

## **Three Countries in One Day: Retelling the News**

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### **Bio Data:**

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Some of the data from this paper were previously presented on October 9, 2005 at the international conference of the Japanese Association of Language Teachers. *JALT2005: Sharing Our Stories* was held in Shizuoka, Japan between October 7 and October 10, 2005.

### **Abstract**

This article reports on the development of a new course for English language majors in a Japanese university. The course was designed to enable students to become self-directed learners and to develop communicative ability and sociolinguistic competence. The theoretical basis for selecting dialogic learning and Content-Based Instruction is reviewed. Questionnaire items, informal discussions with students, and instructor observations recorded in notes after each class were used to evaluate the course, and they are discussed in relation to students' skill improvement in the areas of discourse competence and retelling a story in the second language (L2). Although Japanese students are rarely considered self-directed learners, the students in this course developed the ability to independently analyze news stories, organize their thoughts, and convey the essence of the news stories in their L2. Increases in the understanding of the three countries from which students had to retell news stories (Japan, Korea, and South Africa) as well as the students' and instructor's overall impressions of the course are also presented. Over 90 percent of the students positively responded to a questionnaire item asking students whether they

would recommend the course to other students. The students' explanations about why they would suggest taking the course demonstrate the variety of learning that occurred. The paper summarizes various aspects of selecting appropriate stories and concludes with reflections for improving the course. The latter may be of interest for those considering the implementation of a similar course.

**Key words:** dialogic learning, content-based instruction, EFL materials development in the Asian context, approaches to teaching culture, self-directed learners, globalization, Japanese EFL classroom

### **Introduction**

The Japanese lack of communicative ability has been criticized in many arenas. Jean-Pierre Lehmann (2002), a professor of international political economics, cited numerous examples of conferences where attendees from Europe, North America, India, and the Middle East spoke English, as the lingua franca, very fluently. He then provided stark contrasts of the Japanese, including the fact that out of the 130 delegations to the World Trade Organization only the Japanese delegation uses its own language. This lack of communicative ability can be attributed, at least partially, to a failure of second language (L2) education in Japan. Japanese university students majoring in English often study grammar or literature in their endeavor to learn the language. Although these components are important, they often focus on grammatical competence and literary prowess. In order to achieve communicative competence as well as to begin to truly interact in the international community, Japanese university students who major in English need to view the study of oral communication as a necessary component of their L2 studies.

Once Japanese university L2 learners have gained the “building blocks” for constructing utterances and are at the intermediate level, they need to not only review what they have learned but also be challenged with more difficult activities so they can continue to advance

linguistically and communicatively. In addition, as their English proficiency increases, students often must be able to read a text, analyze its message, and discuss it. In more traditional L2 classrooms in Japan, the reading and speaking skills are not integrated into one course; speaking is taught in a verbal communication course while reading is taught as its own course. Furthermore, these studies can sometimes be rather dry and academic, with students in reading classes analyzing grammatical structures and translating texts while those in speaking classes practice written textbook conversations that tend to focus on grammatical structures, communicative functions, or basic topics without allowing students to evaluate their own opinions or speak for longer periods of time. Although controlled practice and drilling of conversations are helpful for lower level learners, intermediate learners need to be allowed to broaden their ability to speak without a model. Currently, Japanese university curriculums have various L2 “conversation” courses, but their content and effectiveness vary widely, often based on the university’s policies or on the individual instructor’s desire to create new material. One student at the university where this study was conducted noted on a beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire that there are few classes where *we can speak in English*. Since there are many conversation courses offered, it is believed the student was referring to those that allow her to speak for most of the class using unrehearsed conversations. Retelling stories provides students with the opportunity to develop aural ability because although there are classroom controls to direct the students’ study, students are allowed to discuss the topics freely rather than only conversing within the framework of a textbook unit.

### **Impetus for change and need for evaluation**

Discussing something one has heard or retelling something that has been read is a common type of conversation between people in every language. Newspapers have been used for many years

in first language (L1) and L2 classrooms to study language, civilization, and politics (Jackson, 2002; Lamie, 1998). In L2 classrooms there may be a tendency to use newspaper articles from only one country, perhaps from the country where the students live or from the country of the instructor when s/he is a native speaker of the target language. The author developed and started teaching a course that focused on newspaper articles from Japanese English-language newspapers. The syllabus was designed for intermediate level English language majors, primarily in their junior year.

After reading a variety of human-interest newspaper articles during the semester, it became obvious that using English-language articles from only Japanese newspapers would not fully develop the students' sociocultural competence. All the articles focused on the same society and cultural norms. Since the students worked in pairs, the classes also lacked the important element of practicing the communicative dynamics involved when speaking in small groups (e.g., three interlocutors). Allowing students to control the discourse provides the opportunity to develop L2 proficiency, and one way to move away from the teacher question-students answer-teacher response format is to use small-group work, which is more likely to have "acquisition-rich discourse" (Ellis, 2005, p.18). In Nunn's (2000, p. 170) discussion of Japanese university students, he contrasted small-group conversations and pair work and noted, "Because it is more difficult to participate in small-group interaction in a foreign language, extensive practice is required." He also asserted that using three students allows practice with more than one interlocutor but does not greatly increase the possibility of one student dominating the conversation. Consequently, there was a need to revise the course not only to provide more opportunities for sociocultural growth but also to provide students with small group practice.

In addition to meeting these needs, an additional goal, to increase students' awareness of the legitimacy of varieties of English other than American English, was also added. Since

sociolinguistic competence includes the understanding of varieties of the language as well as cultural referents (Hadley, 2001, p. 8), it is important to provide students with learning opportunities beyond the normal Japanese focus on North American English and the culture of the United States. In addition, speakers of English as a second or foreign language far outnumber speakers of English as a first language (Crystal, 2003), so Japanese students are more likely to use English with other non-native speakers than with native speakers.

To address these concerns, a new course format was designed. “When language acquisition activities are based on authentic cultural material or embedded in a cultural context, we can begin to” increase students’ sensitivity to other cultures (Hadley, 2001, p. 105). Spelleri (2002) noted that learners like authentic materials, including news stories, because language, culture, and practical applications are incorporated into each lesson. Consequently, it was decided to continue to use newspaper articles (see Appendix A for sources) but increase the number of countries from one to three (i.e., Japan, South Africa, South Korea). Before class, each student read a news story from one of the three countries. In class, students were grouped into threes, each representing one of the countries. With movable desks, the classroom allowed the students to easily get together for small group discussions. In class, each student retold his/her news story in his/her own words so the small groups could discuss the content. It was hoped that as students discussed the news articles, they would compare the three cultures. As discussed below, each week the news articles were selected after considering the reactions during the previous classes.

Retaining Japan as one of the three countries was considered advantageous because interest in the classes and the relevance of the material to the learners are factors in their motivation (e.g., Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). In addition, stories from domestic (Japanese) online newspapers are accessible sources of reading that potentially have many applications for the L2 readers, so it was hoped that exposing students to these resources would positively affect the students’ future use of

them. Cam Le's (2005) discussion of material development emphasized the importance of balancing local and foreign elements, and this was a third reason that articles from Japanese newspapers were retained.

South Korean articles were used because Japan and South Korea are neighboring countries, but students rarely read news stories written in their L1 or L2 about Korea. A beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire revealed that the university students knew surprisingly little about South Korea but were interested in learning more about the country and its people. More Japanese have recently been interested in Korea because the 2002 FIFA World Cup was co-hosted by Japan and South Korea and also because of the popularity in Japan of the Korean TV and movie star, Bae Yong Joon. Korea was also chosen because even though the two countries are only a short 90-minute flight apart, there are many misunderstandings and misconceptions that are the result of historical tensions. It is important for English majors to read about and understand the modern people of South Korea before accepting the stereotypes that are often made in Japan (e.g., *Everyone eats kimchi. Korea smells bad. Koreans always throw their garbage in the sea.*). The third reason Korea was chosen is because the content of the articles is foreign yet contains some identifiable elements since the countries, although vastly different, share some Asian qualities.

South Africa was chosen because students are often interested in new cultures, and at the beginning of the semester, students indicated they were interested in South Africa. Some English students study and/or major in black writers from South Africa. In addition, English is one of the eleven official languages of the country. Furthermore, as South Africa continues to rebuild in the post-apartheid era, there are many human-interest stories to expose Japanese students to ideas outside of their primarily mono-ethnic culture.

The new material aims included:

1. To allow students to speak for almost all of the 90-minute class period each week.
2. To provide an incentive (e.g., class design, marks for class participation) for students to speak with, not just read, more difficult language, thereby increasing their confidence in their usable spoken lexicon.
3. To help students learn how to be active listeners in the English language.
4. To challenge and build on the students' speaking skills by talking about subjects that they normally do not discuss in English.
5. To help students become self-directed learners by doing their own investigations and creating their own understanding of newspaper articles without a teacher telling them "the" interpretation.
6. To learn to express the ideas that have been read in newspapers; that is, to retell a story in an organized manner.
7. To heighten students' awareness of other countries, to assist them in becoming informed global citizens of today's world who would not be accused of being "aloof ... from the affairs of the global community" (Lehmann, 2002, para. 9), and to expose them to ideas and concepts that they might not have been exposed to on their own. Increasing students' awareness would allow them to:
  - refine their image of South Korea to more accurately reflect modern reality;
  - create an image of South Africa because most Japanese students do not know very much about this country;
  - reflect on Japan as a result of what they learned about South Korea and South Africa.

### **Theoretical basis of the new course**

Instrumental learning involves learning how to do something and includes hypothesis testing with trial and error learning (Mezirow, 1991). For example, students can learn how to construct an English sentence using the S-V-O pattern. This style of learning is often utilized in Japanese secondary education when the students are taught to memorize facts and regurgitate them on tests and university entrance examinations. One result is that Japanese learners are generally not considered self-directed learners; they wait for explanations rather than seeking them on their own. A second result is high school graduates' lack of L2 communicative competence, which the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has acknowledged (Ministry, 2003).

In contrast, the course under discussion in this paper was designed to utilize dialogic learning and Content-Based Instruction (CBI), both of which were new to these L2 students. Learners use dialogic learning when they “listen to other people, read a book, watch television and listen to the radio” and then make judgments about the meaning (Bittel, 1989, p. 9). As a result, the learning focuses on answering the question *Why?* It “is concerned with ideals, feelings, and abstract social, political, philosophical and educational concepts” (Bittel, 1989, p. 9). With dialogic learning, learning and understanding are the result of conversations on various themes in the search for meaning (Bittel, 1989). In the same way that dialogic learning utilizes discussions, one form of CBI involves students responding “orally to things they have read or written” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 208). CBI is “an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 204). Katnic-Bakarsic (2002) discussed using dramatic texts in the L2 classroom to practice, compare, discuss, and study dialogue elements such as turn taking, politeness principles, and register

switching. Although this type of approach is interesting, it does not elicit discussion of contemporary topics in the same way that discussing news stories does.

Cam Le (2005, p. 6) argued for the need to use news stories to help students to be critical and active thinkers and emphasized, “Learning about other cultures and their perspectives is crucial for English language learners because it helps shape their view of themselves and of the world.” Similarly, Barge and Little’s (2002, p. 375) discussion of dialogic learning in the corporate setting noted, “dialogue is viewed as a form of conversation that allows organizational members to grapple with complex system realities and to engage in second-order learning by examining the tacit assumptions and theories-in-use.” In past courses, Japanese university students majoring in English have been surprisingly unaware of the world outside of Japan. In addition, they have not yet been aware of the cultural assumptions that contribute to their sense of being Japanese. Because we “tend to rely very heavily on our own cultural background in interpreting the talk of others” (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 306), when students examine their implicit assumptions, they can begin to understand people from “quite different cultural backgrounds” (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 306). In addition, a learner may start to re-evaluate his/her understanding of words and concepts during or after communicating (Mezirow, 1991). Consequently, the course was designed in the hopes that students would reflect on the content of the other two students’ newspaper articles through not only the discussions but also the thought processes before, during, and after the discussions.

## **Method**

The best-designed material cannot be effective if students reject it or have negative attitudes that would decrease its success (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). As a result, the students’ reactions to the topics in each class were closely monitored. Informal discussions with students also provided

feedback each week; based on these observations and discussions, the news articles for the next week were selected. Consequently, as the semester progressed, the news articles became increasingly tailored to the needs and interests of the students.

At the end of the semester, evaluation of the material was also necessary. Brown (2001, p. 15) noted that by gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing data, the material can be improved. Complete and accurate assessment, however, would be impossible if the students' perspectives were not considered. Without the elicitation of students' opinions of classes, for example, instructors "gain fewer insights ... may continue [negative practices] ... and may not prepare new material more relevant to their students' needs" (Long, 1997, Importance, para. 3). Because this course used a teaching format (i.e., three newspaper articles retold in class) and learning styles (i.e., dialogic learning and CBI) that were unfamiliar to the students, an evaluation of the material by both the students and myself was necessary.

At the end of the semester after the new course was first offered, a questionnaire (see Appendix B) was administered to determine whether the 22 students who took the course perceived their success and growth to be similar to that anticipated when the course was designed. The questionnaire items were designed to correspond to the goals of the course (e.g., goal 6 with questionnaire items 4 and 5) and to indirectly evaluate the results of using dialogic learning and CBI. This research was part of a larger study of the new material that also looked at students' linguistic development, thereby addressing the second, third, and fourth goals for the course. It was hoped that by learning students' opinions about the course, aspects that needed to be revised would be discovered. At the time of administration, students were reassured that their answers would not affect their grades since the questionnaire was for research purposes and course improvement only.

The questionnaire was also administered to the 26 students who took the course the next

semester. Forty-four of the 48 students (40 female, 4 male; 1 sophomore, 34 juniors, 9 seniors) who finished the course during the two consecutive semesters completed the questionnaire, resulting in a return rate of 91.67 percent. In addition to the questionnaires, the author kept a journal with observations made immediately after each class.

## **Results**

### ***Thought Organization***

Discourse competence, one element of communicative competence, includes the ability to “combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought” (Hadley, 2001, p. 6). Unfortunately, some Japanese L2 learners spend more time pausing between words and phrases than speaking, whether it is because they are considering their thoughts, mentally translating from the L1 to the L2, or arranging their words. Disjointed L2 utterances make it extremely difficult for the interlocutor to discern the meaning, not to mention creating the impression that the speaker lacks any degree of L2 fluency. Organizing an utterance takes forethought. Furthermore, it is a skill that needs to be developed in the L2 classroom because for most people, the subconscious prioritizes the points of a story when speaking in the L1. Consequently, an improvement in the ability to organize thoughts would represent a step toward smoother L2 conversations. This is one reason this goal was created for the course and the corresponding item was included on the questionnaire.

At the beginning of the semester when the course was being offered for the second time, a questionnaire was administered to the students. Students were asked, *What knowledge do you hope to gain from this class? Why?* The results indicate that almost one-third of the students realized they needed to develop discourse competence. One student answered, *I want to be good at organizing my opinion when I read a paper like newspapers* (sic). Another expressed the desire

to be able to *learn how to tell people the story simply*. Other students also voiced the inability to clearly give opinions and the desire to be able to express oneself intelligibly. Consequently, there is a suggestion that at least some of the students were aware of the potential to increase their communicative ability during the semester without focusing primarily on lexis and sentence structures.

**Table 1**

Skill Improvement (N=44)

	1		2		3		4		5		mean	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Thought												
Organization	0	0.00	2	4.55	10	22.73	14	31.82	18	40.91	4.09	.90
Retelling												
Story	0	0.00	2	4.55	2	4.55	19	43.18	21	47.73	4.34	.77

Note. On a scale from 1 - *not at all*, to 5 - *yes, a lot*.

On a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 5 representing greatest improvement, 72.73 percent of the students assessed their improvement as a 4 or a 5 (see Table 1). With a mean of 4.09 and a mode of 5, there was a strong indication that students felt their ability to organize their thoughts had improved. My written notes of weekly classroom observations further substantiate improvement in students' discourse competency between the beginning and end of the course. First, there was a marked increase in students' ability to smoothly and clearly convey the essence of the article without reading it and for the listeners to ask better questions of the storyteller. Cam Le (2005, p. 6) noted that Vietnamese find it difficult to "question ideas or express their opinions or individual preferences." The same can be said of these Japanese students, who were not required to write

papers in high school so they had not learned how to analyze what they read or to think critically about an issue. Because Japanese students are accustomed to being told the one correct answer, when they analyzed the written newspaper articles, understanding the different ideas within the text before coming to class, they slowly realized that there are often different opinions about the same subject or topic. As the semester progressed, a second improvement in discourse competency occurred as the students began to politely disagree with each other. Third, their preparation for class prompted some students to become self-directed learners, as evidenced by their self-initiated search for further information about the stories. It is clear, therefore, that by providing the students with a classroom environment where they could practice this invaluable skill, one that is used in daily life, the goal for students to be able to organize their thoughts to retell a story was achieved.

It is, however, concerning that 10 students (22.73 percent) were neutral to improvement and 2 students (4.55 percent) weakly assessed their gains in the ability to organize their thoughts. Observing the students during classes, some of them continued to have difficulty clearly retelling their stories for two reasons. First, these students understood the small parts of the story, but because their language abilities were not as developed as their classmates, they struggled to see how the pieces related to each other; they could not put them together to create the whole story. As a result, they did not provide their listeners with the main character(s) and the country of origin, but setting the scene of a story is critical so listeners can begin to create their understanding of the event as well as continue to understand the entire story.

The second difficulty was a lack of progress in facilitation skills (e.g., functional expressions to check for understanding as well as listener expressions to show interest). At the beginning of the semester as well as throughout the course, facilitation skills were taught. For example, listeners were taught and encouraged to use phrases such as

- I don't understand what you mean by ...?
- Wait a minute. Could you say that again?
- Wow. That is interesting.

Expressions taught to aid in story telling included

- Well, let me try and explain it this way.
- Yes, that's right. And ...,
- No, that's not right. What I mean is ...

Although the majority of the students became progressively proficient in their use, these 12 students did not master the facilitation skills because they were too focused on the facts in the articles. This inhibited their organization of thought.

### ***Ability to retell a story***

Narration is used in many settings - summarizing what has been read in newspapers and magazines or on the Internet or what has been heard from other people, TV, and the news. The ability to retell a story was the primary skill that the course aimed to develop. It was encouraging that the highest mean of the study, 4.34, was for this item, and 90.91 percent of the students asserted that their ability had greatly improved, with nearly half of the students responding with a 5 (see Table 1). This indicates that the majority believed their ability to retell a story, primarily from memory but using some notes, improved more than any of the other skills and knowledge that were measured on the questionnaire. In addition, some of the students said that as the course progressed, they became better able to describe an event not only in their L2 but also in their L1.

### ***Increased understanding of South Korean people***

Part of becoming a global citizen is attaining knowledge of other groups of people. In spite of the

“Korean boom,” on the beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire only two students indicated that they had studied about Korea or the Korean language while two other students gave vague answers. Consequently, while it is unclear whether 8.33 or 16.67 percent of the students started with at least some formal understanding of South Korea, the majority did not.

**Table 2**

Increased Understanding of Countries (N=44)

	1		2		3		4		5		mean	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
South Korea	1	2.27	1	2.27	10	22.73	22	50.00	10	22.73	3.89	.86
South Africa	2	4.55	6	13.64	13	29.55	15	34.09	8	18.18	3.48	1.08
Japan	2	4.55	2	4.55	9	20.45	19	43.18	12	27.27	3.84	1.02

Note. On a scale from 1 - *not at all*, to 5 - *yes, a lot*.

Considering the disparity between the current wave of Korean pop culture and the historical conflicts which regularly resurface (e.g., the representation of war atrocities in some Japanese textbooks, possible financial compensation to Korean “comfort women” during Japan’s colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, the Japanese Prime Minister’s visits to shrines to pay tribute to the war dead - including some who were convicted war criminals), it was encouraging to find 72.73 percent of the students (see Table 2) asserted they had a better understanding of South Korea at the end of the course. In fact, as the means of the three countries demonstrate, students felt they developed the greatest understanding about South Korea and its people. This is one example of the success of the course.

### ***Increased understanding of South African people***

Only 52.27 percent of the students (see Table 2) indicated they felt they had a better understanding of South Africa and its people. Informal discussions after each class as well as at the end of the semester indicate that this outcome is partially the result of the students' difficulty in understanding the South African culture embedded in the articles and the differences in the use of English. For example, students did not understand words, phrases, and names not used in American English, including *matric exams* (i.e., high school graduation exams), *Directorate of Special Operations* (i.e., Federal Prosecutor's Office), and *traditional healers* (i.e., doctors who use traditional forms of medicine rather than modern science). It was, however, because of these contrasts and the students' interest in South Africa that articles from this country were chosen. Additionally, the personal struggles found in South Africa - the post-apartheid era, poverty, racial diversity, language diversity - were catalysts for in-class discussions that demonstrated students' opinions were changing and their minds were opening to new ways of thinking.

### ***Increased understanding of Japanese***

Japanese adult readers of both English and Japanese newspapers have commented that stories in the two languages have different perspectives, possibly because Japanese often do not write the English articles. Consequently, reading English newspaper stories can provide a new perspective on social issues affecting Japan. The ability to objectively reflect on one's own country is an important skill that will enable young Japanese citizens to contribute to society. At the end of the course, 70.45 percent of the students felt they had a better understanding of Japan (see Table 2).

### ***Took more responsibility***

In addition to evaluating the course using the students' opinions with the questionnaire, my

reflective journal provided insight into the successes of the course as well as areas for improvement. In many other speaking courses, if the students do not prepare before coming to class, they can still participate in the conversations, although perhaps in a diminished capacity. For the speaking course in this study, however, a lack of preparation was not only immediately obvious but also detrimental to their ability to convey the story. Unfortunately, this did not stop some students from coming to class unprepared. Overall, observations of the students' preparation led me to believe that students took responsibility at about the same rate as Japanese students who take L2 writing courses. In other words, there are always some students who come to class unprepared because they think they can "get by" with little to no effort, but for the others, they quickly realized that they controlled their in-class learning results based largely on the amount of out-of-class preparation. After they discovered that their preparation directly affected their classroom interaction, most of the students became proficient at utilizing (i.e., not passively listening to their partners but actively conversing) all of the 90 minutes that were not used for instructor explanation (e.g., a cultural aspect of South Africa). For those students who did prepare, by approximately one-fourth of the way through the semester they had learned from their in-class discussions what they needed to be able to do to retell the story. As a result, the students became more self-directed and were better able to do their homework.

### ***Story selection***

When reading or speaking about something in an L2, background knowledge allows students to more easily understand the content. Although this is true for learners at every language level, it is particularly true for students who are not at an advanced level since they have not, generally, been exposed to the target language and its cultures for a prolonged period of time. Although students always want to study new and interesting things, without any background knowledge,

students can be completely lost. Through trial and error, it became obvious that political and economic stories were not appropriate since they were difficult for most students to understand or relate to so the students were usually not interested in them. For example, most Japanese university students are not interested in and find it difficult to talk about Japanese politics in their L1, so it would be completely unreasonable to expect them to have an interest in or be able to speak about the politics of another country using their L2. A second type of article that did not intrigue the students was advice columns; stories with more substance prompted better discussions and exploration. A third type of story that was less successful was an article that just reported the facts or had many statistics, for instance fighting between political parties, transportation accidents, and terrorism. Students could more easily discuss articles with which they could relate, including individual struggles and triumphs. Human-interest stories were easier because background knowledge and specialized vocabulary—including political, economic, and criminal—were not required (e.g., becoming a world-class athlete, new types of buses, rotten food).

Students struggled to understand the South African articles much more than those from the other two countries. In spite of my efforts to select stories the students could understand, some of the problems were the result of vocabulary that the students were unaccustomed to (i.e., a different variety of English) and a lack of background knowledge about the culture, history, or specific topic. The layout of the South African stories also contributed to the confusion since many students found it difficult to find and connect the main points. For example, one South African story was about the lack of classroom space during university entrance examinations because of the large increase in the number of test takers. The Japanese students were interested in learning that South African students also have to take university entrance examinations, but they could not understand that the lack of available rooms was the result of more and more

students now having the right to take the examinations in the post-apartheid era. At the beginning of each semester, apartheid and other important social issues were covered to increase students' awareness of the many problems that still exist, but these topics were very difficult for these students to understand. Reflecting on my journal entries, it is apparent that more effort must be given throughout the semester to assist students in fully grasping the changing situation in South Africa. Since some of the students expressed an interest in South Africa, it may also be helpful to have students periodically give presentations on the real situation in the country and use pictures to help students visualize the conditions, both past and present.

### ***Students' overall impressions of the course***

Students were asked whether they would recommend this course to other students, and 43 of the 44 students (97.72 percent) responded that they would. The only student who indicated she would not recommend the course explained, *Because my friends have almost finished to get their credits*. Her reason reveals her practical considerations about whether her friends will be taking more English courses rather than dissatisfaction with the course; in fact, no negative comments were given. There is, therefore, an overwhelming indication that the students felt the course had merit. Although alone this does not indicate why the students were satisfied with the classes, the students' reflections about why they would recommend the course include a variety of reasons and demonstrate their belief that the course provided them with many types of learning.

Many students gave several reasons in the free-comment section of the questionnaire item about why they would recommend the course. Eleven students mentioned increased knowledge about one of the three countries. For example, one student wrote, *This class is fun for me. Because I can understand customs, conditions, and modern problems in other countries. (of course, in Japan) I understand a difference between reading by myself and retelling the story. In*

addition to the student who wrote, *There's no chance to improve the skill of retelling a story except this class*, nine other students discussed aspects of retelling stories. Five students' comments were related to the news or problems in the world. One student, for instance, stated, *Because we can learn many kinds of world news that we may skip*. Finally, four students specifically discussed their ability to better organize their thoughts. For example, one student reflected, *I think retelling stories is good practice to organize our thought and summarize articles*. In addition, students provided other helpful feedback, including:

- *This is a chance to speak English a lot.*
- *This class makes us very active and we can tell our thought to others, the chance is very rare.*
- *This class is very interesting.*

The statistics and student comments are evidence that students believed the course not only helped them improve their L2 skills of analyzing and retelling stories but also allowed them to acquire wisdom about themselves and the world. The resulting increased confidence in being able to actively participate in discussions for 90 minutes will positively affect their future L2 use and studies.

This feedback is important because when the course is offered again, if students do not register for it, the theoretical types of learning that students can achieve are meaningless. This questionnaire item also provided overwhelmingly positive feedback that at least some of the course goals were met for each learner. This is an important step; the next is to help learners achieve more of the aims.

### ***Instructor's overall impressions***

The beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire indicated that these Japanese students were not

inclined to pay attention to world news. For example, one student wanted to learn about the world because *I can't learn it by myself*. Similarly, another student wanted to learn about *international circumstances. Because I have few chance to learn the news*. Yet another noted the desire to *have some questions about the news. Because I just think 'I see' when I heard the news*. This feeling that the news is something beyond their grasp was echoed by many of the students and is confusing. Although it requires further investigation, these sentiments indicate that outside of class a majority of the students do not use their L1 to read and analyze the news. At the end of the course, however, I had the impression that the students were genuinely more interested in the human side of the news. Informal discussions with them were encouraging, suggesting they might begin to read the news on their own.

### **Reflection, areas for improvement, and conclusions**

By researching the students' end-of-the-semester impressions, I better understand how they viewed their L2 learning and classroom experiences, and I, as the instructor, can focus on improving classroom procedures and the course material. Although informal discussions with students and observations of the student discussions every week led me to feel all of the students had regularly gained knowledge about each of the three countries, 10 students perceived no increase in their understanding of any of the countries. It is possible that the students did not have growth or that they did not recognize it. Consequently, there is a need to help students realize and remember their weekly discoveries. The next time this course is given, at the end of each class students will have time to write a short journal entry reflecting on the things that surprised them, the facts they did not previously know, and the ways their thoughts changed. A few students will then share their reflections with the class.

After conducting this research, I realized that more pre-semester and post-semester

measurements would have been helpful. For example, additional questionnaire items and short essays to elicit students' knowledge of the three countries at the beginning and end of the semester might have provided a complementary measure of the amount of cultural learning that occurred. In addition, for the three questionnaire items about the countries, the students will be asked to explain their choices on the Likert scale. This will provide insight into any lack of perceived learning. A combination of data from the questionnaires and essays, interviews, informal discussions with students, and teacher observations of the classes will better demonstrate student learning.

The students struggled with the South African articles much more than with those from South Korea or Japan. Because the next group of learners may have different interests, a questionnaire and discussion at the beginning of the semester will allow us, as a class, to select the three countries from which news articles will be selected. To assist students if South Africa is again chosen as one of the countries, more background information, history, and culture will be included each week. In addition, letters from a former colleague who was living with local residents and working on AIDS education as she counseled children in South Africa will be used.

The goal to increase students' awareness of the legitimacy of other varieties of English was not achieved to the degree anticipated. Reflecting on the sheer volume of cultural learning, compounded with the difficulty in simply and clearly conveying ideas in the L2, varieties of English may have been outside the scope of this course. Consequently, the goal will be adjusted to a more realistic one, an indirect increase in awareness of varieties of English. This will be accomplished by continuing to point out different phrasing and vocabulary that are unique to South African and South Korean English varieties.

This study has demonstrated many successes, all of which are necessary for Japanese English-language majors. Japanese students are rarely considered self-directed learners, but

students in this course developed the ability to analyze news stories, a skill they did not have at the beginning of the course. This is an important step toward becoming self-directed learners. Furthermore, the Japanese are not only criticized for their lack of communicative ability but also for their lack of knowledge about others around the world. This research has demonstrated that retelling newspaper stories was a good method for allowing students to use their L2 while at the same time helping them to become more aware of and interested in other countries. The study has also suggested areas for improving the course material, and I look forward to using these results to provide an even better course for the students.

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## **Appendix A**

### Sources of Newspaper Articles

#### South Korea

JoongAng Daily <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/>

The Korea Herald <http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/index.asp>

The Korea Times <http://times.hankooki.com/>

#### South Africa

Daily News <http://www.dailynews.co.za/index.php>

Dispatch <http://www.dispatch.co.za>

IOL <http://www.iol.co.za/index.php>

#### Japan

The Daily Yomiuri <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/>

The Japan Times <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/>

The Kyodo News <http://home.kyodo.co.jp/>

## Appendix B

### Portions of End-of-the-semester Questionnaire Discussed in This Study

4. Did this class help to improve the organization of your thoughts?

not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes a lot

5. Did this class help to improve your ability to retell a story?

not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes a lot

7. Did you gain a better understanding of South Korea and the people?

not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes a lot

8. Did you gain a better understanding of South Africa and the people?

not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes a lot

9. Did you gain a better understanding of Japan?

not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes a lot

13. Would you recommend this class to other students? **Yes** **No**

Comment Why: