

The Peer Review Project

— A Class in English Composition and a Class
in Linguistics Taught in English —

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Shinshu University launched Peer Review Project (henceforth PRP) this year, 2002, as a part of the attempt to improve its educational system. This project consists of the following three steps: (1) the grouping of the teaching faculty involved in PRP; (2) observing the classes of the colleagues' within the group; and (3) having dialogues among the group.

This paper, in the first chapter, reviews the aims, and the development of PRP; the second chapter discusses the PRP on a class on English; the third chapter reports the PRP on a class by English; and the last chapter describes the problems and the future plans for PPR. Nishigaki has written the first and last chapter (translated by Hanazaki), Ruzicka has written the second chapter, and Hanazaki, the third.

1. The Aim, and the Development of PRP at Shinshu University

1.1. The Significance of PRP

The main significance of conducting peer review is to exchange and share information related to one class. Such information includes the content of the class, the actual conditions of the students in the class, and so on. Through sharing that information, all the teachers involved understand how other teachers conduct their classes and how students react to them. That knowledge is needed if we try to improve our own classes or discuss how the curriculum should be.

There is some information which cannot be obtained just from the students' evaluation. For example, PRP lets the teachers have a better understanding of what is an appropriate amount of academic responsibility the students should take; while students have the possibility of wanting an easier class, teachers know that they must make students have an academic burden if they expect certain educational effect on the students. As another example, PRP may provide those involved with the information concerning what the content of a class should be. Of course, it is the students who are the subject of learning, so the content of a class may have to reflect the students' needs and wants. However, there must be some valuable comments from the much-experienced teachers as to what the content should be. Summarizing, in order to get data for evaluation, and considering improvement and developing measures, there is a need to have evaluations and opinions from teachers' point of view as well.

1.2. 2002 Fall Semester PRP — Classes on / by English —

Shinshu University launched its PRP since the academic year 2002, and in the fall semester of 2002, two classes were made publicized; *Eigogaku Enshu* (English Linguistic Seminar) (Lecturer Hanazaki), a seminar class for English linguistic majors in *Jinbungakubu*, the Faculty of Arts; and *English II* (advanced class for English) (Dr. David Ruzicka), an English class at *Center for General Education*. The two classes are conducted in English.

In this increasingly internationalized and internationalizing world, to cultivate the language ability is one of the most urgent educational aims that any university is trying to attain. However, this training entails at least the following two problems; (1) cultivating language skill is a step-to-step training, hence it is difficult to keep the students highly motivated; (2) it is difficult to really motivate the students, for it is not easy for the students to realize, from the bottom of their hearts, the needs for language skill. Conducting classes in English will put the students in an English-only atmosphere, and this style of conducting a class may have the possibility of being a model for language training.

The following two chapters, chapter 2 and 3, will review the attempts and the problems that this kind of teaching style may have.

2. Teaching English Writing and the Peer Review Project

The Autumn/Winter semester of 2002-2003 in the Centre for General Education has seen two important innovations in the English education programme. Firstly, the native speaker EFL instructors have been engaged in teaching writing skills to all of the first-year students; and secondly, teachers have been given the opportunity to participate in the first of the Centre's peer review projects.

My purpose here will be twofold: an analysis of some of the methodological issues surrounding the teaching of writing will be followed by a brief discussion of some of the ways in which peer review might be expected to contribute to the professional development of English teaching staff.

2.1. Teaching Writing to First-Year University Students: Main Objectives

The principal aim of any EFL writing course will naturally be to help students to become better writers of English. In order to understand what this might mean for any particular group of English language learners, however, a teacher will need to have some sense of the specific areas where those students are likely to be deficient. In the case of the first-year students in Shinshu University, the answer to this question is probably as complex as in most other situations. Every student will have their own strengths and weaknesses. However, in broad terms, it is likely that what the students of this University need to concentrate on most in refining their writing skills is organization.

It is fair to assume that the majority of first-year students enter the University with

a reasonably good knowledge of English grammar and a decent vocabulary. What they almost undoubtedly lack, however, is the ability to structure their thoughts coherently on paper. For this reason, it seems to me that the main emphasis of the writing classes for first-year students should lie with the organization of writing. On the whole, teachers should probably not be overly concerned with mistakes in grammar or vocabulary, only correcting such errors where it seems necessary or advisable to do so. The real point of the teaching should be to get the students to understand how written English is *organized*.

This is crucially important because the organization of written English is very different to that of Japanese. Expository English (i.e. writing which attempts to explain something) is generally more logically and linearly structured. It also tends to be less personal and intuitive, and places a much higher value on assertion and declaration.

2.2. Problems of Motivation and Pace

Some language instructors who are native speakers of English, when asked for the first time to teach a course on writing, feel a certain degree of anxiety because they fear that, in comparison with lessons which focus on speaking and listening, the writing class, almost by definition, is going to be a rather less stimulating affair. Teachers naturally worry that the kind of techniques that they have been able to employ to motivate their students in the oral communication classroom will no longer work in a course devoted to writing. And obviously there is some truth in this. Writing, after all, is essentially a solitary practice. But there is also a great deal of scope for approaching the activity through the kind of pair work and group work that teachers use to enliven the atmosphere of classes in spoken English.

In the methods they adopt to help students generate and formulate the ideas that they will express through writing, the most successful writing textbooks use a variety of techniques that involve the students cooperating with one another. One of the most obvious strategies is to get a learner to interview a partner and then use the responses to a questionnaire as the basis of a composition. Another useful and more complex procedure is that of guiding the students through the task of making and then processing and presenting the results of a survey of their classmates' habits or attitudes. Such activities form part of the resources that a teacher might employ as prewriting exercises. Once students have completed their written assignments, however, the teacher then has the option of using a wide range of peer editing and feedback activities. For students who are accustomed to being assessed only by their teachers, from above as it were, peer feedback can be both a challenging and stimulating exercise. Feedback can be structured either as pair work or group work ; and this additional interactive aspect of the work done in the classroom can be a powerful motivating factor. Students can also learn a lot from one another.

The kind of writing course being outlined here is one which involves interactive

prewriting exercises, followed by a writing assignment that is then used in an editing and feedback session. This approach depends on students following a sequence of activities, and so problems arise whenever a student misses a class, or fails either to do the necessary preparation or complete the particular writing task in hand. For instance, the feedback exercise in pairs breaks down if one student in a pair has not managed to complete the homework assignment. Sometimes this can be solved by moving a student to sit next to a new partner.

In general, students taking a writing course find themselves being required to produce written work on a regular basis, sometimes every week, and students who fall behind risk becoming demoralized and may even despair of ever being able to catch up. In certain situations problems resulting from an excessive workload might well lead to an entire class feeling embattled and dispirited. Clearly teachers need to be aware of how well (or badly) their students are coping, and the fact that assignments are being collected, marked and returned at regular intervals should be enough to ensure that the teacher notices when students begin to fall by the wayside.

Another strategy which is helpful is to make sure that some assignments are written during class time so that students who are struggling can receive more attention. The pace can also be slowed down by giving the class a preparation homework in which they are required just to think or make brief notes about a topic, or else search for source material. Very often these kinds of activities can be accomplished more easily than tasks which entail producing a polished piece of writing; and this can be a way of generating extra time which students who are behind schedule can make use of to catch up with the rest of the class. The advantage of setting the writing for homework is that it saves time. The downside is that students don't always do the homework. Writing during class also allows the teacher to monitor and help the students as they work. And the work gets done on time.

Finally, it is important that, from the outset, the students themselves are given an overview of the work that they will be expected to produce during the course. One way to do this might be to give each student a slip of paper with a table showing the titles of the various compositions and boxes that could be ticked as each assignment is completed. This would make it easier for students to see what they are accomplishing or, in some cases, how much they need to do to catch up.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that one factor that might be seen as distinguishing a writing course of the kind described here from the learning experience that most Japanese students are likely to have had in their highschool English classes has to do with the question of creativity. Most writing textbooks require students to respond imaginatively; and this in itself is an important reason for teaching writing. The drawback, however, is that some students find this kind of exercise difficult or else work very slowly. They need help with generating ideas. The brainstorming techniques used in

some textbooks are invaluable in this respect. Nevertheless, some students still find they have a mental block at times, and teachers need to be aware of which students require extra help in coming up with ideas. Conversely, of course, one can also imagine cases in which a student who has previously received poor grades in English because their grammar is weak, suddenly comes alive on a writing course because they enjoy the imaginative aspect and find it easy to produce ideas which both their peers and the teacher find interesting.

Although the analysis presented thus far of the problems confronting instructors required to teach writing is relevant to all categories of teaching staff, there may in addition be other issues which pertain specifically to Japanese instructors. The foremost of these has probably to do with the lack of confidence which some Japanese teachers are liable to feel with respect to their ability to correct the errors in students' written work. Certain areas of grammar, such as the use of articles or tenses, pose a challenge even to the most accomplished non-native teachers. One solution to this problem might be for Japanese teachers to simply follow the example of many of their foreign colleagues by concentrating on organization and structure as opposed to accuracy.

2.3. English Instructors and the Peer Review Project

There is undoubtedly enormous scope for employing peer review as a method of staff development within the University's English education programme. For a start, there are a large number of instructors, both full-time and part-time, involved in teaching the same core curriculum. From 2003, the standardization of course content will expand to cover the new courses in presentation and academic writing skills being offered to the second-year students. Many teachers will be teaching these new subjects for the first time, and hence a programme that encourages structured dialogue between colleagues working towards the same goals can surely never have been of greater potential benefit. It is also worth bearing in mind that as a whole the current English teaching staff comprises a very diverse range of experience and background, which suggests still further that there is much that teachers could learn from each other.

Understandably, some teachers are likely to feel reluctant to open their classroom doors to other teachers, most probably because they fear that the process will lead to negative critiques of their working practices. It is therefore of paramount importance to ensure that peer review be regarded not as an assessment procedure, but as an opportunity for teachers to learn from one another. In this respect it is crucial to bear in mind that the word 'peer' derives from the Latin *par* meaning 'equal'. Teachers need to appreciate that the review is a process that takes place among equals and that no one is being assessed by those above them. Equally, it is crucial to stress the reciprocal nature of the exercise. Teachers whose classes are observed should always have an opportunity to observe the teaching of those who have observed them. Ultimately, any process that

nurtures relationships of mutual cooperation between teachers must be a good thing.

The benefits that might result from peer review can be divided perhaps into two stages. In the first instance, the prospect of having other teachers in their classroom is likely to have the effect of stimulating teachers to reflect with renewed interest on their own teaching practices. If nothing else, the review process should sharpen a teacher's self-awareness. The review has not been completed, however, until the feedback session takes place. And here one ought to be able already to appreciate the reciprocal character of peer review, for it is during the debriefing session that those who have done the observing should work to support the instructor whose teaching methods are being reviewed. The first priority here must surely be for the review team to begin by identifying their colleague's virtues and by stating what it is that they think they have learned from the experience. On the whole, the balance of appraisal should be on the positive side. If the discussion is also to include references to areas where improvements need to be made, such comments should be made in a manner and tone that is consistent with the general aim of supporting and encouraging the member of staff who is the subject of the review.

3. PRP on a Class by English

This chapter is a report on the PRP on a class conducted in English, namely *Eigogaku Enshu*, (English Linguistic Seminar), a seminar class for English linguistic majors in *Jinbungakubu*, the Faculty of Arts, at Shinshu University.

3.1. The Aims and the Content of *Eigogaku Enshu*

Eigogaku Enshu is a seminar class which aims to;

- (1) develop the knowledge in Anthropological Linguistics / Sociolinguistics, and the know-how of how to conduct research in the field;
- (2) it also aims to cultivate the skill for English presentation.

In order to fulfill the above two aims, it carries out the following three tasks;

- [1] acquiring the basic notions in linguistics, English linguistics, Anthropological Linguistics, and Sociolinguistics
- [2] acquiring the presentation skills
- [3] presenting and discussing the themes of interests

In concrete terms, during the spring semester, students read a book, Schiffrin 1944, which explains the basic nine theoretical approaches in the field, and in the fall semester, each of them, in turn, makes a presentation, explaining the theme of his or her graduation thesis adopting one of the nine approaches explained in the book, while other students listen to the presentation, and later, discuss whether the approach is appropriate or not.

3.2. The Report on the Attempts Carried Out in *Eigogaku Enshu*

In order to fulfill the second aim of this class, i.e., to cultivate the skill for English presentation, the class is conducted in English. However, as we clearly stated in 1.2. of this article, conducting a class in English is not without difficulty ; it is difficult to keep the students highly motivated. (Measures for fulfilling the first aim are discussed in the former article in this bulletin.)

To overcome this difficulty, *Eigogaku Enshu* has made the following two attempts ; ① the introduction of the “tutor system” ; and ② the introduction of the “peer review system” among students. The following paragraphs explain the two attempts in detail. Sometimes, the students are too shy in making a presentation in English in front of a lot of people, fearing they might make mistakes. In order to overcome this fearful feeling, *Eigogaku Enshu* has introduced the “tutor system”. Each presenter asks another student in the class to be his / her tutor and the tutor will listen to the presentation beforehand. This allows the presenter to give at least one presentation before they really speak in front of the audience, which will make him or her less nervous and have a chance to ask others to correct their English mistakes, if any. This helped not only the presenters, but also the tutors as well, for the tutors, too, had a chance to review their knowledge of English grammar. Needless to say, all the students listening to the presentation found it easier to listen to the already-checked presentation and understood the content of the presentation, which led to a more frank discussion of the content afterwards. Moreover, there was another good result in introducing this system ; usually the tutor prepared, in advance, questions to ask the presenter, to which the presenter, too, prepared an answer. This became a good start for the discussion.

Also, *Eigogaku Enshu* introduced the “peer review system”. Every student will evaluate other students’ presentation ; they are to rate how good the performance was, and to state at least one point they thought was good regarding the content of the presentation and at least one point which they thought needs reconsideration. This system worked well in three ways. First, it was good for the presenter ; when they felt they were being evaluated, they tried to speak English as clearly as possible, which cultivated the students’ language skill. Secondly, this helped the students who were listening as well ; when they were just listening to other students’ presentation, they were apt to feel bored, and lost concentration. However, if they had to evaluate others’ presentation, they kept their motivation in listening to others’ presentation. Thirdly, this system helped the discussion go smoothly. The peer review sheet, which the students listening have to write, were in the form of filling in the blanks. Among the blanks they were to fill in were the following three questions ;

- (a) I didn’t understand ()
- (b) I thought () was interesting because ()
- (c) I thought () needs more consideration because ()

Having been given patterns to make comments, the students felt it easier to give their

opinions in the classroom, which led to a more frank discussion.

4. The Problems and the Future Plan for PRP

PRP had an opportunity to review the two classes and to have a feedback session on October 25 with Mr. Tetsuo Shigekuni, vice manager of human resource at Hitachi L.T. D. The purpose of inviting Mr. Shigekuni was to have an evaluation of the class and the students from a point of view different from teachers', and to utilize those opinions for improving the university's educational system.

Mr. Shigekuni, along with much valuable advice for teaching, made a remarkable comment regarding the students' attitude. He had the impression that the students are not very active, rather very passive and shy. This is the same argument that we had in the feedback session for the PRP in the spring semester. With Mr. Shigekuni's comment, the teaching staff involved in PRP discussed some means to enhance the students' positiveness.

Academic studies at universities cannot have their full effects without students' subjective attitude. To minimize the information to learn or to teach the students step by step how to do things may enable the students to enjoy and relax but without any educational effect. Therefore, students, too, must make their best efforts to understand and follow the classes, especially when classes are conducted in English.

In 1.2. of this article, we have seen that language training faces at least the following two problems ; (1) cultivating language skill is a step-to-step training, hence it is difficult to keep the students highly motivated ; (2) it is difficult to really motivate the students, for it is not easy for the students to realize, from the bottom of their hearts, the needs for language skill. This lack of motivation and the lack of realization of the need for special skill is no special to language training. The fall semester PRP has provided us with the direction as to where the educational reformation (including both curricular and extracurricular education) should be headed.