

NOTE

Reflections on Spirituality : English Academic Writing for Non-Native Students

C. Linden-Thorp

Faculty of Liberal Arts
Department of English

Introduction

This short essay does not in any way pretend to be an academic analysis. It has unquestionably broad vision, makes attempts to be interdisciplinary, and consists of a number of reflections and initial impressions of an English Language teacher newly arrived in Japan. The reader therefore may expect there to be anecdotal-like qualities conveyed by the strong and sincere presence of the author, quite unlike an academic exposition based on research findings with all its necessary objectivity. It has been inspired by the two following central ideas. Firstly, a mixture of surprise and curiosity at the differences between British/European University classrooms and those of Japan, and in that respect it represents a sketchy portrayal, due to the necessary brevity of this piece, of the direct experience of the author; the impressions and observations of a teacher of long and varied experience, it is hoped, are both of interest and use. And secondly, by a conviction that educators need to be aware of the whole learner, be in

contact with three dimensions and not less of their charges; thus the title of this essay makes reference to the human "spirit." Unfortunately, this word and its derivatives seem to mark out territory where angels fear to tread in academic terms, but as Daisetz Suzuki, one of Japan's foremost thinkers says, "Spirituality may appear to be a faint and shadowy concept, but there is nothing more deeply rooted in the earth, for spirituality is life itself." (Suzuki, p-43). It is certainly a word which figures large in humanistic views of education.

One could assert that it is the spirit or "life" of students which fuels their motivation to study in the first place, and therefore the history of Japanese spirituality combined with that of education here which can perhaps inform educators further, giving them insight into the current enervation in English-medium classes. Indeed, it does seem to be the case that a "Reinspiring" of "Japanese Educational Objectives," a formidable task to be undertaken, (Wada, title of article-see bibliography-"Reinspiring of Japanese Education Objectives.") is important at the time of writing, ie the first decade of the twenty-first century, especially in English-medium classrooms in Japan. How-

ever, it is important to state that the high level of concern for the welfare and success of students amongst colleagues is both moving, admirable and in plentiful supply. Finally, it is the search for clarity and understanding of the situation, and not criticism, which is the driving force behind this paper.

On a more prosaic note, of course the development of all four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking is important in any foreign language classroom, but for the purposes of this discourse, the skill of writing academic English for the non-native student of Japan, or more specifically of preparing to write in this genre, comes into focus, though briefly. Without doubt, essay or thesis writing in a language which is not native presents often insurmountable problems, being a specialised skill even in a mother tongue. Moreover, it is hoped that in time further research will be undertaken by the author which brings all these strands together. Finally, although this introduction aims to be as objective as possible in order to give perspective to the subject matter, the use of the first person is inevitable from this point onwards. As the author is relatively newly arrived from the United Kingdom overt comparisons between west and east are perhaps inevitable, as are those between teaching English in the country of the target language and a country where the language is not so. It is sincerely hoped that no charges of “Orientalism” can be brought, and that any naivety may be forgiven.

Note : Inhabitants of the islands of Japan will be referred to as “Japanese” and not “Asian” or “Oriental.” According to the New Oxford Dictionary of English 2003 (p 1241) in a note referring to the entry “Oriental,” “Asian”

tends to be used in American English, though in British English it can refer to the inhabitants of India and Asia, and “Oriental” “tends to be associated with a rather offensive stereotype and so has declined in common usage. As the author is British, and as this essay concerns only the Japanese situation, the specific adjective will be employed throughout.

Context and background

The notion that culture and language are inseparable is well researched and established, but it is very rare that one can get the opportunity to measure and observe this reality at close range. Since arriving in Kyoto 9 months ago to take up an associate professor position in the English Department at the well-respected Doshisha Women’s College, I have become well aware of the challenges which face English education in Japan both at first hand in the university level classroom, and whilst observing in public and private High Schools in the area, and through the informed views of both students and colleagues. It is true that first impressions can be insightful and at the same time wildly inaccurate if one jumps to conclusions ; however, in this case, given my long and varied teaching experience, a good deal of which has been working with visiting Asian and Japanese students in a tertiary setting in the European Union, I feel that I have the potential to be the former. Indeed, I have worked with many Japanese students at undergraduate and postgraduate level in Britain and France intermittently during the last 20 years where the target culture of their second/foreign language is readily available to provide numerous opportunities for practice and reinforcement. Naturally,

cultural adjustment for these students is often difficult, but they are highly motivated, and invariably successful and assiduous in all they undertake.

Now, it has become so strikingly apparent exactly to what extent culture is essential to the promotion of language learning as I observe the progress of the students I have fairly close contact with here in Japan. The national character traits I have become familiar with in my contact with Japanese nationals in Europe are present here in Japan, but in a greatly exaggerated form. "Perfectionism," as it might be called, which can be subdued or modified in order to adapt to western culture, and endearing shyness, which eventually passes of cultural necessity, here seem to become a paralysis, almost a type of defeatism. Unfortunately both of these characteristics make the teacher/learner relationship very unbalanced because students have little confidence in the classroom which is run by a native speaker, and in addition do not seem able to take risks in front of their peers. It would appear that an aggressively demanding performance is required of students who manifest all the symptoms of classic stage fright, and in addition that students seem to realise the inadequacy of their preparation, the paucity of their rehearsals. The result is a stilted atmosphere with little interaction in which the native speaker teacher may be tempted to make the whole educational experience teacher-dominated and therefore inappropriate for the modern English as a second language classroom, where the communicative approach has been favoured for some time now. It is clear that deep changes are needed in the attitude to academic study, in respect of all four skills, ie. reading, writing speaking and

listening, but in this short exploratory paper, which as clearly stated at the outset is a synthesis of serious and informed thinking and inter-disciplinary vistas, I will confine my thinking to academic writing as suggested in the title, an area of learning which I have given the greatest attention to in recent years in the context of Academic Study skills both at under and post-graduate level.

Writing it would seem is a solitary activity for those proficient in writing in their native language, and therefore for the foreign writer of English indeed a potential ordeal. There are many reasons for the latter: the need to form strong opinions which can be clearly presented and addressed to a blank page; the complexities of genre and protocol; the lack of external support or encouragement during the act of writing; and the establishment of a fluent "voice" which speaks into the silence of the individual mind or nature. Furthermore, the requirements of the foreign writer of academic English are considerable in terms of the following: formulae and etiquette; style and voice, and therein implied both humility and caution; the intricacies of the secreting of the so-called "objective" and anonymous author; and the pressing necessity to be a perfect guide, briefing and making provision for the reader's journey. These are but a few of the wide-ranging aspects of the art of academic essay writing in English, and it is impossible within the scope of the present paper to go into depth regarding each of these. However, it is certain that they are all made possible through the confidence gained from persistent drafting and re-drafting after rigorous correction, and from intensive experience of the use of the target

language, of register, writing for diverse audiences, and of course all this to be accompanied by constant and close reading of academic texts, the target genre.

It has been said that a skilfully written essay must encompass the world. In my view this genre presents a unique opportunity to consolidate what is known about the subject area in question, to appraise, to comment, and ultimately to talk to an audience using a well-developed formula. These are formidable linguistic skills difficult if not impossible for most foreigners to achieve. It is my experience that in order to promote and encourage such skills general more global approaches to thinking should be encouraged at the outset. It is certain that this initial, what is frequently called “brainstorming” stage of the process of the composition of essays needs to be consciously taught to foreign students, and seemingly students from Japan struggle hard and fast at this very crucial stage. Of course, in order to actually write the essay in terms of mechanics the following are assumed: sound sentence and paragraph structure; accurate grammar; an extensive and adaptable repertoire of vocabulary; and the ability to move discursively between macro and micro positions in regard of the thesis of the essay. Again, within this essay it is not possible to elaborate further.

It is, then, the motivation and the attitudes of my present students to writing such artful essays in a foreign or second language which I hope to address here. I write obviously from the point of view of an experienced and suitably qualified English Language Teaching professional, but not only that. I have for many years had strong interests in religion and spirituality and

their place in general education, and especially those of the Buddhist discipline. The mounting concern for the present apathy among university level students of English language educators in Japan provides the perfect platform on which to combine all of my interests in the foreign learner as a whole entity.

At this present time the majority of my sources for this essay are specific rather than wide-ranging. However, as will become quickly obvious, my wide reading and study, some of which is referenced, will provide a consistent back-lighting to the objects under the lens. Of the four works which have been held in close focus to enable such depth of thought, three are written by Japanese scholars, two of them in translation. The remaining work is an eclectic volume written recently by two American educators. They are as follows in no particular order of priority:

1. “Reinspiring Japanese Educational Objectives,” Shuji Wada, *Peabody Journal of Education*, Volume 68. Issue 4. Publication Year: 1993, pp. 76–87
2. “The True Heart of Buddhism,” Hideo Yonezawa, originally published as “Shukyoshin no mezame koso” (The Awakening of Religious Aspiration,) in *Gekkan Mamizu* 5, 6 (1982), pp. 30–35. Translated into English by Tsuneo Kamimoto and Rev. Bunsho Higuchi (Horyuji Temple), and edited by Shinya Yasutomi (Lecturer, Otani University) and Wayne Yokoyama.
3. “Japanese Spirituality,” Daisetz Suzuki, Greenwood Press, 1972, translated by Norman Waddell and compiled by the Japanese National Commission for

Unesco.

4. "The Foreign Language Educator in Society : Toward a Critical Pedagogy. Contributors : Osborn, Terry A and Reagan, Timothy G. Publisher Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, pp. 22–31.

Modern Japanese Education : a brief summary

The way in which the system of education has developed in Japan during the last 150 years is unique. Rapid industrialisation and modernising inspired by European models has created a number of interesting problems. It might be said that the Meiji government creamed off the scientific and technical aspects of Western knowledge and thought, at the same time as kicking away any spiritual supports which Christianity had given to rationalism in Europe. Later, post-war education under American occupation, was radically changed, the goal being "to create a peaceful, cultured nation and to make the development of democratic personalities the objective of national education." (Wada, p-78) In brief, the result of these dramatic measures was effectively an emotional and intellectual sterilisation, especially of the youth of Japan. Thus, Japanese cultural, moral and ethical values were forced underground, and all energies channelled into the race towards becoming a world-class economy. In my understanding it seems that a whole nation galvanised itself into scientific and technical advancement, and, perhaps tragically, the leaders were convinced that this would equal optimal human progress. Of course, this scenario is not unique to Japan in itself and seems to have prevailed in all industrialised nations to a greater or lesser extent, but in

Japan it is as if the people were forced to adopt economic achievement as their new faith in such a way that natural religious inclinations were flushed away, and especially those of Buddhism, one of the foremost organised religions from the beginnings of recorded "state" education.

"There are few if any who understand the true meaning of Buddhism these days. As a result, the average Japanese citizen has set religion apart from himself or herself." (Yonezawa, p-2)

This cri-de-coeur by a committed and perceptive Japanese educator is telling. Of course, this current religious dysfunction is common in countries where Christianity prevails, but with the adoption of Zen, "There appears to be an essential rapport between Zen and the Japanese character," (Suzuki, p-46) and the consequent national perfusion of spirituality for which Japan is so famous, the displacement of faith is perhaps more disquieting.

This history is perhaps partly responsible for and certainly relative to the current apathy and disaffection evident in the classrooms I frequent today. It is as if students who major in English are unable to become involved in their own education. "Representative problems" of the race to economic supremacy, "are apathy, disinterest, and irresponsibility, reflecting the increasingly passive and uninvolved attitude of children." (Wada, p-79) They remain silent when asked questions, shying away from any danger of standing out from their classmates, although in a one-to-one situation it is clear that they are often well-able and equipped to propose answers. They often

seem unable to think about their futures, and worse, lack real motivation to study. In the apposite observations of Shuji Wada, “the early adoption of scientific and rationalist thought by youths seems to block their creative thinking.” (p-81). He also points out more pragmatic reasons for this unease amongst Japanese learners, referring to busy parents, driven by economic endeavours, who potentially neglect their children. Also that “That lack of calm can be attributed to the loss of viewpoint or beliefs which help people see beyond their own situations or to think about the future.” (p-80). In addition, as a consequence, that juvenile delinquency is becoming more common.

Establishing a New Buddhist-Inspired Philosophy of Education : Three Foundations

Shuji Wada, Professor of Education at Kyoto University, in his provocative essay on Japanese Educational objectives, suggests strongly that traditional Buddhist philosophy is the way forward.

“If... we critically examine Buddhism and work to realise it in our lives and society, it can help guide us to re-establish the dignity of our teachers and to provide our children with a spiritual foundation – the foundation they need to grow into vibrant adults capable of supporting an interdependent national and international society.” (pp. 85).

He puts forward three very clear objectives to enable this, here summarised :

Firstly, “to reform our educational ideals to acknowledge the interdependence

and shared responsibilities of individual existences.” (p-85) He goes on to propose that living fully as a human being is only possible by intensifying the dialogue between ourselves and the world around us. That it is crucial that educators work to restore the values and beliefs first in themselves and thus in their students which have been buried. In my view, this is key, and is especially important in terms of academic writing. It is each unique view of the world which it is essential first to recognise, and then learn to express using the elegant structure of the discursive essay.

Secondly, “to spread an appreciation for the benefits of educational training to all fields.” (p-86) Training, in the universal sense, implies the idea that more responsibility needs to be taken for learning by the individuals themselves. There is certainly a great need for independent learning within current systems in Japan, and recently the concept of lifelong-learning so fashionable in Britain is beginning to attract interest. In wider Buddhist terms this means the universal values of goodness and fairness should be spread; in other words, that human values and emotions be respected again as they once were.

Thirdly, and perhaps the objective to be the most stressed in Wada’s view, is “to provide guaranteed times and places for teachers themselves to acquire their own grasp of the holistic tasks and goals which they should pursue as educators.” (p-87). In other words, that the spiritual and religious well-being of teachers is precious, and crucial to the positive aspects of education in general.

I personally find great optimism in these ideas, all of which point so definitely

to the human element of education which has become temporarily obscured by the incredible though egotistical drive towards excellence in technological and commercial domains. It is the reestablishment of the feeling, caring individual, always concerned for others, who is motivated by non-materialistic concerns, which I look forward to in my classrooms. The beginnings of the emergence of such qualities can be seen in some of the brave essays I mark. The inspiration to look outside of oneself can be found during the process of reflecting upon the ideas of others and assessing one's position in respect to those reflections, an essential for successful academic writing, and to living in the world in a truly altruistic way. Dr Yonezawa expresses the same sentiment in stronger words: "the awakening of religious aspiration marks the beginning of our true education by which we can come to know our true self." (p-7) When attempting to comprehend student violence, suicide and murder he rails, "Critics will blame home, school, and society for the present deteriorating situation, but I am unconvinced. In my opinion the fault lies in the total disregard for the Buddhist religion." (p-3) In my view, coming from a non-Buddhist country and being strongly and completely in tune with the Buddhist foundations of life, it would seem that a re-inspiring of these values amongst the young Japanese of today would be natural and proper. In addition, my own departure from the materialist roots into which I was born, impassions me to have the young people presently in my care experience some distancing from the desire for material things, the outcome of "the valuing of economic achievement in daily life," along with "scientism in education," which as

Wada says "may be said to be the hidden common faith of the Japanese." (p-79)

Reflection ; learning from within

A major Buddhist belief is that inside each of us there is a priceless jewel which, through misguided ways of living or negative karma, can become dirty, its lustre hidden beneath impurities and ignorance. In addition, that all the people in our lives are reflections of ourselves which can be more clearly seen in clean reflective surfaces. If we look deeply and carefully enough, reflecting without the influence of the ego, we can see that they are not separate from us, and that they have the same defilements and flaws as we do. Reflection is something which can help us to polish both the jewel within, otherwise known as "human potential" or "innate goodness," and the external mirror so that we can go beyond ignorance, or "unconscious incompetence" (Maslow's Hierarchies, 1962) This is the connection between what is to be learned and the learning; in other words the integration of the outside and the inside. It is perhaps useful here to consider the image of the permeable human skin, with its 84.000 pores, being the only thing to separate our insides from the outside; thus our unique energy can quite easily flow through it and mingle with other energy. However, it must be said that none of this is achievable without direct knowing about the notion of impermanence, and that somehow, we, both learners and teachers, have to recognise that wisdom can be found in our uniqueness, and that the manner in which our individual energies behave in the world is pertinent to human happiness and fulfilment.

So, reflection is defined as ;

“the throwing back by a body or surface of light, heat, or sound without absorbing it : the reflection of light.” (1)

Compare the above dictionary definition with the following :

“the bee gathers nectar from the flower without marring its beauty or perfume” (3-p15)

If one reflects gently on these two quotations it is possible to grasp the difference between thinking and reflecting. But before going on to tease out the meanings from such a reflection it is important to outline what is entailed in such a process. Consider the images below :



reader  subject

Imagine a reader surveying each of the two quotations above, mulling over the actual words in order to really assimilate the meanings, to create pictures or patterns which are meaningful to that person. It is as if one is using a magnifying glass to look closely, and then the glass is put aside and one looks from a distance. This means resting, taking space and time, just quietly watching and resisting jumping into the gap which “thinking” does without thinking! Then, once detached, because it is crucial to realise that nothing of this is permanent or is capable of being possessed, the reader rises up a little and brings the mind to those ideas again, this time with a different kind of glass which is conscious of the implications

of this view for living and love and humanity. Again, this is done slowly, allowing space to open the mind and encourage it to breathe in these possibilities, these notions. Once again the mind rises up high to see how these ideas or fragments of ideas fit with the title of the work they are illustrating, with the other main ideas, with feelings and opinions, with the reader’s unique experience. In this non-aggressive way, by resisting finding a cure or solution or clever repost, in other words by tying the hands of the ego, little by little, these notions will become integrated with the reader’s inner world.

This process is a deep listening which changes reactive conditioned behaviour to a leisurely surveying or gazing. For the writer, this must ultimately be a place or an occasion of trust and belief which is placed primarily in the reader. It is as if, like the bee or the humming bird in the above quotation, the reader borrows or hovers around the idea in focus, and at just the appropriate moment, takes a miniscule drop of nectar from the flower. If the reader “thinks,” the ego wants to tightly grasp both the bird or bee and the flower and squeeze them into a desired state. On the other hand, the reflection of these notions is retuned to its source without being absorbed or stored away so that it can be transformed, or re-made and labelled. We cannot fix anything in a permanent place but only play with it and then return it to its source, or, in other words, give it back.

By contrast then, thinking as opposed to reflecting, is perhaps a kind of doing, of digging deeply for knowledge which has in some way been buried by the intellect, and then is appropriated or one’s mark made on

it in some way. Conversely, reflecting is allied to gazing or listening ; it is not acquisitive or end-gaining, the latter being a notion brought into existence by F. M. Alexander to represent grasping at results. (4). We may share our reflections generously with others, whereas the products of thinking may lead to the desire for “intellectual property” rites, for example. Reflection, on the other hand, does not disturb the earth and try to create something from nothing. It is more subtle and entails stillness, a fine, almost imperceptible hovering like the bee, after which a minute drop of insight may occur, or not. Reflection implies that all we need is present and that only a polished mirror is required in order to see it, to glimpse it. It is perhaps a kind of “seeing” inside the heart to make contact with our Buddha nature or wisdom, unlike thinking which concerns almost exclusively the end-product and how it compares and measures up to other products, a kind of standing on other people’s shoulders in order to find the most excellent. This constitutes delusion or distortion. If we truly admit that we are each unique what is the point of comparing?

So, reflection is the only real way that we are able to know the Dharma or Cosmic law respected by Buddhists ; we must acknowledge that it is already inside us, passing easily through the thin membrane of the skin, because we are all part of the law of the universe. Clearly, the act of listening is much more akin to faith and belief and the subtle energy of the universe. But perhaps it is easy to see that “thinking” has no place in this context? Indeed, I question its usefulness in the living of fully human lives at all. Precious insight undoubtedly creates

wisdom and integrity, but the eye, or the “I” or ego, always leads one away from the heart. It takes the ear to bring one back into the very centre of it.

Through a number of different means it is possible to learn how to learn and teach in a reflective way ; but these means pertain to life experience rather than to textbooks or traditional educational modes. In my case, through travel and study in different cultures, through work as a music therapist with learning and physically disabled people, through dealing with the intense stress, disease and even suicide that those engaged in fiercely competitive education can find themselves enveloped in, and the concentrated practice and attention to minute detail as a professional musician, I came to understand that there must be other routes for education. These life situations are to my thinking the universities humanity needs to make more use of, and this approach is without doubt my preferred way so I am eager to disseminate it.

Reflective Learning : the practice

To return briefly to this idea of promoting reflective learning in the English Language classroom, it is essential to encourage students to bring their ideas out. After giving a presentation of the area of knowledge, it is important to encourage students to generate ideas. Work in small groups seems the ideal way to inspire this, and given sufficient time, students do eventually start to reflect on their ideas. However, this is not easily accomplished at first. It seems that gradually students gather together grains of faith both in the native English teacher, in their peers and then finally in themselves. It is also important to stimulate

a playful attitude to this process. Mind maps which use non-linear diagrammatic means, colours and shapes, and allow a large number of ideas to be represented all in one place on one page so that they are easily surveyed is liberating for students. This “doodling” or playing with their ideas mixed with those of others seems to initiate reflection, and so leads on to a liveliness of mind and ultimately stimulation. In no time, the dirty mirror is cleaned and is able to reflect the mind and the qualities of the individual. It is inspiring to consider the approach to reflection of the great minds of our time; for example, Albert Einstein, the theoretical physicist, spent much of his time in a state of what he called “vague play” and dreamlike states prior to the birth of a theory.

Next, ideas can be moulded and organised into the strong formulae of the structured discursive essay. As mentioned above, this first stage of an essay is the most crucial. The rest is merely a matter of mechanics which can be relatively easily learned if taught well.

Conclusion

In the broader picture, we need both enlightened goals and quieter objectives which nestle inside us waiting to be coaxed into the open, and which are part of us pointing to real development as balanced people; essentially goals which allow us to

come to understand our own minds and their ignorance and defilements. In essence, all education is about learning about oneself and how to let the masks of ignorance and envy and greed fall away. Naturally, this is more evident in specifically spiritual education, but in the intellectual model, e. g. knowing one's learning strategy, the style of assimilating the target information, one's fears or blind spots, understanding the true motivation for following a particular path of study, and generally being self-honest, all are effective ways to move away the blocks to learning and therefore to negativity. We need objectives and approaches which allow us to be able to be clear, to be in close contact with our pure nature, to understand exactly how to polish the gem within! In short, we need to educate directly from the sincere altruistic place of the heart, and it is my contention that reflective education is one way of ensuring that.

General References :

- (1) The New Oxford English Dictionary, 2003-“reflection”
- (2) “The True Heart of Buddhism,” Hideo Yonezawa, orig. published in *Gekkan Mamjzu* 5, 6 (1982), pp. 30-35
- (3) The Dhammapada, Shambala Press (1989)
- (4) “Man's Supreme Inheritance,” F. M. Alexander, Mouritz, (1918)