

Teaching in trade high schools

Senior High Schools in Japan

Upon graduating from junior high school (the last level of compulsory education), most Japanese students opt to continue onto high school, but the schools they can choose to attend are no longer determined by neighborhood, and many students will commute to a senior high school outside their home area or town. Relocation to a different town or prefecture is also possible. So long as a student meets a school's entrance requirements and can afford its fees, she or he can choose from a variety of public and private high schools, with a wider choice of curriculum and courses of study available. The high school a particular student attends is more typically dependent on that student's interests, academic level, test scores, finances, and other factors. Many different types of senior highs exist, including the following types: academic schools that specialize in preparing students for ranked universities, schools offering general courses of study for students who will attend less prestigious universities and colleges, vocational schools that offer courses of study for different professions (such as fisheries, farming/agriculture, commercial/business, and technical/industrial—the so-called 'FACT' schools), and schools that graduate students directly into the adult workforce. While some schools will have combinations of the types above in parallel but distinct courses of study, certain courses of study and certain high schools are more associated with success at continuing onto higher education while other schools and other courses of study are not. Most students at what we could call 'vocational' high schools in Japan clearly tend to be near the bottom of the academic scale and lowest in rates of continuation onto the tertiary level.

EFL literature

If one looks at the publications and materials available to EFL teachers,

including EFL in Japan, it seems much is available to those working at the college level, with children, with beginning level students at the junior highs, and even with students in academic high schools. Unfortunately, those who teach at the vocational schools and in vocational courses often feel alone, with little guidance or support and classrooms that can be very difficult to manage. Much that is written in standard TEFL just does not seem to fit these students. Common assumptions about motivation, needs, achievement, classroom performance, and many other factors appear misplaced in relation to them. Many of the students in the FACT schools and other vocational courses are simply in English class because it is a general education requirement they need in order to graduate, and learning a foreign language is not viewed as having any real relevance to any future scenario (such as needing it for a university exam). This is the situation I have found myself teaching in. Through my struggles, I have learned, and continue to learn, many points which I hope can be of instruction for the many other teachers working in such schools, some of which I would like to share here in this paper.

Yamagata Gakuin High School

I currently teach at Yamagata Gakuin High School, a private high school in Yamagata City. We have three programs, a culinary program, information systems program, and general studies program. Unlike the situation in other places where private senior high schools can be a prestigious alternative to public ones, the private schools in Yamagata are second-tier schools to the academic-level public institutions. In other words, students who were not able to pass the public school entrance exams mostly populate our general studies course. About 70% of them will go directly into the workforce upon graduation, with the remaining 30% continuing on to some sort of post-secondary training school

or, occasionally, on to junior college. Only a few students each year will succeed at entering a four-year institution.

This is not to say no junior high leavers desire to attend Yamagata Gakuin. The culinary course is the only high-school level course of its sort in Yamagata Prefecture, attracting students from many areas and even from neighboring prefectures. The information systems course is serious as well. Many of the students in our general studies course choose Yamagata Gakuin for its strong sports programs. Students serious about academic study or entering university, however, usually choose another school, coming to us only when they have been denied entrance at their first choice.

While the general course classes are a challenge to teach as well, I want to focus on the two trade courses, as they provide a unique experience, and I believe there are many other teachers in similar situations. Some of these include ALTs on the JET Programme who end up at vocationally-based or non-academic senior highs.

What teachers face

There are several challenges teachers in trade high schools face. First, the students tended to be on the low end of the scale in their junior high school English classes. Many of them gave up on the subject even before they had really begun, so there is very little intrinsic motivation. Second, many if not most of the students see little connection between their chosen trade and the English classroom. Being a high school and not a post-secondary trade school, English is a general education requirement but is not really connected with entry into a higher level of education, meaning little extrinsic motivation exists either. While college- or junior college-bound students may lack intrinsic motivation, the reality of an entrance exam often supplies at least some extrinsically. Third, the trade that students are training for—not English language

ability—determines their grouping, so ability levels vary widely within classes. There are other issues involved as well. While far from having definitive 'answers' to these issues, there are several things I've found to be helpful in my own experience, which are discussed in the sections below.

Getting to know the students

First and foremost for me is relationship building. It could be argued that, as English teachers, our job is restricted to the teaching of English. Especially with trade high school students, however, if there is no relationship, no learning is going to take place. That is, at least no learning in the way we are hoping. Obviously, most of this relationship building could occur in English, but Japanese is sometimes necessary. It is important to get to know the kids as well as possible, including outside of the classroom. They need to know we care.

Setting expectations

It's also important for the students to know we have expectations for them; we expect they will be able to speak some communicative English. Through junior high school there is no requirement to actually study, as each student will move onto the next grade or level regardless of how well they do. I have found many of my students have given up on English, convinced they can't do it. They come into high school with this perception, not even being able to do simple greetings after three years of junior high school study. It is often assumed my class will be the same and many try to make it clear to me they are a lost cause. I don't give in. I expect improvement, and they will work until it happens. I find that, when there are expectations, most students are able to do far more than they were willing to admit or previously believed.

On testing I expect 60%, no less. The school requirement for credit is 30%, but my students have to retake their tests, with changes obviously made to the retests, until they can get 60%. I do not have the authority to change the level needed for credit, a level almost any student can achieve, but by setting a minimum retest level,

I let the students know that I expect something from them. I make sure they know there is not a single student in the class who, if they tried, could not get the minimum passing score.

Goal setting

Another important factor for students is having a goal. Most of my students, having given up on English, have no goals for themselves in regards to English learning. Thus, setting up a system for them to establish their own goals, and making the goals of each lesson explicit, are important factors in maintaining focus and motivation. The students need to feel they are accomplishing something and have a purpose.

I start the beginning of each year with a goal sheet for each student. Each one needs to decide something they would like to accomplish. At first many students are not sure what to do, as they are not used to the proactive setting of goals. Some students do choose not to participate, but by emphasizing the goals of each lesson as well and writing them on the blackboard at the beginning of each lesson, they often begin to feel a sense of accomplishment, a sense they are moving forward.

A learning diary

While I also have the students keep a diary for their summer and winter homework assignments, keeping a learning diary for myself is important, especially with this level of student. More so than higher level academic students, students at this level need guidance, but with more than 40 students in a class, it is hard to keep track of or notice what works for each group and each student on an individual level. The keeping of a diary is one way to remember and to become aware of trends we might not notice otherwise.

Self-expression in English

One thing I have noticed about junior high school English classes, at least in Yamagata, is very little time is spent with students expressing themselves in meaningful English of their own. English is something manipulated formally, rather than something owned and used on a personal level. The focus also tends to be on mistakes

rather than expression. Most of my students have never created something of their own in English before. Thus, I spend a lot of time and energy giving them opportunities to create their own meaningful English. Each student writes a little diary, even if very simple, for their summer and winter homework. Going over these diaries takes a lot of time, but anytime the students are creating something of their own, it will take more time for the teacher to look over than simply circling correct answers. I think this is maybe one reason such projects appear rare. Student diaries, or journals, also allow an opportunity for dialogue with the teacher. The teacher can write comments, responding to the student's writing, and the student can then use these comments as a springboard for later entries. The unit on email in the textbook as well, for example, requires each student to write me an email message. I would personally like to do an internet web blog, but most of my students do not have internet access outside of their cellular phones, and the school does not have a setup available for the culinary course students to use computers at school in such numbers; the computer labs are usually reserved for the information systems students.

Use their trade

One nice thing about a trade course is that the students have something they are interested in and desiring to study. One way to increase motivation is to include contents directly related to their course of study. For culinary students, for example, I do recipes and cooking in English, along with focusing on English needed for service situations. My course is required to have a grammar component as well, however, in a similar way to general studies courses, so this content has to act as supplemental.

Popular media

I use many movies and music with my classes as well. I find the Spiderman films to work quite well in my situation. With my students we do use the subtitles, but I have found

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that most of my students have never seen a subtitled movie before; they've always watched the dubbed version. This is a great idea for getting them to listen to some English. The same works with music, where I can focus on some faster and often more natural intonation and pronunciation patterns.

Varying levels

While most of the students in my classes have low level English, this is not true for all of them. Several students simply want to become cooks, even though they are quite high level in many of their academic classes. The Japanese system is such, however, that these students are lumped into the same English classes as their lower-level counterparts. If we don't take them into consideration, then we risk their boredom and alienation.

Projects, such as the diaries, are ways in which they can express themselves at their own level of ability, but more is necessary. Most of them don't wish to have extra 'study',

however. I have found, for many of them, extensive reading to be a helpful alternative. It gives them something enjoyable, but that they can also work on at their own pace. Additionally, they do not stick out in the classroom, something students of this age are often concerned about.

Conclusion

Vocational senior high schools are a unique and challenging atmosphere in which to teach, differing from more academic schools in many important ways. Students in vocational schools and courses often lack the sort of extrinsic motivation attached to learning English in order to get into a university or college, but they may also see no connection between a foreign language and their future jobs. Still, there are many things we as teachers can do to create an atmosphere where students can learn. This includes getting to know the students and establishing professional but human connections with them. It would be helpful to try and use the foreign language for this, but outside of class, it has to be recog-

nized that first language skills are very helpful. Another thing teachers at these sorts of high schools need to try is setting minimum goals so students know that they are held responsible for learning and can then feel some sense of achievement. Finally, although these students must be taught a lot of the same syllabus as general study courses (hence the required grammar component), it is vital that teachers try their utmost to supplement with materials that are more of interest to this sort of learner; and allow the students opportunities to express themselves in personalized, meaningful English.