

## **Lessons from the Way Teachers and Students Bond in a Japanese Higher Education Situation**

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*Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. (Freire, 2000, p. 80)*

*Authentic education is not carried on by “A” for “B” or by “A” about “B,” but rather by “A” with “B,” mediated by the world – a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views and opinions about it. (Freire, 2000, p. 93)*

### **Introduction**

I came to Japan in 2007, where I am now a long-term resident by way of marriage. Over my seven years in Japan, I have learnt a lot about how teachers and students bond with each other. I will discuss what I have observed of teaching practices in my workplace with reference to literature on bonding in the Japanese classroom. I will also discuss strategies that can be used to promote bonding that are particularly relevant to the socio-cultural realities of the Japanese situation, but which can also be extended to other teaching contexts and cultures. My discussion will include observations on how such professional exposure and experience have helped my praxis as language teacher, specifically in relation to the facilitation of greater involvement, empowerment and participation among students. The sharing of my observations and experiences is very much influenced by my belief that education plays an important part in the humanization of society (Freire, 2000).

### **Some contextual background about bonding the Japanese way**

In the course of teaching English to undergraduates at a university in Tokyo, I came to know about the legendary high school teacher, Takeshi Hashimoto, who, in the years after the Second World War, was eminently ahead of his time as a quiet but firm believer in getting students to think deeply through contemporary issues and promoting media literacy and

critical thinking (Ito, 2010). He was very patient. He never hurried through his lessons and always found time for bonding. By bonding the class, he could help them build the self-confidence that they needed to express their opinions while engaging in deeper thought.

Hashimoto was a good teacher. He organized student *kenkyukai* (research group) meetings in his home, where his wife served sukiyaki to the often hungry students. He went out of his way to make learning experiential. He brought old Meiji style snacks to class so that they could understand abstract descriptions from literature produced in the Meiji period (Ito, 2010). Hashimoto valued his students as people and kept in touch with many of his former students. He even sent a student who moved to another district his preparatory notes and continued doing so until the student graduated from junior high school at the age of fifteen. Many of his students became successful people in business, industry and politics. He lived to a ripe old age of 98 and died only last year, in 2013.

I have learnt from Hashimoto (even if I have not met him) and other colleagues that bonding comes in the form of harmony and consideration. Both of these qualities are useful in building long-lasting relationships. Strong bonds can last beyond school. Kindergarten teachers are known, for instance, to visit the primary schools where their former-students are studying on special occasions to show their support and to demonstrate the fact that former students are not forgotten. Acts like these are a reminder of Lin's (2010) description of the way she remembered good teachers long after she left school, teachers whose personalities and teaching strategies made an impact in her life.

### **The seminar as a place for bonding**

In my own department, the Department of Comparative Cultures, I teach in a *zemi* [ゼミ] for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students. The Japanese university *zemi* functions both as a 'home group' as well as a tutorial group for students interested in a particular area of study or research. *Zemi* teachers are required to prepare materials, lead discussions and supervise graduating students in dissertation writing. *Zemi* teachers also function as academic confidantes and advisors. Establishing channels for communication and teacher-student bonding is an integral part of the work of a *zemi* teacher. My *zemi* is targeted at students interested in discursive constructions of culture, in particular, cultural discourses and representations enacted in different varieties of English. Most of the *zemis* in my department are conducted in Japanese,

while mine is conducted in English. The students in my *zemi* are actually EFL students. Hence, an interesting aspect of my *zemi* is that part of my contact time involves elements of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP), including academic writing, aspects of critical reading as well as academic literacies.

In terms of bonding, a special tradition for *zemis* is the yearly *zemi* trip during summer break. In Japan, travel agencies and hotels offer special seminar packages to universities in the surrounding areas. Such packages include accommodation, transport and in most cases, meals. Depending on each particular package, student favorites like barbeques and buffets are advertised as attractions, with the implication that meal times are good opportunities for teacher-student interaction. Weeks before a *zemi* trip, students prepare for it eagerly.

My first *zemi* trip proved to be a valuable lesson in bonding for me. It enabled me to see how students came with ready hearts to relate, contribute and learn. There were 8 students in my *zemi*, all in their final year except for one who was in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Final-year students routinely face the daunting challenges of job-hunting, pressurizing interviews and long-drawn job briefings. For the final-year students, this was going to be their final study retreat before entering the real world of employment, overseen by a very different (and much more hierarchical) culture.

On the first of our 3-day retreat, we headed for the Izu Peninsula, famous for its steep cliffs and beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean. I had with me reading materials, including some Southeast Asian short stories. I was going to tell these stories and invite responses from students during the retreat.

I could feel the students' enthusiasm when we arrived. While they were usually more reserved in class, they were unusually social during the retreat. They were constantly talking about things which included tales of job hunting, trips abroad as volunteers in Thailand, Laos and Bangladesh, challenges faced with working part-time while still studying. They also shared with each other their hopes, worries, and aspirations. These topics soon found their way into written accounts after the trip.

Eventually, we had a collection of short stories and vignettes which we put up for exhibition at the next university open-campus festival. I believe that the quality of the written pieces was the outcome of the time and opportunity for deeper sharing and expression during the retreat. This experience exemplifies what academic literacy scholars have noted about how writing is a socio-constructive activity that is situated, intertextual, resonant and dialogic (Russell, 1997; Prior, 1998), which is very much in keeping with the present discussion on bonding.

### **Practical steps in bonding**

I took away from the retreat lessons on valuing meaningful interaction. Such meaningful interaction has in turn encouraged me to think more deeply about the importance of engendering a sense of inclusiveness and teacher-student bonding for ELT purposes. I now try to find and even plan for occasions where learning and purposeful interaction can occur at the same time because they seem to be correlated. Bonding often does not just happen. It is something that a teacher can create through various activities.

### ***Common goals***

I have discovered that my students are culturally group-oriented people who bond and thrive when they are able to feel that they are part of a common goal. Hence, one of the challenges I have set myself in both my *zemi* as well as my ESP and EFL classes is to implement activities that tap on their ability to work in groups towards common goals.

Activities with common goals encourage participation and bonding through engendering a sense of acceptance and inclusiveness. One such activity is the organization of a talk show. A talk show could be used to approach a study topic like autism. Students could play different roles in the talk show (e.g. parent, social worker, policy maker, psychologist) and sometimes, even the teacher is involved. Such an activity could facilitate bonding through working towards a common goal.

### ***Planning and working together***

Many Japanese universities set aside a special day for an open-campus festival, and mine is no different. Each *zemi* is given a small budget for materials (e.g., color paper, magic pens), a festival booth, food and drinks. Working as a group, students in the *zemi* are well-organized and systematic in keeping records and receipts for whatever they have spent. From my own

observations of how the students are able to work together, open-campus activities are good occasions for people-to-people bonding.

The day before the open-campus festival is usually set aside for setting up the exhibition booth. The good side of this is that while most of the work is directed by the *zemi* leader, usually a final-year student, initiatives for the set up comes almost entirely from the students. I look forward to open-campus festival preparations in the middle of the second ('Fall') semester because they are good times for bonding. Posters have to be designed, venues have to be decorated, welcome notices have to be put up on boards. On more than one occasion, I have found that the weeks and days set aside for festival preparations are good opportunities for bonding. My strategy is to let the senior students take the lead in the preparations. More than once, they have shown enough confidence to approach me to help with things that they would not normally ask of their teacher, like doing poster designs or whiteboard decorations. Bonds and good relationships built on such occasions have a positive effect on classroom dynamics, providing positive washback for the overall learning environment.

### ***Learning from each other***

As an English teacher, I speak to my students in English but through the years, I have made it a habit to let my students teach me some Japanese as well, in order to make things reciprocal. Early in my stay in Japan, I realized that my position as a language teacher from overseas was helpful because it allowed me to position myself as a language learner. While the students learned English from me, I learned Japanese from them. Through learning Japanese from my students, I was able to make them more aware of the challenges of second language acquisition, very often through the mistakes I have made when I spoke Japanese. I have found that my willingness to position myself as a language learner allows me to identify with the students. Moreover, my readiness to demonstrate appreciation for interesting aspects of the Japanese language like in the following examples invites reciprocal responses with regards to English while promoting cordial relationships with students.

While teaching, I have often found that laughter can help bring people together, especially when the humor is also a reminder of some aspect of language – be it syntax, phonetics, morphology, pragmatics or discourse. Some students appreciate the way I introduce puns into my lessons, be they in English or Japanese. Much humor can be found in similar sounding

words like how the sound *chou* in Japanese can refer to 長 (leader or manager), 鳥 (bird) or 腸 (intestine). Humor can also be found in popular sayings like that of how finding a good spouse means finding one who is tall in stature *koushinchou* (高身長), has a good education *kougakureki* (高学歴) and earns a good salary *koushuunyuu* (高収入). All these qualities begin with *kou* (高) which means ‘high’. The punch line, which often gets students in stitches, is that ironically, there is a fourth ‘quality’ to be found in spouses with these three attractive qualities – *kouketsuatsu* (高血圧), which is another *kou* (高) expression, meaning ‘high blood pressure’. By making language lessons humorous, for example, through ‘experimenting’ with puns, my aim is not only to create a positive atmosphere conducive to bonding, but also to heighten students’ awareness that language learning can be an interesting activity.

### ***‘With-itness’ during dissertation writing***

*Zemi* teachers are also responsible for supervising students doing their graduation dissertation. I have found that as a supervisor, being available even for short conversations to help trouble shoot allays fears encountered in research and dissertation writing, and is a good way to establish the bonds that will see graduating students through a particular difficult part of their final year at university. My usual practice is to encourage students who are working on nearly similar topics to brainstorm various aspects of their research together at an early stage. Starting early on their dissertations is useful because it gives everyone more time to ponder relevant issues and to get used to each other’s working styles and pace.

A particularly difficult challenge for me is when graduating students choose to write their dissertations in Japanese. As a dissertation supervisor, my role is to read drafts and provide constructive comments. While this has not been easy for me given that Japanese is not my first or second language, I have found that working co-operatively with my student supervisees has enabled such consultation sessions to be very positive experiences in terms of teacher-student bonding. My approach is to attempt my best to read the draft before meeting the student supervisee. After reading the draft, the supervisee and I would meet to discuss the manuscript. At my meetings with supervisees, misunderstandings or queries I have of the Japanese text are discussed. Through paraphrasing, translating, questioning and explanation, many difficulties encountered are ironed out at consultation time. On such occasions, I rely heavily on the trust and bonding cultivated during *zemi*.

***Sharing and reflecting***

One approach to fostering bonding I have found useful with reserved students is to encourage them to write journal reflections in English. I have found this to be an important consideration in the face of challenges and pressures of the type I will explain in the next section. Writing journal reflections is a good way to encourage students to think and express themselves in English. One positive outcome of getting students to reflect on various issues or on their learning experiences is that it enables them to come out of their shells and become more confident in expressing their feelings. Through weeks and months once reserved students become more confident in their writing and expression, enabling many to find the courage to write me emails asking for advice on matters to do with their studies. Moreover, they also begin to show signs of blending in with the larger group. Over time, reading students' journal entries and messages and being privy to their struggles have enabled the sort of bonding that allows me the privilege to respond with appropriate advice.

***Caveat: Acknowledging the realities and challenges***

Before concluding, I feel that it is important that consideration be given to some of the challenges I have faced, in relation to opening up opportunities for greater bonding in the classroom.

For the most part, I can say that students do respond positively to bonding activities. However, positive responses do not mean automatically that the application of bonding strategies will invariably result in stronger bonds in class. There are instances where students can be passive or unresponsive. Such passivity and unresponsiveness have been attributed to overly teacher-centered teaching styles and other pressures from a rigid system. Such pressures have affected the way students have been taught or spoon-fed throughout their time in high school, as well as their fears of making mistakes or being different from peers (McVeigh, 2002). In my experience, there have been instances where I have encountered obstacles to bonding in the form of reticence, reluctance, self-consciousness, or even apathy from a minority of students. McVeigh's description of unresponsive behavior helps encapsulate such situations:

[t]he most frustrating experience...was their refusal to answer my questions; and when they did answer, they would often do so in an inaudible voice. When I privately asked

students whom I had come to know why they would ‘pretend not to know,’ why they would not answer in class, or would refuse to say anything, they usually said that they ‘were afraid of making mistakes,’ ‘were afraid of instructors,’ ‘thinking is too hard,’ ‘I’m too nervous,’ ‘I feel tense’. (McVeigh, 2002, p. 98)

My experience with reticent students is that they tend to sit alone in an isolated corner, remaining reserved throughout the semester. They also have a tendency to go into extended periods of absence without permission from the teacher, which means that they may not attend the requisite number of classes to pass a course. In response, I try to look for ways to provide positive reinforcement and encouragement without attracting unwanted attention as some students have a tendency to worry about what others may think of them. I have observed that such students require a much longer time to bond with their classmates. As in all situations like this, maintaining empathy, consideration and a healthy sense of humor is important in helping them work through their challenges.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers like me will attest to the fact that approaches that can be taken to encourage closer bonding in the classroom are often dependent on culture and the local context. Approaches that work in one situation may have to be modified for them to work in another situation.

While putting into practice the various possible strategies discussed, I am often reminded of what Paulo Freire, the famous critical educator, said concerning how teaching is never about ‘banking’ into students deposits of lifeless knowledge (Freire, 2000) but about thinking, learning and experiencing together in different ways what the bonds of mutual encouragement and cooperation can offer to teaching and learning.

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