

## Participants' Reflections on the Impact of a Short-term Graduate Student Exchange Program for Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language

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### 英語教育に関する海外学術研究交流プログラムの実践と省察 —大学院生の学びに着目して—

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#### ABSTRACT

The authors developed and put into action a program aiming to explore effective foreign language teaching approaches through the joint effort of a short-term exchange program between graduate students of AUE (Aichi University of Education, Japan) and those of NCUE (National Changhua University of Education, Taiwan), with the goals of promoting graduate level research exchange, attaining a higher level of teaching research, and forging a research partnership. This program was supported by a Short Stay Program 2015, granted by the Center for International Exchange, AUE. The program mainly consisted of six sessions including: a lecture on early English education in Taiwan, seminars on the cognitive-linguistic approach to English grammar teaching, a seminar on elementary English education in Japan, a symposium concerning Effective Early Literacy Instructional Strategies for EFL learners, an International Exchange Class teaching experience at an elementary school in Japan, and an English Teaching Roundtable sharing current English teaching issues with international teacher trainees from Costa Rica, Pakistan, Myanmar and Indonesia, and graduate students from Taiwan, and Japan. In this paper, the researchers centered on reporting three Taiwan graduate students' reflections on their AUE visit. In particular, we limit our discussion to their experience of teaching the International Exchange Class in a Japan elementary school and their opinions regarding the English Teaching Roundtable. It is hoped that this program has played a certain role in sharing academic knowledge, broadening the participants' views, creating an international basis of research exchange, and strengthening the two participating universities' partnership.

**Keyword:** Research Exchange, Teacher Development, Foreign Language Teaching, Early English Literacy Education

#### 1. Introduction

This is a report on a Short-term Graduate Students Exchange Program between AUE (Aichi University of Education) and NCUE (National Changhua University of Education, Taiwan) in Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages, which aims to explore effective foreign language teaching approaches through a short-term exchange program between graduate students of AUE and those of NCUE. The program is supported by a Short Stay Program 2015, granted by the Center for International Exchange, AUE, and it is a joint effort of Midori Inaba (Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language Department, AUE) and Feng-Lan Kuo (Graduate Institute of Children's

English at NCUE, Taiwan).

According to the General Guidelines of Grade 1-9 Curriculum of Elementary and Junior High School Education published by Ministry of Education, Taiwan (2008), one of the curriculum goals is to further "cultural learning and international understanding". The core competence involves "appreciating and respecting different groups and cultures, understanding the history and culture of one's own country as well as others", recognizing the trend of the globalization in which countries all over the world are integrated into a global village, and developing a global perspective with mutual interdependence, trust and cooperation". Therefore, the current study attempted to

provide such a learning experience at the graduate level for a practice teaching experience at a foreign country and an understanding of English education policies of different countries and challenges faced by these countries. Two research questions will be answered:

- 1: What did the participants learn from the elementary school visit / the International Exchange class teaching experience in the Japan context?
- 2: What did the participants learn from the International English Teaching Roundtable regarding education systems and challenges faced?

## 2. Overview of the Program

### 2.1 Participants

Three 2<sup>nd</sup> year graduate students were screened and recruited from a graduate institute of children's English in central Taiwan. It was the S1's initial Japan visit and also her first foreign country visit. S2 made a conference presentation in Osaka, Japan in March 2015 and the AUE stay was her second Japan. In contrast, S3 visited Kobe, Japan in August, 2013, presented a conference paper in Osaka, Japan in March, 2015 and the AUE experience was her third Japan visit. These graduate students spoke no, little or some Japanese. However, they had been exposed to some Japan cultural content through textbooks and media technologies. They have excellent command of English which was the major language used for communicating with the Japan researcher. It is believed by the researchers that these participants were representatives of typical English major graduate students in Taiwan regarding their Japan experience.

### 2.2 Duration and Activities of the Short-term Exchange Program

The duration of the short-term exchange program is one week starting from June 19 to June 25 in 2015. The program covers six major activities: a lecture on early English education in Taiwan, a seminar on cognitive-linguistic approach to English education in Japan, a seminar on elementary English education in Japan, a symposium on effective strategies for promoting early literacy skills for EFL learners, an International Exchange class, and an International English education roundtable. In this paper, we focus our discussion to the elementary school International Exchange class teaching experience and the international English roundtable.

#### 2.2.1 Features of the Elementary School Visit and the International Exchange Class Teaching Experience

The school being visited was located at a suburban area

near Nagoya. The target students were four 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes. The school visit program included 4 activities: international classes, lunching with the students, Japanese traditional dancing performance, and English class observation. Nine International teacher trainees and three graduate students from Taiwan participated in the school visit and taught the international exchange classes. In general, 2 international teacher trainees team-taught 1 class, whereas the three graduate students formed a team. The international teacher trainees came from United States, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Kongo, China, Pakistan (2 teachers), Indonesia, and Myanmar. These teacher trainees have entry level to intermediate level Japanese proficiency. Though the participating teachers were recruited due to convenient sampling, these teacher trainees are representatives of countries ranging from North America, Central America, South America, Africa, South Asia, South-East Asia, to East Asia. They thus provided a variety of ethnic groups and cultures for each participant to develop a global perspective toward mutual understanding and cross-cultural cooperation.

Conversely, since the graduate students from Taiwan knew little Japanese, a fourth-year English-majored student from AUE, Japan served as the teaching assistant to help the three graduate students conduct the teaching session. Additionally, the researchers circulated among the 4 different classrooms to observe the teaching practice, to take notes, to take photos or to videotape segments of the teaching practice. Each international exchange class lasted 45 minutes.

During the international exchange class, the participating teachers introduced topics such as local foods, traditional costumes, and famous scenic spots of each home country. Likewise, the graduate students first introduced where Taiwan is with emphasis on the participants' home university. Next, they described the famous places respectively representative in northern, central and southern Taiwan. They also illustrated the popular food varieties in Taiwan. Then, focused practice using parallel examples of daily Japanese and daily Mandarin was provided. These example sentences were "Good morning.", "How are you?", "Thank you.", "You are welcome.", and "Goodbye".

- a. おはよう。(早安=ジャオアン)
- b. こんにちは。(你好=ニイハオ)
- c. ありがとう。(謝謝=シエシエ)
- d. どういたしまして。(不客氣=ブクチ)
- e. さようなら。(再見=ジャイジエン)

With the help from the Japanese teaching assistant, a Pelmanism matching-game was used to effectively facilitate

learning the five corresponding sentences between Japanese and Mandarin Chinese.

### 2.2.2 Features of the International English Roundtable

On the agenda were the current situation and issues in English teaching, programs, curriculums, textbooks, professional development, and challenges faced in developing countries. In addition to the three target graduate students from Taiwan, the other participants were respectively from Costa Rica, Pakistan (3 teachers), Myanmar, Indonesia, and Japan (1 doctoral student and 1 master's student). The researchers served as the moderators. Five AUE international teacher trainees from the 4 different countries talked about the current situation and issues in English education in each home country. After and/or during each presentation participants exchanged opinions. The five speakers were recruited based on convenient sampling. They were teacher trainees mainly from developing countries and they were taking the Introductory Japanese class from the second researcher when the short-term exchange program took place. However, they were representatives of countries ranging from Central America, to South Asia, to East Asia geographical areas. It is believed by the researchers that opinions voiced by these speakers provided ample input to the three graduate students from Taiwan to broaden their international insight on English education policies and related issues.

Speaker 1 from Costa Rica referred to the role education plays in achieving high social status in her country. Education has become the most popular form of social climbing in Costa Rica. In a democratic country this represents an equal chance of opportunity as higher levels of education often leads to better job opportunities. The government invests 8% of the gross domestic product (GDP) into public education; this contributes to a better skilled labor force that impacts society positively. However, this change has not had the desired result, as new graduates are not competent enough in the English language, which impacts negatively on their performance and competitiveness when looking for a job. The need to find a solution has created some debates about the efficacy of the English methodologies used in the classrooms as well as the quality of professionals in charge of this duty in Costa Rica.

Speaker 2 from Pakistan first mentioned the role and status of Urdu & English in her country. Urdu is a national language and *lingua franca*, there are seventy-two regional languages in use, mainly in informal social interactions, and English is an official language and gatekeeper for entry into prestigious higher education institutions, high salaried jobs, the military, and the bureaucracy. The saying goes: "English

is the passport to success and key to national progresses."

Speaker 2 referred to the government policy of English education, which says that soon after a government assumes power, it announces an English education policy to the masses as a way of achieving democratic ideals of equality of opportunity. The government has instructed all public sector schools to start teaching English from class I. The Higher Education Commission's English Language Teaching (ELT) Reform Project aims to improve the teaching and learning of English in higher education institutions in Pakistan. More specifically, improving the teaching and learning of English 'will help the graduates of public sector universities and institutions of higher learning to compete for good jobs in Pakistan.' The challenges and issues are:

- (1) English as an examination subject: the primary function of teaching English in Pakistan is to prepare pupils for examination.
- (2) Linguistic inequalities: the Urdu-English Medium Divide in Pakistan has crippled the country's education system.
- (3) Speaking and communications skills neglected: English taught in schools neglects speaking, listening and critical reading.
- (4) Teachers do not use English: English teachers in government schools tend to teach the language through the medium of Urdu as their own competence is poor.
- (5) Grammar and spelling drills: teaching amounts to nothing more than rote English spelling drills and some formal grammatical constructions.
- (6) Poor students, poor teachers: students who are poor in conversational and written English are poor teachers if they choose to enter the profession.

To properly prepare students, English education should target the following areas: academic use, inter-active use, communication in target areas of work, travel and study abroad, and meeting native speakers as well as speakers from ESL/EFL countries.

Speaker 3 from Pakistan brought up the importance of English ability to success in society. Along with Urdu, 'the national language of Pakistan,' English is the official language of Pakistan. Now, English has become necessary for "opportunity" and "progress," as it is the language of power, being used as it is in almost the entirety of public and private sectors.

English has become a marker of elite status and the language of power. It is used in all aspects of society: the civil service, armed forces, the higher judiciary, universities, prestigious newspapers, radio, and entertainment. In general, a person who does not have knowledge of English is not considered educated in the truest sense of the world. English

is the language of administration and is a compulsory subject at the school/college level. It opens the door to employment. Even in public schools, most subjects are taught in English, and higher education is taught entirely in English except for the study of the national language, Urdu, and regional languages and other foreign languages.

English has a vital role in Pakistan but English in Pakistan is taught under conditions which are far from satisfactory. English education in Pakistan faces numerous issues and challenges: lack of trained English teachers, unclear English curricular objectives in textbooks, inadequate material and facilities, inadequate oral practice, imprecise teaching methods, the underdeveloped examination system, inadequate professional development, and lack of in-service teacher training.

Speaker 4 from Myanmar discussed the current issues facing English education in his home country. English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools from G-1 to G-11. This means that students learn English for 11 years in school. But when students finish high school, they cannot apply their English skills well in real situations. They lacked adequate communication skills. Public schools have been criticized for their failure in communicative language acquisition. Students with practical skills are required. Challenges and major issues include: 1) a need for practical communicative skills, 2) a need for fixed curriculum and textbooks, 3) a focus on reading & writing in the classroom, 4) the testing format and system, 5) a need for communicative teaching methodology, and 6) a need for training courses and for maintaining teachers' motivation.

Speaker 5 from Indonesia discussed the present situation of primary schools in his country. In Indonesia, English is taught in primary school. However, in general, the results are not satisfactory. Students do not have competence in communication using the language, except for a few employees in government or private schools mostly in big cities. In these schools, students have relatively advanced English communication skills. This is due to better access to excellent learning resources, such as native English teachers, good textbooks/learning materials, and the good quality of schools in general. In big cities, too, it is quite common for students to take English courses after school or during weekends. Another exception can be found in the so-called "Pondok Pesantren" or "boarding school" where students stay at the school for 24 hours every day. They attend formal classes during the day and have night classes where they speak bilingually (i.e., English and Arabic) almost all the time. In this type of school, students' English competence is usually very good. The causes of the general low proficiency of English in Indonesia are: 1) a lack of qualified teachers, 2)

inadequate exposure to the English language in daily life, and 3) the inequity between city and rural life resulting in a great difference in terms of schools, infrastructures, and access to better learning resources. Therefore, it is suggested: 1) provision of continuous upgrading systems for English teachers, 2) changing the focus of English teachers from grammar master to language communicator, 3) reducing the disparity of schools between urban and rural areas and between government and private schools by allocating more funds for the provision of learning resources of good quality and infrastructure.

### 2.3 Instrument

Since there were only three graduate students participating in the exchange program, this study therefore adopted a qualitative analysis to examine the students' reflections on the impact of the short-term exchange program for teaching and learning English as a foreign language. A researcher-developed 13-item open-ended questionnaire was developed to collect their responses. In the present study, we focused our discussion on the 2-items concerning their comments towards the International Exchange Class teaching experience and the International English Roundtable.

## 3. Evaluation of the Program

### 3.1 Reflections on the School Visit and the Practice Teaching Experience

S1: The school visit was unforgettable to me. The students treated us so kind and so did the school staff. Although I couldn't communicate so well with the students, The Japanese teaching assistant helped us to translate and deliver what we want the students to know properly. The students were very smart and they learn so fast. The time we had lunch with those students were quite interesting because they did rock-paper-scissors to choose which teacher was going to eat with them. After the lunch, we did the English class observation. The teacher introduced the sports by asking students some questions. Let them guess what sports would be the top three among the international teacher trainees. It's very important to arouse students' interest in English. Additionally, the students had good pronunciation and they were not afraid to ask us questions in English.

S2: On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, I visited the elementary school near Nagoya with 9 international teacher trainees and we exchanged teaching experiences as we took the tram and buses to get there. As I arrived at the school, I saw some students going swimming in PE class and they welcomed us with their angel-like smiling faces which I can't forget. Before entering into the main building, I had to change my



shoes into indoor slippers. It is different from the practice of Taiwan's schools and no wonder it is so clean in Japan's classroom. Next, we three graduate students as a team prepared a PPT to introduce famous spots and food in Taiwan. Five basic Mandarin Chinese daily use sentences with the corresponding Japanese pronunciation were also taught: All students were able to learn how to say the daily languages in Mandarin Chinese effectively with the 'Pelmanism Game.'

After that, I had school lunch with those children. The school lunch is simple but nutritious set meal including a bowl of rice, two dishes of vegetables, a piece of Japanese fried meat, a packet of dry 'kibinago,' and a bottle of milk which is my favorite. As I drank the milk with satisfied look, one of the girls told me that she could give hers to me. I feel that Japanese children like to share what they have with people. They are so friendly. However, children in Japan do not take a nap after school lunch and it is also different from Taiwan's daily routine. Next, we were invited to the school's assembly hall to see the students' dancing performance with Japanese traditional music and costumes. They are so adorable and energetic.

At last, I joined the English class observation which is not much different from Taiwan's elementary English classes. The Japanese teacher used the target language to teach; besides, he utilized the native language, Japanese, to assist his teaching. For the teaching props, using flashcards with pictures and vocabulary can attract students' attention. However, the activity 'Which sports do you like?' could be designed with real context to make students learn real communication.

S3: This kind of school visit is the most interesting experience I have ever had because both the students and the teachers speak different languages and are unable to communicate with each other. However, with pictures and some body language, the students and the international teacher trainees can understand each other. Not only did the children learn from us, but also I think that I learn from those lovely kids. In our presentation, we introduced some Taiwan famous places, food and greeting words with the children and they also shared theirs. From their performance, we are encouraged. At school lunch time, it's a great opportunity to have some interactions with the kids. With little Japanese, we still had great time. The last one is the English class observation and the teaching procedures are similar to those in Taiwan. It focuses on Grammar translation method, communicative language teaching method and some task-based approach. Through doing the activities, the students can learn the target language.

Based on the three participants' reflections, it can be summarized that their attitudes toward the international exchange class teaching is highly positive. With the help of the Japanese teaching assistant, these graduate students from Taiwan successfully introduced local foods and popular places through the use of a matching game. It also showed that the participants considered the exchange program as fundamentally beneficial.

### 3.2 Reflections on the International English Roundtable

S1: In the roundtable, we learned some current educational situation in each home country of the international teacher trainees, such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Indonesia, Costa Rica and Japan. Most of them mentioned about the license for teachers. How to motivate teachers to attend advanced studies is a very important issue. We've figured out a possible solution that the government could ask the teachers to re-new their licenses within a certain period of time. Besides, they might be asked to get higher education status to make their teaching up-to-date. It was quite good to know the situation in other countries, so we can have a broader view about education policies in different EFL contexts.

S2: On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, I joined the Roundtable to share current English teaching situation and issues with international teacher trainees and researchers who are from Pakistan, Myanmar, Costa Rica, Indonesia, and Japan. We discussed and shared the main challenges faced concerning English teaching, the curriculums and the materials of English teaching, and how to train English teachers in each of the home country. In Pakistan, English continues to be the official language and it is also adopted as one of the two languages of indigenous origin, Urdu and Bengali. In Myanmar and Indonesia, English is viewed as an international language, World Standard English, literate English, so 'English as a lingua franca (ELF)' has emerged as a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages. In Costa Rica, the Spanish-speaking country has been in contact with English for more than a hundred years, not only through education, but also through contact with native English speakers both foreign and domestic. I was so impressed about the international teacher trainee from Costa Rica's presentation because she said that English teachers need to select appropriate teaching materials which are fitted with students' needs and proficiency levels. I think it is a top priority to consider before teaching English.

S3: In the roundtable, several international teacher trainees shared their home country's English teaching situation with us, and it's a good opportunity for us to have

an understanding of challenges faced by other countries. I think that we are really lucky to have this opportunity to get in touch with so many international English teachers, and they all are really kind to us. I truly appreciate Professor Inaba's arrangement for the roundtable activity.

Based on the aforementioned responses from the participating students, it was found that their orientation toward the exchange program goes beyond host-country's specific emphasis, but toward multilateral perspective. It was therefore believed by the researchers that these graduate students had recognized the trend of the globalization in which countries all over the world are integrated into a global village, and had developed a global perspective with mutual interdependence, trust and cooperation. According to the General Guidelines of Grade 1-9 Curriculum of Elementary and Junior High School Education published by MOE, Taiwan (2008), one of the curriculum goals for training elementary and junior high school students is to cultivate their multilateral perspective. It is believed by the researchers of the current study that it is even more urgent and important for the prospective teachers in the teacher training programs to participate in multilateral cooperation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Bachner and Zeutschel (2009) reported the long-term effects of a high school home-stay experience for American and German students participating in the Youth for Understanding program in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In contrast, this paper focused on providing verbatim descriptions of the Taiwan graduate students' short-term exchange experience. This paper also shared with the readers on features of the successful exchange program between AUE, Japan and NCUE, Taiwan. The researchers centered their discussion on the features of an elementary school International Exchange Class teaching experience and an English teaching roundtable involving graduate students and international teacher trainees from 6 countries. Particularly, the reflections and opinions of the three graduate participants were provided and elaborated. This paper provided an overview of major findings by elaborating on how AUE best used the available resources, and generated some discussion on future programming in relation to the findings by posing: What next?

Six months after the AUE visit, in December 2015, NCUE, Taiwan invited the second researcher of this paper, another faculty member of AUE, and an undergraduate student from the same university to have a follow-up scholarly and culture visit. Activities being conducted included a high school class observation, an elementary school class visit, and two graduate level class visits at

NCUE. The AUE scholars also delivered two speeches regarding strengthening the exchange program between the two participating universities and the developing trend of English education in Japan.

During this visit, the first researcher actively involved the same three graduate students who participated in the AUE exchange program for follow-up interactions. At that time they became the 3<sup>rd</sup> year graduate students. Furthermore, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students at the same graduate institute of Children's English were recruited to participate in the follow-up exchange program.

In addition to the regular long-term exchange programs which have been promoted between the two participating universities since 2004, the researchers in the present study have been making efforts to develop a model of a sustainable short-term exchange program between the two participating institutions not just in the past, now, but also in the future. Similar or extended short-term exchange programs can also be developed between or among other participating institutions by referencing the model the researchers have developed.

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