

Professional Development Trends in Japan

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日本における職能開発の動向

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Abstract

Using the Language Institute of Japan's summer program for high-school language teachers as a reference point, the article identifies three major trends that characterize current professional development in Japan.

Key words : professional development, vocabulary, communicative activities, language-culture links

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抄 録

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Held in Odawara, Kanagawa Prefecture since 1969, the Language Institute of Japan is perhaps the most venerable of Japanese teacher-training programs. Though it has undergone several changes in the 36 years of its existence, this intensive residential program remains a bellwether for interested observers who care to investigate the current focus among teachers who seek professional development. The program consists of an intensive English-only week of core lectures, plus associated classes, workshops, seminars and presentations, at a residential center where participants and lecturers live and work in close quarters for the whole time.

Using LIOJ's own local staff, who are typically foreign-born native or highly proficient speakers of English, invited lecturers from all over Japan, plus invited presenters from various international Anglophone settings (India, Singapore, Canada, Britain, Australia, Sri Lanka and other such countries have been represented among the Institute's invited faculty in recent years), the Institute offers an unparalleled chance for the Japanese high-school instructor of English to have a concentrated pedagogical, linguistic and social experience of exceptional quality.

As a participant in the summer of 2005, I anticipated working with teachers who would be stimulating and interesting colleagues. That expectation was more than fulfilled. I also looked forward to getting a bird's-eye view, as it were, of where professional development among English teachers in Japan is currently heading. Three major trends that are 'in the air' for teachers in these post-bubble, mid-reform days of language education can be identified from this year's course. The trends can be described as follows, keeping in mind the standard caveat that like most simple-appearing taxonomies, the labels tend to be primarily for the convenience of the writer and reader:

1. Vocabulary

If the watchword of real-estate is 'location, location, location,' the buzz in EFL, a bit more than a decade after Lewis' groundbreaking work appeared (Lewis, 1993), is 'lexicon, lexicon, lexicon.' In the wake of Paul Nation's plenary address about the importance of both autonomous and integrated vocabulary study for language learners at the international TESOL conference in March, 2005 (Nation, 2005), several trainers at LIOJ (now officially known as LIOJ-II to reflect recent administrative restructuring) focused on ways of teaching, developing and incorporating vocabulary study into EFL. One core course, "Some Ways to Increase Your Vocabulary," taught by renowned teacher trainer Alan Maley, formerly of the British Council and now an independent writer and consultant based in the UK, was designed to help the teacher develop his or her own vocabulary while disseminating ideas for teaching lower-level learners as well. Reflecting the growing dependence of vocabulary research and pedagogy on computer corpora, Maley introduced techniques for exploring a corpus for self-study and lesson preparation, though traditional

paper learners' dictionaries were not ignored. Clearly, computer literacy is a *sine qua non* for language teachers in Japan now. Other courses included vocabulary development in the context of pedagogically fashionable approaches such as communicative activities and story-telling. Judging by teacher reaction to these courses, a continuing focus on vocabulary is welcome: while teachers are aware of the strong link between self-expression in the L2 and the lexical richness of English in particular, it can be hard to find appropriate methods for introducing in-depth vocabulary study to the already full schedules of most high-school English instruction. Integration of vocabulary twinned with intensive word-study appears to be the direction for the near future.

2. Adapting Communicative Activities for Large Groups

To quote a participant, 'It used to be that my school insisted that we use games and other such activities only on Friday afternoons or when we had an extra ten minutes to fill at the end of a class. Now the school requires us to incorporate games and contests into every lesson.' Many of the participants in this summer's LIOJ program were exploring the challenges of coping with structural change at their institutions and how those changes interacted with perceived needs for individual development. It is a truism of long standing that Japan as a society wants to improve the functionality of its English language education; the Ministry of Education hopes to see better practical command of English—especially as reflected in TOEIC scores—become widespread among young learners. LIOJ participants embodied the contemporary attempt to make English a tool for both professional and pedagogical growth. Core sessions reflected the need to adapt teaching methods to the reality of large classes and mixed proficiencies, which most teachers in Japan face on a daily basis. For example, one class, entitled "Communicative Activities for Large Classes," exemplified techniques useful for teachers who want to follow the set curriculum but also hope to improve the interactional abilities of their learners. In general, every session included suggestions for increasing the interactive elements of an activity, even if its primary focus was elsewhere. As the quote above illustrates, however, teachers today face the tricky question of how to respond to several conflicting trends—more interaction but also higher test scores—that characterize English language pedagogy in today's Japan.

3. The Language-culture Link

With one core course and several short-term sessions devoted to the relationship of language and culture, intercultural communication and understanding, and specific cross-cultural issues such as cuisine, school system reform, and literature, culture was never far from the conversational arena this year at LIOJ. Drama, food, films, story-telling, dialect study, psychology, and the internet were all explored as sources and vehicles of cultural awareness. Specific courses about inter-Asian understanding, Thai culture, British cuisine

and American humor were popular among this set of well-traveled and globally-minded participants. Professional, as well as personal, opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, peace education, and engagement with global issues seems to be the hallmark of teacher development in today's Japan. Many of the participants either had traveled, or planned to travel, not only to English-speaking countries, but also to neighboring Asian countries where the complex entanglements of culture, history, language, and education continue to be delicately deconstructed. One lecturer on the course has been involved in global youth exchanges for many years, and his insights into peace-building measures were nicely balanced by a younger lecturer's training in storytelling as a way to promote peace and peace education.

Were there any surprises in my findings? Given the exponential increase in computer usage in school and university classrooms all over Japan, it was in some ways unexpected to find that that computer-assisted language learning was given relatively short shrift at LIOJ, though of course there were several offerings that either referenced or depended upon computer use. The aforementioned venerability of the program, the fact that the attending population tends to cover a wide range of ages and levels of experience, perhaps tilting to the higher reaches of the range, and the fact that the attraction of LIOJ for many participants is the chance to talk with, listen to, learn from and observe people—not machines—all converged, most probably, to limit the focus on CALL.

Indeed, one of the great pleasures of the week-long program—for both faculty and participants—has always been the intensely human side of teaching, learning, eating, relaxing, and socializing with people from other age groups, professional contexts, backgrounds, prefectures, and countries. As the demographics of Japan alter sharply in the coming years, as the economy shrinks, as international travel, the Internet, increased tourism, and all the other factors that are already changing the face of language learning here continue their inexorable forward march, and as other programs expand their offerings to teachers around the country, it is inevitable that LIOJ will continue to evolve and perhaps lessen its impact on pedagogy in this notoriously challenging national context.

However, given that some of this year's participants were in their fourth, tenth, even fifteenth year of participation; given that the LIOJ name continues to represent cutting-edge professional development opportunities to the working language teacher; and given that nothing, in the end, beats sitting down in a room with a small, highly-motivated, intensely interested group of learner/teachers, there is every hope that the answers to the questions raised at LIOJ will continue to be explored in meaningful ways at that program, and at many other professional venues around Japan in the coming months and years.

References

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