Thinking in the Japanese Classroom

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Abstract: The Course of Study by the Ministry of Education in 1998 and 2008 proposed to foster thinking abilities. To assess how often high school students engaged in activities with thinking, I conducted a survey with over 1,300 students in 1999 and 2014. The results in 2014 revealed that more students asked questions, spoke opinions, and wrote opinions than in 1999, while still about half of the students were reluctant to do these activities which requires thinking. Although the Japanese education system has achieved high standards in the world, it has failed to nurture students’ thinking abilities which are essential to work with people from different backgrounds in the globalized society. To meet the demands of a rapidly changing world, it is proposed to make students objectively aware of their own culture and to provide materials to develop new teaching with thinking activities in the classroom.

Key words: thinking, high school classroom, Japan

1. Introduction

The world has globalized rapidly in the past few decades, which has increased interactions between people of different backgrounds. In order to make ourselves understood and to understand other people, we need to be able to explain things clearly in words, and interact thinking logically. As Paul (1993) states, “in a world of accelerating change and complexity, a new form of thinking and learning is required, a form of thinking and learning that involves much more intellectual discipline and skills of self-evaluation than we have yet learned to accept” (p.v).

In Japan, however, learning to “think logically” had not received much attention until 1998, when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released the new Course of Study (guidelines for all schools), which emphasized the importance of activities with “thinking” (MEXT, 1998). This reform in education required a drastic change in methods of teaching in Japan. However, a survey I conducted in 1999 revealed that most students seldom or never asked questions or expressed themselves in class (Okada, 2000). In 2008, the new version of Course of Study emphasized the balance between knowledge and thinking, requiring more thinking activities in the classroom (MEXT, 2008).

In 2014, fifteen years after the 1999 survey, I conducted another survey to assess how high school students now perform thinking activities in the classroom. In this paper, I will first discuss how teaching has been conducted in Japan and review the results of the 1999 survey. I will then explain the revisions of the Course of Study during the past few decades, before presenting the results of the 2014 survey. Finally I will discuss problems
and suggest approaches to dealing with them.

2. The Classroom in Japan

In the traditional Japanese classroom, “neither verbal ability, nor class participation, nor the ability to work in groups... significantly affected grades” (Fukuzawa, 1995, p. 300). “Japanese tend[ed] to think quiet, passive, and obedient youths who perform[ed] well on tests [were] good students” (Nozaki, 1992, p. 28), and in many cases, tests were given in the form of multiple-choice questions or fill-in-the-blank statements. In short, self-expression and originality were not valued highly in the Japanese classroom, while teaching in western classrooms typically values lively interaction among students and between teachers and students, as Lewis (1992) states.

The one-way, teacher-centered instruction in Japan is said to be heavily related to Japanese culture and particularly to traditional communication styles. Many studies (e.g., Hall, 1976; Suzuki, 1978; Hofstede, 1980; Fitz Gerald, 2003) describe Japanese culture as characterized by high-context communication, placing more value on consideration for others, respect for elders, and harmony within the group than on facts or ideas, often leading Japanese individuals to avoid open confrontation. As a result, they favor ambiguous expression or they speak less, while a person who constantly asserts his or her opinion is often considered pushy or strange.

In 1999, one year after the release of the 1998 Course of Study emphasizing the introduction of active thinking into the classroom, I conducted a survey with about 1,300 students from ten high schools in different regions in Japan (Okada, 2000). The results disclosed that more than half the students seldom or never asked questions, expressed opinions either verbally or in writing, or collected new information (57%, 88%, 68%, and 64% respectively), while the students who always or often did these activities were around 10% or less.

3. Revisions of the Course of Study

The Course of Study is a set of national guidelines to organize school programs throughout the country. It has generally been revised once every ten years to reflect a changing world. Teachers are expected to incorporate the revised curriculum objectives into their classroom teaching.

In 1998, MEXT revised the Course of Study to meet the dramatic changes brought about by globalization and released it with a sensational catch phrase “yutori kyoiku” (no cramming), focusing on students “thinking by themselves actively”, rather than acquiring factual knowledge (MEXT, 1998).

In 1999, however, many teachers in secondary schools were not ready to implement thinking activities in the classroom. The problem, as Suzuki (2006) argues, was that although the 1998 revision of the Course of Study originated from objections to traditional rote memorization and text-centered lessons, it did not clearly detail how to nurture the ability to think, create, and express actively in each academic subject.

The 2008 new Course of Study emphasized the balance between acquiring basic knowledge and fostering the ability to think, make decisions, and express oneself. Students were expected more than ever to use, rather than simply acquire, knowledge and to demonstrate this in thinking activities.

4. The 2014 Survey

I conducted thinking activities in junior college classrooms after the 1999 survey, and found that students were ready to memorize and copy information from textbooks but they were at a loss when asked to apply it in
new situations (Okada, 2002; Muir & Okada, 2008). An extensive, objective study was needed to determine to what extent thinking and expressing activities had been implemented in the high school classroom after the revisions of the Course of Study in 1998 and 2008. Thus, in 2014, I undertook a new survey.

4.1 Subjects and Questionnaire

The subjects for this study were 1,481 Japanese high school students from 13 high schools in different regions in Japan: one high school in Hokkaido, six in the Tokyo metropolitan area, three in middle Japan, one in Osaka, and two in Kyushu. About 100 students from each high school were randomly selected, and they responded to the same questions given in the 1999 survey anonymously (Appendix): How often do you ask teachers questions, express opinions verbally, express opinions in writing, and collect new information? Students responded by choosing “always”, “often”, “sometimes”, “seldom”, or “never”.1

4.2 Results

The percentages of students who chose each of the frequencies for each question are shown in Figures 1, 3, 5, and 7. Each figure is followed by the corresponding result in 1999 (Figures 2, 4, 6, and 8).

Figure 1 shows how often students asked their teachers questions when they did not understand something related to class materials. Only 17% students responded “always” or “often”, but with the response “sometimes” added, the total percentage of all positive responses was 60%, meaning that more than half the students asked questions in class. This number is an 18% increase from the corresponding result in 1999 (Figure 6). However, still as many as 40% of the students seldom or never asked questions.

Figure 2  Results of the 1999 Survey Showing How Often Students Asked Questions

The result of the second question, how often students expressed their opinions orally in class, is shown in Figure 5. Although as many as 61% students responded “seldom” or “never”, the percentage of the students decreased by 27%, compared with the result in 1999 (Figure 4).

Figure 3  Results of the 1994 Survey Showing How Often Students Spoke Their Opinions

Figure 4  Results of the 1999 Survey Showing How Often Students Spoke Their Opinions

1 Following each of the four questions, the students who chose positive answers were asked to indicate the academic subject(s) in which they engaged in the activity, and the students who selected negative answers were asked to indicate the reason. However, this result is not discussed in this paper.
Figure 5 presents the result of the third question, how often students wrote their opinions about what they studied in class. The students who responded “always” or “often” were nearly 30%, a much greater proportion than for the first two questions. The students who gave a negative response (43%) decreased by 25% from 1999 (Figure 6). Considering that expressing ideas in a written form requires a lot of thinking (Oi, 2006), a 25% decrease in negative responses is a meaningful improvement.

![Figure 5 Results of the 2014 Survey Showing How Often Students Wrote Opinions](image)

![Figure 6 Results of the 1999 Survey Showing How Often Students Wrote Opinions](image)

Figure 7 shows the responses indicating how often students collected new information related to the topic of the class from materials besides textbooks. Students who answered “seldom” or “never” were as many as 62%, while students who answered “always” or “often” were only 13%. Neither of these numbers shows a significant change from the 1999 survey (Figure 8).

![Figure 7 Results of the 2014 Survey Showing How Often Students Collected New Information](image)

![Figure 8 Results of the 1999 Survey Showing How Often Students Collected New Information](image)

5. Discussion

The results of the survey showed that more students asked questions and expressed opinions verbally and in writing in 2014 than in 1999. Students who always or often performed these activities increased by 9%–17% and those who never or seldom did them decreased by 17–27%; improvement was especially seen in expressing opinions. MEXT’s guidelines seemed to have been successfully implemented.

However, the results also indicate a serious problem: 40–62% students still never or seldom asked questions, expressed opinions either verbally or in writing, or collected new information, and the students who regularly did so comprised only 11%–17%. This result is disappointing considering that sixteen years have passed since the release of the 1998 Course of Study, and six years since the 2008 new Course of Study. Why has teaching in Japan changed so slowly? Several deep-seated cultural attitudes may be responsible.

First, many students are reluctant to be active in the classroom perhaps because they unconsciously avoid assertive statements or argument, fearing that such behavior will make them look strange. Okada’s survey (2013) on over 300 college freshmen supports this assumption, that is, about 50% of college freshmen answered that they
would rather not request a person to be quiet even when they were disturbed by his/her noise.

Second, the result that as many as 62% of students seldom or never collected information from materials other than textbooks may reflect students’ tendency to accept and believe everything supplied by teachers, since they are used to living in harmony with people around them, rarely doubting those in authority, and often leaving decision-making to those senior to them.

Third, it is possible that teachers share the same reservations about expressing themselves and also believe what is supplied by authorities. Observing high school teachers’ teaching practices, Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) found that Japanese teachers tended to rely on two things, their own learning experience and their model teachers’ practice, which resulted in a gap between the proposed objectives and actual teaching practices.

As these attitudes are the product of national culture, it is assumed that the problematic features of teaching and learning in Japan are resistant to change. Researchers as well as teachers must do much more, and more effectively, to develop Japanese students' ability to think and express themselves, in order to meet the needs of a globalized society. Here are two suggestions.

First, differences of culture and language should be taught explicitly and systematically to make students aware of their own culture and culturally dependent values. As Suzuki (1978) states, “[People] take everything in their culture for granted; most of them go through their lives without realizing that there can be other ways of living or doing things.” (p. 22). Therefore, students need to learn why Japanese people act and think in the way they do from a broader, objective viewpoint (Okada & Fukuzaki, 2012). By understanding big-picture differences of culture and language between Japanese people and those from other countries, students will be able to learn more quickly and effectively how to think and act appropriately when communicating with people from different backgrounds.

Second, more materials, curriculum, and methods to teach thinking in the classroom in Japan must be prepared and provided. Since skills to think logically have not been widely taught in Japanese education (Inoue, 1989; Suzuki, 2006; Takemae, 2006), most teachers in Japan have no experience with learning them, much less teaching them. Table 1 shows how scarce publications on “thinking” or “logical/critical thinking” are in Japan compared with the US.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Thinking</th>
<th>Logical/Critical thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Diet Library (Japan)</td>
<td>49,093</td>
<td>1,251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American University library (US)</td>
<td>4,927,208</td>
<td>2,209,885</td>
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</table>

6. Conclusion

In this paper, results obtained from research conducted in 2014 with over 1,300 high school students were analyzed. The findings suggest that in high school classrooms in Japan, active learning with self-expression and independent thinking is not as widely practiced as expected, although for more than fifteen years government guidelines have emphasized the importance of nurturing students’ ability to think. Evidently the long history of Japanese culture and values still strongly affects education in Japan. Although the Japanese educational system has achieved high standards, it has neglected to foster unique, individual talent by teaching students to think
originally and creatively (Suzuki, 2002).

To meet the demands of a rapidly changing world, education in Japan needs to change, beginning with reforming the mindset of teachers. Two suggestions are proposed. First, broad differences of culture and language should be taught explicitly to make students objectively aware of their own culture. Second, teachers need new curriculum and materials to support them as they develop the techniques and class activities to encourage active and logical thinking in their students.

Social harmony, a central value in Japanese culture, and western logical thinking and personal expression are not opposed. Rather, educating Japanese students to think independently and express themselves openly will enable them to better work with people from different backgrounds, which is essential in fostering harmonious relations throughout our increasingly globalized world.

Acknowledgement

I express my sincere gratitude to the students of the thirteen high schools for cooperation on this study.

References


Appendix