Outside Looking In? A Case Study of Foreigners Teaching in Japanese Colleges and Universities

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1. THE SITUATION AT TWC

It is commendable, when reviewing the many periodicals and journals of language teaching and linguistics, to see so much research devoted to pedagogy, linguistics, theory, student needs, teacher training, culture, and so forth. One area sorely underrepresented in the literature, however, is the issue of the foreign teacher in the university. It is a situation with significant implications: The foreign teacher is often someone with different cultural values, training and expectations from those above him or her (deans, administrators and government bureaucrats), around him (colleagues) and below him (students). How do all parties involved react when these cultural values meet?

This paper is an investigation of one such situation in a Japanese women's junior college. Over the course of one month in June and July, 1998, I interviewed teachers and students at the college (TWC for purposes of this report), and observed classes and routines. The research was mostly in an ethnographic in nature, and the findings are mostly direct observations or quotes from interviewees. Initially, I set out to answer

this question: How does change happen at TWC? Declining student populations and a broad-based educational reforms (Foreign Press Center, 1995), especially in the junior and senior high schools, have put pressure on colleges and universities to find ways to attract students (McVeigh, 1997, Gossman and Cisar, 1997). I decided to focus on two changes that happened at the college in 1995: a decision to have all the full-time teachers use the same textbook for first-year Eikaiwa (English Conversation) students, and to increase the number of Eikaiwa classes for first-year students from one 90-minute class per week to two 90-minute classes per week. The reasons for these changes will be dealt with in the paper.

Although I had intended to focus on how change happens at TWC, as my investigation progressed, a very different theme continually emerged during interviews with the three foreign teachers who were central figures in the change. They spoke less of the changes — which had been approved at a faculty meeting with no dissent or discussion from the Japanese faculty — than of their dissatisfaction of being outside the decision-making processes. They also complained of a cultural, professional, and linguistic divide in the English department at TWC. This divide has foreigners on one side, and the Japanese faculty and staff on the other. This paper will show teachers' perceptions of this "divide," the benefits and frustrations, and the linguistic and cultural differences that make closing the gap difficult.

The teachers will be referred to by single letters. F is a 42-year old American with a master's degree in education. He has taught English in Japan for 12 years, first at a college in Kagoshima and then at TWC for nine years. For the past six years, he has been an associate professor, and "head foreign teacher." He has an Iranian wife, and three children.

B is a 42-year old female, born and raised in Ireland who then emigrated to Canada in her 20s. She has taught English at TWC for five years,

and is currently working on a Master's degree in education via a distance program. She is divorced from her Japanese husband, and is raising two children alone.

P is a 38-year old male, born and raised in Communist Poland, who escaped to Germany during the Solidarity labor uprisings of the early 1980s, then emigrated to Australia. He has taught English at TWC for 11 years.

M is a Japanese teacher in the English Department, fluent in English, and a holder of a degree in theology from a major American university. He has taught at TWC for nine years.

H is the dean of the English department. He replaced T, the previous head of the department under whose authority these changes happened a few years ago. T has since passed away, which explains the absence of any quotes by him.

2. PROCESSES OF INNOVATION and CHANGE AT TWC

2.1 THE CHANGE TO A COMMON TEXTBOOK

In 1996, a part-time teacher and a full-time teacher at TWC, who taught the same group of students in separate classes, realized that they were using the same textbook. One of them informed F. What followed was a typical procedure for handling change that involved only the foreign teachers at the college. F informed T, and suggested a solution : That the full-time teachers all use the same textbooks. T agreed to discuss the matter at the next faculty meeting. According to F, the matter did not arouse much interest among the Japanese faculty.

"T proposed the change in a faculty meeting, and everyone [Japanese faculty] said 'if it doesn't affect me, okay.'" (6/30/98)

The next stage of the process, interestingly, is the source of disagree-

ment among the foreign teachers. F said that he, B and P discussed and decided on a textbook. But P and B remember that F had already decided to use *First Impact*. Said P:

"F just told us that we were going to use the same book. But I liked it, so I didn't really mind [not being consulted]." (7/12/98)

B resents not having been consulted, and said that F's style is not one of consultation. "He doesn't realize his style," said B. "I think that he thinks he consults with us, but he really does not." Otherwise, their relationship is excellent.

2.2 THE CHANGE TO TWICE-A-WEEK CLASSES

In August of every year since 1986, TWC has sent 12-15 students to three-week homestays in Santa Rosa, California. In an effort to prepare the students to communicate better during their homestay, F unilaterally proposed to T (in 1995) that first-year students take Eikaiwa class twice a week, rather than once a week. As with the textbook change, the Japanese faculty were mainly concerned with how the change would affect their own work load. The change actually affected only the foreign teachers, since only they taught Eikaiwa, which is common in Japan (Wadden, 1993). When the Japanese teachers learned this, the proposal was quickly passed with no debate. Said F:

"The (approval) process was very short. It was proposed at a meeting, and they said 'fine' and it was done. It was a non-issue." (6/30/98)

F then went on, unprompted: "I'll tell you this directly: The faculty in this country are very much split. There is an attitude like: 'This is a Japanese group, and the gaijin are over there.' I don't think the change was viewed as being in the same chain of command. The Japanese attitudes seemed to be, 'It's only the gaijin teachers. Let them do what they

want.' Nobody really cared about it. It's almost as if we were subject to a different set of rules and laws." (6/30/98)

H admitted that there was no debate on the issue because it "would be seen as an interference in the other teacher's class. The tradition in Japanese colleges is that academic freedom should be maintained. The faculty can't force teachers how to teach." (7/31/98)

3. A PERIPHERAL EXISTENCE: DISADVANTAGES

There is a feeling among foreigners that they are excluded from the decision-making processes of the school, and of feeling used and unappreciated. However, foreigners rarely attend faculty meetings, and so do not know some of what is going on at the college. Why don't they attend? Poor Japanese ability is one reason.

"They have been asked to come, but they don't," said M. "I guess it's because they don't speak Japanese. But the four-year university has two foreigners who attend their meetings." TWC has an associated four-year college. (7/24/98)

The above statement is, in fact, both true and false. Of the foreign teachers at the four-year college, one (C, an American born and raised in Japan), is fluent in written and spoken Japanese and English. She is close friends with the other foreigner, K, and translates for K during faculty meetings. This close access helps K to know what is going on. To the contrary, F, B and P have no such access.

H also says that foreign teachers are welcome at the faculty meetings:

"If the foreigners could use Japanese, all the problems would be solved." (7/31/98)

The foreigners acknowledge the language barrier, but they point to

cultural aspects of Japanese decision-making processes as a bigger deterrent. B said:

"I'd like to know what's going on because some of the things they discuss affect us. But one gets the impression that, because the Japanese [tradition of] consensus, it takes 365 meetings to reach a consensus on something that could take two meetings." (7/24/98)

The Japanese tradition of consensus, and the practice of excluding foreigners from decision-making process, is well-documented (Wadden, 1993; Van Wolferen, 1993; Yamada, 1997). F relates his experience of TWC faculty meetings:

"For the Japanese to make a change like this [referring to the twice-a-week change] would have been traumatic. When I came to TWC, I went to meetings for an entire year, and I got totally disgusted. We talked about curriculum changes every week, but *nothing* happened. I even presented a four-page paper in which I outlined the skills I thought the students needed to get a good job. I suggested that Japanese teachers use English in class. Some teachers actually said: 'I think this is a really good idea, but please wait until I retire before you change this.' So, after an entire year of meetings, we only decided to change the name of one course. *That was all anybody could agree on*!" (6/30/98)

H said that there "is not so big of a gap" (7/31/98) between the foreign and Japanese teachers. H said that Japanese teachers bridge the gap "when we ask questions on English or when A-sensei invites F to her office for coffee." He suggested that Japanese and foreign teachers "work together," "learn from one another," and "develop trust" (7/31/98). When asked how this could be achieved, H suggested team teaching.

Wadden (1993) says that a gap between foreign and Japanese faculty is typical at Japanese universities and colleges. He refers to most foreign

teachers' situations as a "peripheral existence." He says "It is wise for foreign teachers not to fool themselves into thinking that they are really important. Most have neither the time nor language ability to cultivate the proper connections needed to make much of an administrative or curricular impact on their institution" [and foreigners pushing for change] "are always in danger of being viewed as a threat to social harmony." (1993, p. 153)

3.1 A PERIPHERAL EXISTENCE: ADVANTAGES

Although supposedly frustrated at being left out of the college's decision-making mechanisms, F, P and B admit that by not attending meetings, and not having extra duties, they are free to pursue their own interests. My observations of them in their offices confirmed that they do this. B often works on her M. A. She sometimes tends to things off campus as well, for example, doctor-mandated physical therapy, or doing something for her children. P often leaves campus if he has no class. Sometimes he returns home, goes to a gym, or does errands. During lunch period, he often checks on-line news from Australia. On the other hand, F spends his entire day at his office. "They pay me to be here from 9 : 00 to 5 : 00, so I figure that it's my job to be here all day," he said. Nonetheless, he spends a lot of time on the internet. He edits a home page for a non-college organization, and also downloads software to review for an on-line magazine for which he writes a column.

But in addition to personal matters, office time is often given to students as well. Students regularly came to the foreign teachers' office with questions, or for homework.

Would the foreign teachers change the system if they could? The answers vary. Says P:

"If I were a workaholic, I would [change the system]. But I like the

situation I'm in now. I have lots of spare time that I can use for things that I like." (7/12/98)

B, however, sees things differently:

"If I was going to make this my career, I would want to be involved at a deeper level. I would like to be on the international committee that handles exchange students. I'd like to be involved in planning and curriculum. Maybe I'd be involved in a club activity, if it was seen as being valued." (7/17/98)

The fact that F and B — but not P — would change the system might be due to the fact that teaching is their vocation. On the other hand, P has planned for many years to return to Australia and do something other than teach.

Despite the freedom that being on the periphery at TWC allows, the foreign teachers view their situation as social and institutional exclusion. Consider the language the teachers used: "separate chain of command," "no one cared," and a "non issue." This language suggests a desire to be part of a team working for the benefit of the students. The following section will show that, though they are disenchanted with their peripheral existence, foreign teachers try to do what they think is best for the students.

4. FOREIGN TEACHERS' PHILOSOPHY: FOCUS ON THE STUDENTS

In any industry or company, it is not unusual to see the job performance of disillusioned or unhappy employees suffer. And though it is difficult to judge the quality of F, P and B's teaching, there are indicators that suggest that their primary concern is the educational needs of their

students. One such indicator is the fact that the change to twice-a-week classes sometimes added an extra class to their teaching schedule with no extra pay. Yet all three supported the idea. F's formal recommendations in faculty meetings, and lingering insistence on them, reveal a commitment to educational ideals. Said F, regarding the rhetoric, behavior and decisions he has observed at faculty meetings:

"The focus [of the Japanese teachers] is completely off. The focus is on protecting their own little space. The focus should be on the student's developmental needs but there is no thought on that." (7/16/98)

F, and P, also criticize the low standards the college maintains. F once proposed that TWC should require students to pass the Eiken 2-kyu as a condition for graduating. But, according to F, many teachers objected. "They said 'some students would fail, then what would we do?' So I said 'the students will conform to our expectations of them. If we expect them to do nothing, they will do nothing. If we expect them to pass the 2 kyu, they will pass it.'" (7/16/98)

Ironically, this emphasis on higher standards could be the very cause of the foreign teachers' frustration. As many researchers have noted (Van Wolferen, 1993; McVeigh, 1997; Wadden, 1993), the purpose of higher education in Japan is not necessarily academic excellence, but to allow students "to mature" (Wadden, 1993, p. 177). As such, it has been described as "leisure land" (Wadden, p. 28). In trying to instill an academic-oriented philosophy, F was disturbing the college's harmony.

He now follows his own belief by helping his students learn as many practical skills as possible: he started a pen-pal club, and a computer class where students learn how to use the internet and use email. He uses the extra time created by twice-a-week classes to do 20 minutes of mandatory free conversation.

P, also, wants higher standards at college. "I'd like to put in some entrance requirements. Some students should not be here," he complained. "Also, I would force them to study three times a week (in both first and second-year Eikaiwa classes). We should also cut some unnecessary classes." P said that he wishes his "voice could be heard at faculty meetings," but "accepts the situation." (7/12/98)

B, like F, combines her personal beliefs with her teaching. Whereas F's focus is on practical skills and computers, B's focus is on global issues, and personal and spiritual development. Certain quotes from a lecture on the United Nations in B's workshop class (7/24/98) that I observed are revealing: "countries working out problems peacefully," "United means togetherness." B believes her role as a teacher is not limited to language teaching, but also to challenge students' intellect and to develop their sense of civic responsibility.

"I find it very stimulating to see people reach and grow, and to rise to a challenge. Those workshops give me an opportunity to create an environment where that can happen." (7/17/98)

4.1 OBSERVATIONS: FOREIGN TEACHERS IN ACTION

To triangulate some of the notions expressed above, I observed some classes to get a clearer idea of how F, P and B put into practice their particular philosophies. I was also interested in how they used the textbook.

4.1.1 P's Eikaiwa Class

P closely followed the textbook and workbook of *First Impact* (Ellis, et al., 1996), continuing from where they had left off previously. Unit five focused on simple and present progressive forms. Class began with stu-

dents, in pairs, reading the dialogue aloud while others listened. P then played the dialogue, then true-false questions on the tape, and called on students to answer, correcting poor pronunciation. He spent 3-8 minutes, at different times, explaining grammar points and vocabulary. For example, he spent over five minutes explaining the various uses of "crazy," "unite," and the different nuances of the question "What do you do?" He often asked "do you understand?" Students always said "yes." They were not subsequently made to use the word themselves. P played the dialogue again, stopping after each turn, and asking individual students "what is [the character] doing?" Students produced language only in response to the P's questions or following a textbook or workbook exercise.

After the class, P was neither surprised nor happy about the class. He had previously said getting these students to talk was "like pulling teeth." There was no energy in the room.

4.1.2 B's Eikaiwa Class

B, like P, is generally pleased with the change to *First Impact* for her Eikaiwa class.

"I like the book. It's easy to use, the chapters are all organized in the same way, so the students know what to expect, and it's at their level." (7/30/98)

Like P, B covered all the material in each unit, and also explained a lot of vocabulary encountered in the book, though her explanations were brief and did not break the flow of the class. B's Eikaiwa class was more energetic than P's. Half of B's class was very teacher-centered, with B asking questions, and leading students through taped dialogs and taped questions. The second half of the class, students did some free writing exercise, pair work drills, and self-study. B met with students individu-

ally to check their workbook homework, during which she offered criticism, praise and encouragement. However, while B was busy with individual students, most of the other students read magazines, looked in their day planners, checked messages on their portable telephones and so forth.

4.1.3 B's Workshop Class

B's Workshop class focused on the structure, purpose and activities of the United Nations. B set out the context in which the U. N. was born: Two world wars, nuclear bombs, and the absence of an international agency to defuse crisis. She led into the need for racial and religious tolerance:

"Instead of looking at each other as 'gaijin' and 'Japanese,' we can look at each other as part of the human family," and "the central teaching of all these religions (various religions were listed) — the Golden Rule — are alike." (7/24/98) At the end of the class, B passed out "Virtue Cards." On each card were terms like "thankfulness" "assertiveness," "modesty" and "tolerance," accompanied by a verse from the holy book of a major religion. Students became very lively when choosing a card and reading it. They wrote in their notebooks. B confirmed my impression:

"Oh, these cards are a *huge* hit. They love them. I can't get over it." (7/24/98)

B said her Workshop class are not normally so teacher-centered. She normally gives them group activities during which they get chances to speak and work with authentic texts. She described her workshop class as an attempt to give her students a chance to consider their own values and choices, and defended herself against my suggestion that her teaching might be considered proselytizing by saying that it was content-based learning. She said that she focuses on language, she does not tell students

what to believe, but that she does challenge them to discover what values are important to them.

4.1.4 F's Class

F's belief in teaching practical skills was evident during many of my visits to his office. Students came to his office at all hours of the day to choose their email pen pals or to ask about accessing something on the internet. Posters can be seen throughout the school with the latest news from the special home page set up for the class, and messages left on the home page from students who accessed it.

5. SATISFIED IN LEISURE LAND: A CASE *AGAINST* CHANGE?

With the level of frustration of the foreign teachers at TWC, it is conceivable that their teaching suffers as a result. To get a more complete understanding of the situation at TWC, it was necessary to find out what the students thought about their classes, their teachers, the changes that had been made, and the college in general. I administered a written questionnaire, and allowed the students to answer anonymously, in writing, in Japanese, and on their own time. These are second-year students, taking Eikaiwa class only once-a-week from a part-time foreign teacher.

The results show that, while a few students have serious attitudes towards English, most lack an academic attitude. These findings resemble those of Benson (1991), and also of Hadley (1996), who found generally negative attitudes among college students regarding making efforts at improving English. This study found that 80-90 percent of most students' waking time is spent "relaxing," doing a "part-time job," or "with

friends." "Study/homework" accounted for only five percent of most students' time, even among those whose stated goal is to live abroad. Further evidence of a non-academic focus is found in comments regarding what they would change at TWC. Three-fourths of the students wrote "nothing," or complained of non-academic matters such as "better cafeteria" and "I want to drive my car to campus." Six students would change "curriculum" or "change classes." Four of these six were hoping to live or work abroad someday. Slightly over half preferred Eikaiwa class twice-a-week, saying that they "wanted to improve" their English, or that the added classes "led to" improvement. Many 'not improved' respondents admitted that they "did not study." Regarding the textbook, students generally liked it, but in one-third of the cases because "it was easy." Regarding students' attitudes towards their first-year Eikaiwa teacher, students were unanimously complimentary. "Kind," "good," and "patient" were the most-frequent comments. This satisfaction with their teacher is common among Japanese students (Shimizu, 1995, and Marakova and Ryan 1997).

These findings reinforce Wadden's (1993), Van Wolferen's (1993) and McVeigh's (1997) views of Japanese colleges as places largely lacking an academic orientation. The implications of this for the foreign teachers at TWC will be discussed in the next section.

6. CONCLUSION

Decision-making at TWC is bottom-up and consensual, though primarily limited to Japanese faculty. (The role of the school's Board of Directors was outside the scope of this paper, though it is known to initiate broad policy). Foreign teachers are essentially a separate entity at TWC, and

decision-making among the three teachers was — in this study — top-down.

The language barrier is a definite problem for the foreigners, but being proficient in the language will not necessarily move a foreign teacher from the periphery into the mainstream. Differing cultural expectations and habits of foreigners and Japanese makes acculturation a long and difficult task. Foreigners' ideas about college being an academic pursuit, as well as their so-called "confrontational" and "direct" approaches to problem-solving and decision-making, clash with Japanese thinking. This is a cultural and professional reality that is not likely to change — or will change when the Japanese decide. Foreigners must accept this.

Decisions at TWC are as much a matter of politics and personalities as they are of principles. Without political allies, or a power base, foreigners cannot expect their voices to carry weight (Wadden, 1993, Hurst, 1983). However, foreigners at TWC have a large degree of freedom which they have not been creative nor aggressive in exploiting. They have a lot of room to pursue changes that do not threaten the "harmony" at TWC. White et al. (1991) propose a model for curriculum development that stresses goal setting and adjusting to local conditions. However, the foreign teachers have articulated individual — but no common — goals or objectives. Gossman and Cisar (1997, p. 30) reported on dissatisfied foreign teachers successfully achieving broad innovations at a Japanese university after "a core set of objectives were decided on as something to take the administration."

Concerning the change to a common textbook at TWC, there has been no apparent pedagogic benefit from that decision because there is no coordinated approach that calls for reusing and recycling language items from the textbook. But from an organizational standpoint, it solves the

problem of students being taught from the same text book in different classes (see 2.1). Compared to the textbook classes I observed, B's content-based class and F's computer and pen pal classes generated more excitement among the students. More classroom observation and a much longer paper is required to evaluate the changes that F initiated.

Most students spend little time studying, and are content with things at TWC. Given students' satisfaction — or complacency? — and a Japanese faculty mostly concerned with their own issues, foreign teachers lack a mandate for significant change. But this laissez-faire attitude among the Japanese faculty should be exploited to its fullest possible extent.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

1. Set up a bilingual liaison between Japanese and foreign teachers whose job it would be to summarize the minutes of faculty meetings, to help foreigners work through administrative red tape, and so forth.
2. Agree on a common curriculum and approach before choosing teaching materials. Using a common textbook does not necessarily lead to better teaching and learning.
3. Improve communication and coordination among foreign teachers, at least. Include Japanese faculty as much as possible.
4. Find ways, within the permissible limits of college guidelines, to cooperate with each other in setting out academic and pedagogic goals. For example, a synergy between B's and F's interests might be for B to require her students to search the internet for global issues topics, or make their own homepage. F could allow such work to count towards credit in his courses as well. As in number three above, include Japanese faculty as much as possible.

5. Explore ways to establish some definite, measurable standards. Even if not required for graduation, standards which are "strongly recommended" by the college might give students (and teachers) something to aim for.

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Appendix

1. Did you prefer Eikaiwa once a week, or twice?

   Twice a week : 13

   Once a week : 11

2. Did your English improve as a result of twice-a-week Eikaiwa class?

   Yes : 13

   No : 9

3. Did you like the text book you used for Eikaiwa class?

   Yes : 13

   No : 7

4a. How was your Eikaiwa teacher's attitude toward teaching?

   Answers : Kind, he cared, interesting, patient, gentle, diligent, funny, good, he had good Japanese, courteous

4b. How was your Eikaiwa teacher's attitude toward students?

   Answers : "Kind" was the overwhelming answer.

5. How do you use your time, typically?

   * 76% of students responded : Study — 10% or less of waking time.
   * Only one student marked a percentage lower than 20 percent of waking time for any following responses : "part time job," "friends," "relaxing," and "watching t.v." In other words, these were the leading categories for nearly every student.