

Best Practices Applied to Language Education in Japanese Universities

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Introduction

In response to the direction of performance levels in the Chicago school system a group of concerned educators created an instruction-based newspaper to address concerns with teaching and learning. This newspaper would then be sent to all teachers, administrators, parent groups, politicians, community groups and foundation officers in the city. The term “best practices” was borrowed from the legal and medical professions where such a term is used to describe solid, reputable and state-of-the-art in the field. In trying to follow the lead of the “best practices” program this paper will examine what is being done in the area of language education to make the efforts of teachers in this area more effective in benefitting the students in our charge. Various areas of research will be introduced to give a clear indication as to how things are being changed and ultimately improved in language education worldwide.

Best Practices Movement in America in the 1990's

In the 1990's the “Best practices” movement got its start. Standards actually began with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) which outlined a program of, “mathematics as a way of thinking and required state-of-the-art teaching” (Zemelman et al.: 1998:x. Once these practices were established they quickly took root in other disciplines. Eventually a dozen professional organizations were commissioned to adopt similar standards to improve the teaching standards of the schools. These efforts were not without problems. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and

the International Reading Association (IRA) had their grants terminated due to a lack of specificity in their programs. However, both groups went on to spend over \$1m of their own money to complete their projects. In some cases the standards were well thought out but in others such as the music program that mandated that students learn the names of famous ballet dancers from the 19th century these standards were heavily criticized from the start.

"In the meantime other state governments, business groups, independent school reform organizations and many school districts were implementing plans of their own. In some cases the efforts were confined to a single subject but others like the New Standards Project were offering recommendations across several disciplines (Zemelman et al.: 1998:x.) At the end of the 20th century there were fifteen national standards projects and many others in state and local school systems. But why has there been this interest in standards? Some may be interested in presenting a positive front in seeming to be interested in standards when they only want the appearance of interest but have no interest in change at all. Zemelman et. al. point out that the issuing of standards is not really action. It is more of a call to action. Whether action or improvement actually takes place may be of little concern to some. "Hopping aboard the standards bandwagon allows you to sound tough, rigorous and concerned: you can wring your hands about what is wrong with kids today and you can fret conspicuously about America losing the war of global economic domination, all without actually doing anything" (1998) says Zemelman.

The standards group involves two different groups which are referred to as the "accountability reformers" and the curriculum reformers". These two groups have quite differing views of teaching and learning which make their alliance an uneasy one. The conservative accountability reformers are comprised of state legislatures, governors, education agencies, business panels and even in some cases teacher's unions. Their primary preoccupation is with testing and standards that come about based on that testing. On the other side are the curriculum reformers who are made up of subject-area experts, classroom teachers, discipline organizations, professional associations and research centers. This side rejects the notion that doing the same things longer, harder and stronger will somehow improve the education of children. "Achievement can not be increased through more testing no matter how rigorous the testing" (Zemelman 1998).

This derisiveness between the accountability reformers and the curriculum reformers is most evident in the state of California where the governor ordered the mathematics

curriculum scrapped asserting that the problems posed to the students were too innovative and experimental. This action of abandoning rigorous standards stunned mathematics experts around the country. This debate on standards of accountability v. curriculum will continue as there has yet to be an appropriate compromise put forth by either side. This debate has given us the opportunity to consider what each school subject entails and how they can be made better. In Japan, there is no such issue at the moment but there are questions that we can consider in regards to what is being done in the foreign language classroom (principally the English classroom) in Japan and what we can do to make that classroom better. What aspects of language education are effective and should be encouraged? This paper will use the backdrop of the American standards discussion to assess how we are teaching our students here in Japan and perhaps find what we can do ourselves to make if not, the standards we teach by better but at least the general classroom environment in order to achieve the same desired results of those in the United States: of making the classroom a place where a high quality of education can be found at any level and in any subject.

The TESOL Methods Course

An examination of a TESOL training course in Singapore gives us something to consider regarding Best Methods applied to the training of language teachers wherever they may be. Farrell (2007) researched how such students perceived their education in comparison with what actually was practiced and achieved in that classroom. Farrell was concerned with how the students filter out their previously formed beliefs based on past experiences. The inability to filter out these previously held beliefs caused a rift between what the students thought was important for their education and what their own teachers thought was important. Joram and Gabriele (1998) argued that teacher educators must take these previously held beliefs into account because what they are being taught will replace these previously held beliefs

Farrell taught a group of twenty pre-service teachers using *concept maps*. These *concept maps* are diagrams which show the relationship among concepts. The idea of concept mapping "graphically illustrates concepts and their hierarchical interrelationships" (Meijer et al.: 1999:62). The maps created gave an indication as to the pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching reading. Once the maps were completed they were asked to share answers with the group in a peer group reflection session. In the pre-course concept map there were few topics listed but the post-course map listed many

more topics. (as seen here)

Pre-course Listing of Topics (# of teachers listing)

(+ students who reconsidered)

What does teaching reading involve, and how would you do it?

Reading (4) +15

Vocabulary (7)

Motivation (9)

Grammar (3)

Comprehension (15)

Other (role plays (3), drama (2), speed reading, silent reading, read for details, read newspapers (3), book reviews (4)

The post-course map shows more extensive understanding:

Cultivate interest and passion in reading (7)

Teach reading strategies (9): why (4) what (4) when (4) where (4) prediction (4)

Meta-cognition and awareness: DRTA (2) Pre- and post reading in class (4)

Direct reading and thinking activity (DRTA) (11)

Text awareness (6): Text types (2), Discourse markers (4)

Teach not test (9)

Top down and bottom up (12)

Extensive reading: No book review (2) interesting reading (2)

students choose book (4)

Lesson planning (3): Pre-reading activities, Post-reading activities (3)

Vocabulary (7): Guess meaning in context (4)

The concept of mapping does have its skeptics arguing that it is too complex and time consuming. That there is too much emphasis on short-term changes in the teachers' cognition and Kagan (1990) wondered if comparing students' and teachers' concept maps rendered them invalid. On reflection, Farrell wondered what impact the course had on learner teachers. That there was an impact is indisputable but how much of an impact and of what quality, Farrell is uncertain. In using the concept maps he determined that students internalized the work in different ways. "Many of these students could have acquired a superficial knowledge of the terms linked to the teaching of reading, such as top down and bottom up, but have not fully conceptualized them in terms of teaching reading. Furthermore, I now wonder if the Singaporean cultural norm *Kiasu* played any role in these post-course maps. *Kiasu* means "fear or dislike of losing out to others"

(Brown 1999:123). In this sense, Farrell is uncertain as to whether the students have been able to truly grasp the content of the course.

Engaging Student's Interest

Everyone knows that stimulating interest of students will be extremely helpful in allowing them to become better language users. An attempt to exploit literature in Spain gives us a good example of how to peak the students' interest. In using a variety of texts from proverbs to nursery songs to novels or poems Jaimez-Munoz found that a broad exposure to a variety of sources can have a positive effect because, as McCrae tells us, "Representational language opens up , calls upon and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion, from pleasure to pain, which referential language does not teach. Where referential language informs, representational language involves" (McCrae 1991:3).

An action project by Jaimez-Munoz for high school students in Granada systematically instituted the use of literary texts according to students' likes and interests but also of the teachers' interests as well in the following stages: (in Borg, ed. 49-50)

1. An initial questionnaire was prepared to do a basic needs analysis and to discover the students' attitudes towards learning English and the English teacher.
2. The most successful texts were selected from the previous year to begin what he called a "complimentary literary syllabus".
3. Resource books, short story collections and poems were read to select more suitable and relevant materials and activities for the students.
4. The materials were integrated into the general syllabus and tried with an experimental class while teaching a control group according to the set textbook.
5. The learners were observed interacting with one another and the texts while notes were taken on difficulties, reactions and participation.
6. The teacher reflected on ways the texts chosen seemed to shape learner's attitudes and learning.
7. The teacher designed exams, a final questionnaire and an interview to determine the learners' progress, feelings and opinions about the way they worked and the experience of integrating literature.
8. The data was analyzed to evaluate the overall impact of the intervention.

These actions were based upon two basic questions:

1. What could I do to increase teenage students' intrinsic motivation so that they

would learn more English?

2. Could they increase their second language vocabulary and improve their global use of the target language by constant reading and interaction with relevant literary texts?

In choosing the literary texts it is advised to make certain that the students use them in an appropriate way. The approach in this instance is clearly supported by the work of McCrae (1991) and Carter and McCrae (1996) in SLA research:

1. **Language-based principle.**

The idea is to not directly teach literature but to use the literature as a valuable resource to teach language.

2. **Process-oriented principle.**

The literary texts are not seen as complete products to be studied but as a means to stimulate and acquire the processes of reading and writing.

3. **Task-based principle.**

Ensures the learners' engagement in the classroom with the teacher designing a series of tasks which help the students to discover and solve problems by themselves and to keep actively involved with the texts with their partners.

4. **Student-centered principle.**

The relation between teacher and class becomes more collaborative. The teacher does the planning and organizing before the class but once class begins it's entirely under the control of the student. The students work with each other and the teacher in the target language. The teacher's role is to motivate, observe and cooperate with them.

(Jaimez-Munoz in Farrell (ed.) 2006:52)

Jaimez-Munoz, in his reflections on this activity believes that the project provided insights into the roles of the students and the teacher. The research indicates that using the literary texts provide the challenges necessary to increase their motivation and thus as a result can increase their comprehension of how the language works and have more of an interest into the process of learning it. The researcher believes that doing the research was a rewarding process which allowed them to be more aware of their personal teaching practice and the connection to the students' learning. On the practical level the evidence that the use of well-chosen texts will offer many opportunities for the students to practice their English thus the writer has integrated the use of these texts

into the syllabus as a cornerstone of any language learning process. Jaimez-Munoz has also added to the limited amount of research into the effects the use of these materials will have on language learning in any environment.

The interview used for this methodology

1. How do you usually feel in English class?
2. Do you like your textbook this year? Why?
3. Do you like the reading and activities of the book and workbook?
4. Do you like the original literary text you are reading this year?
5. What do you think about the experience of reading original texts?
6. What do you do to understand these texts better?
7. Which ones do you find more difficult? Why do you think it may be so?
8. What do you think of the activities and the tasks related to them?
9. Are the topics of these texts relevant to you?
10. Do you think that if you are interested in a topic you can understand the text better? Why may it be so?
11. What do you find most and least interesting about English class this year?
12. Do you do all the extensive readings I assign for homework?
13. Can this reading of original literary text help you to learn English?
14. Have you really noticed any improvement? In which aspects?
15. Have you learned something about English culture reading these texts?
16. Do you like reading in Spanish? What do you usually read?
17. Did your parents read you tales when you were a child?
18. Do you usually read during the course? And on holidays?
19. What do you usually read? Why?
20. Do your parents usually read? What do they read?
21. Which ones of the texts we have read have you liked most?
22. Which ones have you not liked?
23. In which aspects are English classes different this year?
24. Do you think it is too much effort reading original texts this year? Is that a challenge or a difficulty?
25. Can this experience be positive for your learning in any respect? In which respect? Explain to me, please.

(Jaimez-Munoz in Farrell (ed.)

The inclusion of the above questionnaire is very interesting. By using such a questionnaire it allows both the teacher and the student to reflect on the experience. The teacher will then have two chances to reflect on what is being done in the classroom. The first time will be in the original preparation of the questionnaire as the teacher determines which questions are important to be answered for an appropriate understanding of the impact of the class. The second time will be when the teacher finally reads the responses of the student to determine what the students have thought to be important thus allowing the teacher to then adjust the class activities accordingly.

Factors Affecting Recall and Retention

In this section the writers have wondered how learners recall and retain lessons in classes given in Australia for predominately Asian students. The main purpose of the research was to better understand what the students recalled about their vocabulary retention in the classes they attended. Two key questions were posed:

1. What new vocabulary did learners recall and retain from lessons?
2. Why did they retain and recall what they did?

Learner response to classroom input is well documented (R. Allwright 1980, 1989), (D. Allwright 1984) and Slimani ((1987, 1989, 1991). Simani explored learning in the classroom by asking the students to record everything they thought they had learned during a lesson which was termed, *uptake*. She determined that it was necessary to *notice* new words to learn them and also determined that *topicalisation* or focusing by the learner on new words contributed to this uptake. Studies have indicated that *comprehensible input* is most important to determine what language is learned. The author set out to focus on new vocabulary the students claimed to have learned from their lessons. There were 24 students in the study and the researchers focused on the ones in the afternoon sessions who were recorded on video in classes taught by teachers other than the author which they felt was easier to accomplish than to record the lessons that they themselves taught. Data was collected in the following manner:

1. Students were recorded on video in their four 90-minute general English lessons. The classes ranged in size from 4-12 students. The students sat together in small groups.
2. All lessons had vocabulary input from the teacher in this 10-week intensive course.
3. Immediately after the lesson the students completed a reflection sheet which asked what new vocabulary they could remember and asked why they thought they

remembered it.

4. After the reflection sheets were written the students were asked the same questions again in interviews which were audio-taped.
5. Transcripts of the comments were written up and they were listed. Due to time constraints only the words that were frequently mentioned were written. By frequently it was meant they the words were recalled by 30% of the learners in each lesson.
6. Teachers gave lesson plans to outline their objectives and the teachers were interviewed after the lessons to discuss the plans.
7. After two weeks one group was tested for retention, after six weeks the students were given a vocabulary levels test where the students were required to match the words with the meanings.
8. Transcripts were made of the classroom interactions to confirm the comments of the learners.

The following results were determined after the course was over:

The **recall** of items was directly connected to these events:

- a. Learners or teachers mentioning the item.
- b. Learners or teachers repeating the item.
- c. Learners or teachers focusing on the item. (topicalisation)
- d. Learners or teachers taking turns in the interaction around the vocabulary item.

Focusing was determined in the following way

- a. Directing attention explicitly to the word.
- b. Eliciting comments directly or indirectly about the meaning of the word.
- c. Asking learners to complete sentences with the word missing.
- d. Giving the definition of the word.
- e. Requesting-explicitly or implicitly-more information about a word.
- f. Using the word to answer an elicitation.

In reflection on this activity ideas about teaching vocabulary were reevaluated. They were encouraged with the fact that learners can and do learn what the teachers teach. Teachers cannot ensure that this learning will take place when doing planning for such activities. The role of the teachers in such an activity requires that they focus on student-centered activity and tailor the follow-up to meet the needs of each individual student.

Interaction is also seen as being important in the retention of vocabulary but this interaction needs to be considered carefully and not overdone. Some students will need to participate more than others in order to get the full benefit of the course. In this respect, the authors conclude that the class be a little more teacher-initiated than student-initiated and that this finding is particularly true for Asian learners. Learners acknowledged that classroom participation assisted in their vocabulary learning. Interestingly, the students reported that “fuzzy” teacher explanations about vocabulary which were then clarified by home-stay families, peers or dictionaries made the learning that much more memorable.

Conclusion

We have seen that the term *Best Practices* while being used to apply to education in the American school systems can be easily applied to teaching English in other countries such as Japan. It is also clear that what is considered to be under the umbrella of *Best Practices* can be very wide-ranging, indeed. While we are not discussing certain specific standards which will be applied to all as in the American school system, we can see that efforts made by those of us teaching English in far ranging places around the globe can easily understand the concept of doing what is right for the students to make them better educated or as in this instance, better users of the English language.

Whether it is teaching teachers how to be better reading teachers in Singapore or introducing literary texts to students in Grenada or teaching Asian students in Australia, there are a variety of practices from which we can all emulate to make our own classes better for our students. And certainly *Best Practices* could not be limited to the few examples expressed here.

This paper has set to demonstrate what kinds of activities we can involve ourselves with in order to be good practitioners of TESOL. Certainly, there are many other teachers around us who are doing excellent and productive work in the classroom which needs to be read, understood and copied by others regardless of what country, what age or what level of interest our students may have. Perhaps it could be suggested that within our own institutions we would develop some type of system of best practices which could uplift the educational practices of ourselves and those teachers around us who may not be totally aware of what other teachers are trying and succeeding with in their own classrooms. It should be the goal of all of us to try to develop these best practices within our own classrooms and move on to classrooms of others, even those in

other disciplines outside the teaching of English as a foreign language.

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