student B1 will confer with student E1 on questions directed to student E1 as well. This usually occurs without a request, but instead, from student B1 directly.

This conferencing before answering is practiced by four of the six students in class. The remaining two students will ponder the question and attempt an answer on their own. One of the two students who do this is student F1. The isolation of student F1 has left no one to confer with, so questions are answered individually. Although student F1's English ability is still low, the effort put forth in trying to answer things individually will lead to her improvement if continued.

The other student who will attempt an answer individually is student C1. This student did not have strong English skills at the beginning of the first term. However, student C1 did have a great willingness to try. Any time an answer was unknown, she concentrated and repeated the teacher-supplied answer, so it could be retained. This willingness to learn and to try has made student C1 the most improved student in the 7th grade class. Because of this, student D1 confers when asked a question, but conversely student C1 does not feel the need to confer. Student C1 is also part of the group that runs outside and socializes during break time. However, individual thinking, and

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answering without conferencing are this student's strong points and the main reasons for the student's improvements.

These last several months have been a wonderful learning experience for me. I have studied first-hand methods for teaching to teenage children that I had not practiced before. I have also learned about the junior high student age group itself, and the things that go on outside of the class, which are brought into class more often than is the case with kindergarten children.

On a personal note, Hakuoh University was the first place that I worked at in 1998, upon coming to Japan. Because of that fact, many of my key impressions of Japan were formed in my first two years on the Oyama campus. I learned how to use chopsticks at the Frontier Cafeteria eating the soba set. I learned many of my first words of Japanese through break time conversations with college students. It was for these reasons that I was so shocked and saddened at the excessive damage from the floods last September. Seeing the buildings I had frequented reduced to such a sorry state made my heart sink. At the same time it made me realize even more, how special a place Hakuoh University is. Not only the buildings themselves, but the people as well. (I was especially moved by the student and staff volunteers who worked so hard to clean up the school for the fall semester after the flooding.)

From faculty to students, I feel like a part of an extended family when I am at Hakuoh. I was therefore so relieved that none of the Hakuoh family were severely injured during the flooding, and that our campus is beginning to somewhat return to normal. It also makes me feel happy to be able to be a part of the junior high school, from which possible future Hakuoh University students are being molded. I look forward to being part of changes that will improve the English

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of students in Hakuoh's various subdivisions, from kindergarten to the university, in the future.

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