NUFS Workshop 2014

Newsletter No. 10

Workshop in February

<Part 1 >

Date: February 21, 2015, 10:30-14:00
Venue: NSC College, Building Minami, Room A-31
Presenter: Junko Yamanaka
(Chukyo University, Aichi Gakuin University)
Title: "Developing Critical Thinking and Language Skills"

Abstract: In today's world there are heaps of problems humans face that need to be attacked and solved. We, residents of this planet, have to put our brains together and work collaboratively. Language teachers play important roles here. We train and help students communicate with other residents of the planet. We can also provide opportunities in which students become aware of important issues, think deeply to make judgments, and express them. There are reasons why language teachers in Japan should try both – developing students' critical thinking and language skills at the same time, and yes, we can do it.

The number of participants: 36

1. Interesting activities you might want to use in your class. Why?

- All activities were very authentic. When I think about the reason why we teach English, we are teaching not only a language itself but also something students need to learn as a person. Critical thinking activities give them a chance to think about a certain topic deeply and express their opinion.
- I'd like to use content-based approach: as Input, (1)give students background knowledge both first and second language, (2)show sample opinions/reasons, and (3)give basic key words and phrases: as Output, (4)pair or group work, (5)essay or compositions, and for the next class, (6) error correction or feedback.
- I was interested in the activities that we walked around and exchanged opinions each other. Pictures can help us understand and I think students would get more interested in the worksheet with pictures.
- With using easy English, we can fill the gap between their own linguistic level and intellectual level. That's because people usually try to use to fancy words to express their smartness, but the important and smart thing to be evaluated is to show the idea with their words that everyone can understand.

- Actually I'm nervous to ask students about their opinions because they may say 'I don't know' or 'I don't have any opinion' and so on. They don't like to stand out. But I'd like to try from easy questions like a topic 'Do you agree with green hair?'
- After listening to CDs or videos we filled in the blanks with right words from a word list to check how much we understood each interview. I think I might use this activity in my class because students can make sure how much they could understand what they listened to.
- I'd like to use the activity with the guy whose hair is green. I find it interesting and fun for my students to talk about fashion or how their appearances affect their job hunting.

2. What you learned from today's workshop

- Discussion in the classroom is very important. I would like to give my students more chances to speak English. First, I have to choose content.
- I learned that there're times when there isn't an absolutely right or wrong answer to the situation. We should set ourselves to be open to different situation whereby unexpected things would occur.
- Critical thinking is a good factor to lead the students to paying more attention to the communication in English. With the critical thinking approach, the goal of communication would be clearly described.
- I really liked this approach because the communication is authentic. Japanese students should have more opportunity to have and express their opinions. It was great to know that we, English teachers, can do this and beginners can do this kind of activities, too.
- I thought that I can use the idea of critical thinking in my class when we do input activity. It is a bit hard for JHS students to say their opinion freely in English, but I'm sure it definitely stimulates students thinking or ideas and they'll have solid time in English class.

- At first I thought 'critical thinking' is too difficult for junior high school students, but now I know easy approaches for it. For the beginners, to ask 'Do you agree?' will be enough.

3. Questions and Answers

Q (1): Do you really use 'Impact Topics' textbook to students of Eiken 3rd level? I think the book level is a way too high. I think it's Eiken 2nd level.

A: I think *Impact Topics* is roughly between Eiken 3rd and pre-2nd. I have used this textbook for remedial (再履修) writing classes in a University General Education course (一般教養) . Majority of students there were at Eiken 3rd level or much lower. They had failed English courses because of their low language proficiency. In my class they had to listen, read and comprehend the text first, and then write an essay expressing their opinions. Even though I do not usually do this with English majors, but for this class, in each lesson at one point I quickly translated the text (plus the sample opinions) into Japanese to make sure the meaning was clear to them. This was the type of scaffolding they needed. Other than that, we followed the textbook doing the activities in it. They were able to use the text's vocabulary and expressions for their pair works and essay writing. They were also allowed to use dictionaries, or the teacher as a walking dictionary! With a lot of help from the textbook (and the

teacher), they expressed opinions that were authentic and often unique, and I enjoyed reading their essays. They understood each issue clearly and they were motivated to write.

Q (2): Sometimes my students don't have enough vocabulary to express their opinions. How can I give them chances to speak in English? I want to learn more about 'scaffolding'.

A: If your students do not have enough vocabulary for output, do give them support. For example, before students talk in pairs or groups, give them a chance to ask you "How do you say _____ in English?" Write the English words or expressions on the board. Students then exchange opinions, when they can look at the board for vocabulary support if needed. They should be able to ask you such questions during the activity, too. Later they can copy what's on the board onto their notebooks for reviewing.

You could, of course, prepare something in advance, such as "important words and phrases for today's topic", which you could distribute and go over before opinion exchanges or discussion.

You could prepare sample opinions like I introduced in the workshop, so that students could use them (or parts of them) as they express their opinions. This way they get help for both vocabulary and expressions and are able to express their opinions without anxiety or frustration.

Q (3): I've seen many teachers who dislike this approach because it "allows students to make mistakes." I think that's a shame because mistakes are necessary for learning, especially if communication is the goal. What would you say to teachers who insist on accuracy as a goal?

A: I think that's a shame too! I believe Japanese students need absolutely more fluency training and much more comprehensible input in order to enhance accuracy. Let's see….I would say to such teachers: "In this approach, chances of students learning new vocabulary and expressions can exceed their chances of making mistakes". Also, I would point out: "In this approach you will have more chances of correcting students' mistakes during output activities. So why miss the chance? You can observe pair or group works, detect mistakes, and then give feedbacks. Or, you can make students recall what they said in the activities and write them on paper. You can correct their mistakes later. Therefore, allowing students to make mistakes is good because it means more error detection and correction chances on the teacher's part, to help students enhance accuracy".

To be honest, I do not believe that accuracy can be best attained by error correction per se. However, you need to be strategic to deal with such teachers!

Q (4): Are there any good ways to assess students' CT skills?

A: One of the CT skills, 'differentiating facts and opinions', can be assessed rather easily, which I will explain in the answer to Question 6. Also, students' CT attitudes or awareness can be assessed through questionnaires. You could ask them:

1. Did you understand the issue clearly?
2. Did you have chances to think about it deeply?
3. Were you able to form your own opinions?
4. Did you enjoy exchanging opinions with your classmates?
5. How did you feel when your classmate had a different opinion from yours?
6. Did you have any new findings or awareness about this issue?

7. Did this activity (or lesson) change your way of thinking? Why or why not?

You could ask such questions either in Japanese or English (depending on their language levels) and get feedback from them. This is one way of assessing how much your lesson has helped them enhance their CT attitudes. I would not use the questionnaire results, however, for evaluation or grading purposes.

For your reference, I suggest reading the following paper. It is for L1 situations and not really for EFL classes, but you can get good hints. I found it very interesting. (It is written in Japanese)

南 学　Manabu MINAMI

「クリティカルシンキングをうながすゲーミング教材の開発と評価」

"The development and estimate of a game material to promote critical thinking"

三重大学教育学部研究紀要第 64 巻教育科学（2013）　337－ 348 頁

http://miuse.mie-u.ac.jp/bitstream/10076/12347/1/20C16238.pdf

Q (5): How do you determine your students' grades?

A: I usually do not include CT aspects in my grading. I regard CT skills or attitudes as 'by-products' of this language teaching approach. CT skills / attitudes can be developed as students learn the language through the text and activities. Therefore, usually I give grades based on their linguistic achievements only. Developing CT attitudes in students is like planting seeds in them. We hope those seeds will grow and bloom in students' lives in the future.

Q (6): I think one clear example, taken from the textbooks we use in the schools, should be used as an example. We will be able to see more clearly and be stimulated more deeply to go out and use these ideas. What do you think?

A: I understand your point. Here's one way of doing it. One of the important CT skills is 'differentiating facts and opinions'. You can use vocabulary and structures in your textbook(s) and present some sentences to your students, and they have to tell if they are facts or opinions.

For example:

A. Mt. Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan.
B. Mr / Ms (Your name) is the best teacher at this school.
C. This week's English test was difficult.
D. The school library has more than 200 books on computer.
E. There are too many books in the library.

This is a type of content-based approach. Your students are doing a task to learn a concept, and while their minds are concentrated on the task, they learn the language rather unconsciously. This skill of 'differentiating facts and opinions' could also be used for assessment or evaluation.

Q (8): The students discussed together in groups and the students wrote things on the board but they were dropped or not explored. I want to hear other ideas so I think those ideas should be shared with the class as well, at least a few. What do you think?

A: I agree with you! So let's do it here. The Japanese translations of CT written on the board were: 自由思考力・客観的思考力・多様な思考力・主体的選択のための思考・ 柔軟な思考力・問題を発見できる力・ 多角的思考力・ 物事をいろんな視点から考えること

As I said in the session, these are great translations and I am truly impressed. I am amazed how all are different, but each is so true.

Now think about these:

1. Which translation do you like best? Why?
2. Do you like the presenter's translation (「判断のための思考」)?　Why or why not?

<Part 2>

Date: February 21, 2014, 14:30-17:00

Venue: NSC College

Advisors: Kazuyoshi Sato, Nancy Mutoh (NUFS), Robert Croker (Nanzan University)

Abstract: Monthly report on action research

The number of participants: 18

Workshop in March (Scheduled)

This workshop is for Action Research Group members only.

Date: March 28-29, 2015

Venue: Hamamatsu International Brain Center

Advisors: Kazuyoshi Sato, Nancy Mutoh (NUFS), Robert Croker (Nanzan University)

Title: Final presentation of action research