

# 20/20 Hindsight: Teacher Change and Advice

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The following paper, which was presented at the Japan Association of Language Teaching (JALT) '99 Convention in Maebashi, Japan, is about a case study of five English language teachers who have been in Japan for over twelve years. These teachers were interviewed twice concerning changes in their professional and personal life. Ten fundamental themes will be summarized and discussion will focus on the findings, and advice for teachers new to Japan.

## Introduction

In discussing the concept of professional development, one Japanese professor remarked that 10 years of experience for many Japanese teachers actually means one year that is simply repeatedly ten times. This leads one to ask: Is this the case for native EFL teachers? This case study was initiated because of previous research on teacher change among native EFL teachers in Japan. In this study, the responses between the teachers who were new to Japan and those who had been here for some time were often very different in nature: Younger or newer teachers were more likely to be disenchanted with their students, to have more difficulty in relating to their colleagues, or adjusting to Japanese culture. More experienced teachers seemed to be more accepting, content, relaxed, and better adjusted. Thus, the aim of this research is to better clarify issues (and research questions) concerning personal and professional development of native EFL teachers who have taught in Japan for over 12 years.

## Problem

The research on adult development has often been criticized as being at a point where child development was 50 years ago. Recently, more attention has been turned upon the stages in personal adult development and how it can affect professional careers (Neugarten, 1968; Lowenthal, Thurner & Chiriboga, 1975; Gould, 1978; Levinson and colleagues, 1978; Sheehy, 1976; Cross, 1981). Various schema as been presented: Unruh and Turner (1970) divide careers into periods of beginning, building security and maturing; Gregorc (1973) divides careers into stages of becoming, growing, maturing and finally, the fully functioning professional stage. Katz (1972) describes four stages as survival, consolidation, renewal and maturity. Feiman and Floden (1980) look at three concepts of teacher development; the first one includes survival, consolidation and renewal; the others focus on teachers' ego, moral and cognitive development and means to support teachers' development through in service training.

A common criticism for such schema has been that individual differences in experience are not acknowledged. Burdon (1982) gives a framework of teacher career cycles, consisting of survival, adjustment and mature stages, however, he too has no leeway for individual differences. While differences in teacher development can be better described, what seems to be more important is what teachers have to say about their experience. This is even more important for teachers living in Japan and having to adapt to different institutions, roles, and culture. More descriptive research is needed.

## Review of Literature

Super (1957) was one of the first to delineate a series of sequences that characterize the careers of various individuals in the same profession. Though these these cycles may not always be experienced in the same order, or that all members traverse each sequence, there are several advantages to using the concept of career as the unit of analysis: First, by identifying and describing certain cycles, respondents can better discuss experiences, ideas, and insights.

## Career Entry

Survival and discovery are two terms that Fuller (1969), Field (1979), and Watts (1979) use to describe this period: The `survival' aspect concerns being able to handle new responsibilities, managing the classroom environment, responding to the discrepancies between educational ideal and classroom life, establishing effective student rapport, improving, adapting inadequate teaching

materials, to name a few. Career entry is also described as time of enthusiasm because of new authority, responsibilities, status--being part of a guild of professionals. Career cycle literature labels this time as induction which Kramer (1974) describes three phases of reality shock including a honeymoon period, a time when shock and rejection are felt, and finally a period of recovery. Changes that do occur at this time are a result of teachers understanding their professional identity and overcoming their doubts about professional competencies. If teachers are left to learn by trial and error, teachers will often develop "survival techniques" that may close off other options and crystallize and harden into teaching styles that ultimately prevent them from becoming effective teachers. Important influences that can affect how smoothly induction include: (a) family / adult developmental influences, (b) individual dispositions, (c) task autonomy and discretion, and (d) support systems for induction teachers.

For many EFL teachers it seems likely that these key influences would be absent as teachers are far away from family and friends, and often are not in teaching institutions that will allow them a great deal of task autonomy because of institutional rules. Language difficulties often provide another barrier to obtaining support from Japanese colleagues. At issue would be whether native EFL teachers found their first year to be very difficult in Japan.

## **The Stabilization Phase**

As teachers become more familiar with their surroundings, students, classes, routines, and institutions, they become more stable. Stabilization also relates to pedagogical mastery. In the classical literature dealing with the human life cycle, a period of commitment and stabilization follows; in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g. Erickson, 1950; White, 1952), the choice of a professional identity constitutes a decisive stage in ego development. Teacher identities are solidified. In the samples of Watts (1980) and Field (1979), the accounts are nearly identical: accrued confidence, the comfort of having found one's own personal style of teaching in the classroom, longer-term objectives, greater flexibility in day-to-day classroom management. In career cycle literature, researchers refer to this phase as competency building; common influences include refining their personal value system by integrating them into their professional development plans or research agenda. Failure to define priorities or clarifying interests and values can push a teacher to exit the profession and look for another career. Those teachers who are unable to build appropriate competencies during this period are likely to move toward stages of frustration, and stagnancy. Usually teachers can rely on three major sources of support: university or college courses, seminars and workshops, and peer support from within the teaching profession. However, many EFL teachers did not have this support. What factors helped teachers to stabilize?

## **Experimentation and Diversification**

The central tendencies, either from self-report or from observational studies, describe a period of diversification although there are various explanations for such a shift. Perhaps as teachers gain more confidence in their abilities they are likely to be open to other options and innovate their material, testing, and teaching style. In Prick's sample (1986), this motivation also translated into heightened personal ambitions (the quest for more authority, responsibility, prestige), through access to administrative slots (department head, for example). Teachers are reported to be search of new stimulations, new ideas, new commitments, new challenges (Cooper, 1982). As teachers become more motivated they enjoy the benefits of organizational membership, journals, newsletters, seminars, and conventions; this, in turn, helps teachers to become more secure and to make more long-term decisions regarding their life and career. The issue for EFL teachers in Japan concerns what teachers have learned from their experimentation.

## **Reassessment**

Although reassessment has been solidly documented in empirical studies of the teachers' life cycle, there is still debate as to when it begins and defining characteristic. In many profiles, the period of experimentation gives way to reflection and self-doubt. Perhaps disenchantment with the outcomes of certain innovations precipitates a crisis. Frustration can also come about when teachers find themselves torn between desires and demands, or are not able to be more creative in their position. For some, it is a period of stress and withdrawal. In several empirical studies (Prick, 1986; Adams, 1982; Sikes, 1985; Neugarten, 1979) the phase is marked by teachers explicitly questioning, clarifying issues, and deciding on options. Common influences tend to be a lack of mobility, change, isolation, and not being happy or secure about teaching. What seems to be important concerning reassessment and EFL teachers in Japan is how teachers now perceive their own careers, schools, students, and educational materials.

## **Serenity and Relational Distance**

Research indicates that there is a distinct phase that occurs around 45-55 years of age. Generally while levels of ambition do decline, there are feelings of greater confidence and serenity, perhaps because there is less to prove to others or to oneself. This can be a time of consolidation and renewal, of stagnation, or of bitter resignation depending on how teachers reassess their original motives for entering teaching and view their satisfaction with teaching as a occupation. Relationships with students and colleagues are often more distant; Lightfoot (1985) and Prick (1986) claim that the relational distance experienced between older teachers and their younger pupils may be, in part, the result of being members of different generations and separate subcultures between whom dialogue may be more strained. The key influences relate to motivation and to positive or defensive focusing. More motivated teachers are more likely to be open to new experiences; their positive focusing allows for more specialization in a set of tasks, level of students, or material. Teachers who are less motivated maintain a defensive focus that was more traditional and closed in nature. Teachers tended to simply derive some form of satisfaction from their remaining years in teaching. The question concerning native EFL teachers in Japan is whether they perceived any changes in relating to students and colleagues, and what has helped them to like teaching in Japan.

## **Disengagement**

The classical literature of the human life cycle postulates a gradual withdrawal near the end of the professional career. There is still some debate as to whether disengagement is a distinct phase; there is no reasons to think that teachers would behave differently near the end of their careers than would members of similar professions. However, empirical studies of teaching have not documented this trend. Career wind-down is the term often found in career cycle literature. Teachers often detach themselves from their careers progressively, without regrets, from professional commitments. Career exit refers to leaving the teaching profession for a variety of reasons, including retirement, job termination, child-rearing, investigating alternate careers, or moving into administration. Frustrated or burned-out teachers are the most likely to be moving into this stage, failing the development of a more fulfilling teaching role. Teachers at this time are often influenced by family, hobbies, individual dispositions, life stages, and crises from their personal environment. Influences from the organizational environment for teachers are synthesized into four categories:

- School regulations and administrative management style
- Unions
- Public trust and societal expectations
- Professional organizations

Disengagement for native EFL teachers is more difficult since leaving EFL implies leaving Japan and starting over in one's home country. The question, however, is not whether these influences are relevant, but whether teachers have wanted to leave or retire early and for what reasons.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Literature still presents a fragmentary, embryonic, and, above all highly speculative and normative sequence of the professional life cycle. It is important to acknowledge that age is an empty variable, particularly as a dimension wherein one can study stability and change. Age itself does not determine social and psychological behaviour. It seems problematic for the teaching context in Japan; however, this remains to be further explored. Furthermore, it seems logical that the next step is to understand how EFL teachers reflect on their careers and what advice they would give to teachers beginning their careers.

## **The Study**

### **Aims of the Study**

The aim of this study is describe teacher responses that relate to career entry, stabilization, experimentation, reassessment, serenity, and disengagement. A second aim is to solicit advice for new teachers to EFL and to Japan and to identify / clarify issues requiring further study.

### **Instrument**

Organization of the questionnaire began in October of 1997. The first framework was based on five orientations as identified by Elbaz (theoretical, situational, social, personal, and experiential). Eleven of these items were used for the next questionnaire along with eleven more questions relating to the career cycle and teacher advice.

## Subjects

Five subjects were selected for this study. Two teachers from a language school, both in their forties, a teacher in his late 40's who teaches at a junior college, one retired teacher (a nun) who taught at a Catholic school, and one university professor in his 60's. Teachers were interviewed from May through September.

## Data Analysis

In this study, the interviews were analyzed in relation to the six themes that have surfaced from the literature based on teachers' lives and the career cycle. A second aim was for transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985-in Johnston): to allow these stories to resonate with other contexts with which readers be familiar and to leave largely to them the task of determining to what extent, if any, the findings may also apply to them or elsewhere. Given the stress placed on the vital role of contextual features and on the diverse nature of EFL/ESL teaching, this goal seems preferable to that of generalizability, which in any case is highly problematic with a small sample in a single setting.

## Results and Discussion

This section of the presentation will present common or important themes that surfaced from the insights teachers had concerning their personal and professional development. Insight is defined as the act or result of apprehending the inner nature of things or of seeing intuitively, i.e., any emotional response to a new situation, acquired knowledge, a change in perspective or values based on some experience.

### Theme 1. Career Entry

In reflecting back on their first year of teaching in Japan, it became clear that understanding the institutional context, students, and colleagues is important. The kind of training that teachers had received before or on the job was viewed as very important, particularly because most of the teachers found the passivity of students difficult to deal with along with their concern in learning grammar. Teachers who had no training or support from their institutions had the most difficult time. Almost all of the teachers spoke about their lack of familiarity with Japanese norms or practices. One discussed the issue of criticism and how he was shocked when he was reprimanded for openly siding with a student who had criticized a school policy. The first year was also problematic due to "connecting" with one's colleagues. One teacher spoke about how she did not know who was even working at her school when she started. In short, the first year seemed to be a demanding time. Teachers discussed that it was important to learn how to quickly adapt and to "work out a system" for oneself.

#### Observations:

1. Being flexible is key to making the first year a successful one.
2. Working out a system, establishing boundaries, clarifying values, beliefs, and expectations. This will be far more effective than simply reacting to specific events that occur daily.
3. It is important to ask questions and learn as much as possible about one's students.

### Theme 2. Stabilization

Perhaps stabilization was made easier for many of these teachers because they had a long-time interest or desire to be educators. One teacher spoke about her vow of obedience, being a nun, and that she felt that she needed to honor this. Even though the teachers had specific dreams or goals that they still wanted to accomplish, they felt that English teaching was simply more than teaching nouns and verbs. However, one teacher observed that the alternatives to teaching were not that attractive and helped her to be more satisfied with teaching. The concept of creativity did surface: as teachers became more familiar and less dependent on various teaching materials or techniques, they felt it was important to be creative. This creativity allowed them to be simply happier in their careers. It was also observed, though, that one goes through "cycles," that over the long-term, the feelings one has about teaching will always change. Learning Japanese and being patient as well as polite was fundamental in being more secure in Japan, and for teaching, learning how to use the group process was equally important.

#### Observations:

1. Be creative and make learning English meaningful for the students.
2. Learn Japanese and become more familiar with Japanese culture.

### **Theme 3. Experimentation**

Teachers spoke about not only being flexible with material but also changing their teaching style. One teacher did remark that being eclectic is important but whatever is done, should have a solid rationale and a consistent pattern to it so that students understood why they were doing certain activities. She said that experimentation without consistency simply confuses students. However, teachers need to think more deeply about these patterns and to have them develop, and occasionally interrupted so that students do not get bored. Two instructors stated that they had learned to leave "students alone more" and to talk "too much." One even handed over the role of teaching to them. A language school teacher spoke of his emphasis on empowerment instead of performance.

I want my students to have a positive experience in my class. So the way I go about gearing for that is through creating a good atmosphere. If they can remember they had a good time with this teacher to me that is all that matters. Because when they encounter a situation that this new or foreign, they will be more predisposed to like it.

Experimentation also involved making changes in the group setting, that experimentation should always involve the group; one teacher observed: "Group cohesiveness is a key to success in any endeavor here."

#### **Observations:**

1. Have "stages" to your curriculum and lesson format so that students do not get bored with your instruction or material.
2. Try changing your style or role.

### **Theme 4. Reassessment**

Teachers felt that they had become more confident. One mentioned that she had "learned the importance of teacher equanimity, the ability to challenge, motivate, encourage. At first, I used to get excited, now I know it's important--even tempered." Teaching had become easier because teachers had become more familiar with the students' level, ability, skills, background, culture, and could predict what to expect in the classroom, and how to set the pace and standards of the course. One of the things that teachers did reassess was the concept of education itself here in Japan. One teacher realized that his value system (concerning education) differed greatly from his students.

A long time ago, I gave up the idea that education is a search for truth. I can't remember when I did this, but I have always been an idealist and knowing myself as well as I do, I'm sure I must have sat down and cried at that point. I came to the conclusion that education is basically training for young people to function in a culture. Anyone who considers Japanese cultural standards seriously should evaluate his teaching accordingly. Anyone who will not do this should pack up and go home, or go wherever he can find an agreeable environment outside 'good old Nippon(Japan).'

Related to this is drop in standards and the abilities of students. A teacher stated that this seems to be a national trend and that "we really have to level down our expectations, and materials in many cases to survive unfortunately." This teacher had previously discussed how he was openly criticized in departmental meetings by his Japanese colleagues because of student complaints concerning the difficulty of his classes. Regarding what they felt that they had learned and needed to master, it was interesting to note that all of the teachers, except for one, felt that they still needed to master human relations (or themselves). One stated that she needed to master "enthusiasm" and keeping her opinions to herself while the others talked about people skills, "understanding the feelings and mood of the students," and "to master how to make students learn from their mistakes." The only exception discussed his need to develop better computer assisted learning. Most felt that schools had improved, but one teacher noted that the success of her school was partly due to its requirement of five hours a week of oral English. One teacher observed that materials had vastly improved; there were more choices in textbooks, more kinds of topics and CALL materials.

#### **Observations:**

1. Take some time out each month to assess your career and life.
2. Think about what you have learned and mastered: always establish new goals for yourself.

## **Theme 5. Serenity and Relational Distance**

Success seemed to be an important factor in teachers being content about their careers. Related to this was being able to better relate to colleagues, and having more confidence. One teacher added that this confidence helped her to relax and to better connect with her colleagues. Teachers also stated that having the support of English staff members helped as well. Time did not necessarily bring this about with one's colleagues. It was discussed that while many teachers today are too independent, and distant, they had become less competitive and more inclined to help others. Another teacher joked: "they still don't understand my jokes" and went on to indicate that there was some relational distance in their perceptions on teaching: "My colleagues still balk when I tell them I believe my work is fun. They feel that's undignified. So be it! It's fun!" Teachers also seem to be more realistic about their maintaining teacher-student rapport. Younger teachers had previously indicated in another study that they were very disenchanted with the passivity of many Japanese students. This was not the case with most teachers in this study. One instructor stated "If you make clear what you want them to do, and they believe you are dead serious, they will do it. Who could ask for more?" Another observed that students who want to learn will study and those who don't will not. One respondent at a language school, however, observed that Japanese adults had more confident and bolder in English conversation and that her classes had become more reciprocal.

### **Observations:**

1. How could you improve your relationships with your colleagues?
2. Are you becoming closer to your students and colleagues?
3. Are you more confident about teaching?

## **Theme 6. Disengagement**

Boredom and monotony were two reasons for one teacher leaving EFL while another had retired because of difficulty in hearing her students. The apathy of some students was cited by another as something she disliked while another discussed his dislike for irresponsible student gossip and peer criticism. The other teachers said that they they were satisfied with where they were, that being busy is good. None of the respondents discussed issues relating to Japanese culture, but one respondent observed that economic conditions had so improved that it was tempting to return home.

### **Observations:**

1. Are you becoming more active or less active in your career? Why?
2. What would prompt you to leave EFL?

## **Theme 7. Understanding the System**

First, teachers spoke about the need to realize how little Japanese students understand you or your goals in the curriculum. The idea being that you will not know how to adapt your teaching unless you realize what needs to be changed. Even with the school system teachers will have to adapt: One teacher stated: "get it into your head the system is very different, and it is very important to learn the system, and when you learn it, there is so much good, there is so much good in it." The theme of emphasizing the positive was echoed by another teacher who also made the warning: "Unless you are ready to swim, don't rock the boat." Another issue concerned relationships with one's colleagues; like one's family, you can not pick and choose who to work with, so it was simply better to be accepting of others. As one teacher noted, "getting along with one's colleagues is far more important than degrees."

### **Observations:**

1. Be accepting and flexible and learn about your institution: the process of change, committees.
2. Learn the good and use it as a means for further development.

## **Theme 8. Adapting - Bridging Cultural Differences**

The first rule of thumb in adapting to life in Japan seems to be not comparing it to the West. As one teacher noted: "Things that don't seem logical or even right to our morals and common sense are not wrong, they are Japanese logic and sensibilities. Learning Japanese language and culture was not only recommended but that teachers should have "excessive appreciation and respect" for it because it "will probably not be excessive here." Several teachers cautioned new teachers not to criticize the country since it just

antagonize people, and there is so much good to learn." One teacher argued that unless one was invited here, one should not tell the Japanese how to live their lives: "We are guests in their country." This sentiment was also referred to by another teacher who advised:

Spend most of your time with Japanese people. You've come a long way from home. It's a crime to spend your time with a bunch of foreigners complaining all the time. 99% of their complaints about Japan spring from not understanding the wonderful things they should be learning from experiencing the culture. Learn to live in it. You'll love it.

>By showing "great interest in things Japanese, trying the food, and sleeping on tatami, teachers will not only be more acquainted with Japanese society but also more aware of how they can fit in. Fitting in does not imply total assimilation and agreement with current policies and customs. One teacher noted that as he became more aware of the conservative nature of his school, he tended to adapt to circumstances instead of fighting to change them.

#### **Observations:**

1. Always learn something new about Japanese culture.
2. Try to establish a reasonable balance between challenging and conforming while keeping intact your own values and identity.

### **Theme 9. Connecting with Yourself and Others**

All of the teachers also indicated that they were very active with their institutions, communities and families. Several teachers advised having satisfying personal lives with "good hobbies" and showing that you care about your students and that they should care about each other. As one teacher noted:

This begins a relationship that lasts forever. I still get new year cards, e-mail and letters from some students that I taught as long as 27 years ago. It makes not only teaching rewarding but your whole life as well.

Another teacher discussed that he was only able to relate to his students when he discussed his own past experiences and life. The importance of sharing his enthusiasm with his classes helped them to get excited about their own lives.

It was discussed that teachers need to cooperate and encourage each other as much as possible and to draw inner encouragement from these relationships and their own inner faith. One teacher discussed the need for balance, that it was easy to forget the importance of recreation. Even in teaching, one respondent said that it was important to teach a basic "moral and spiritual principles, not only dull and lifeless grammar points or rote vocabulary", stating "focus on what's important for life, not just for language."

#### **Observation:**

1. Always try to develop new relationships.
2. Get your students to not only develop their English skills but also their relationships.
3. Take trips abroad when you get exhausted. Pace yourself.

### **Theme 10. Personal and Professional Development**

These teachers were very specific in their advice for those wanting to work in Japan for the long-term. The first issue concerned the teaching context, that the kind of school does matter: it is important to get into a good college since one's colleagues or workplace can "build one up or tear one down." These teachers demonstrated the need to be creative and to grow personally and professionally. In informal discussions before or after the interviews, most referred to outside projects, classes or community activities, textbooks, church or mission programs, and EFL articles.

#### **Observation:**

1. Decide whether or not your school is giving you the support you need to grow professionally.
2. Never stop being active in professional organizations or publications.

## **Conclusion**

What did these teachers all have in common? Well, they had become very practical about living in Japan. They had realized that they were going to be changed more by Japan and the Japanese than they were going to change anyone or Japanese culture. They realized that simply transplanting techniques, values, or ideas was not going to work in most cases, that instead they had adapt or simply reject theories or methods that were too incongruent to the Japanese context. Second, these teachers were very flexible, and attuned to the needs of their students. Finally, they had learned the importance of emphasizing the good in Japanese culture and their teaching situations instead of dwelling on what they disliked. The second aim for this case study was to identify other issues for further research. These issues seem important.

#### **I. Issue of job-related pressure, stress, discrimination**

- How do experienced EFL teachers respond to job-related stress.
- Have experienced EFL teachers had to deal with discrimination in any way?

#### **II. Innovation**

- Were experienced EFL teachers able to bring about innovation or change at their schools?
- Were there any reforms that these teachers tried which did not succeed?

#### **III. Personal beliefs and Relationships**

- Can teachers described personal beliefs or values that they had reassessed or changed?
- Can these teachers describe issues or difficulties in relating to their Japanese colleagues?

In sum, this preliminary research indicates the importance of reflection, looking back and thinking about our professional development.

## **Workshop Discussion**

In groups of three or more, select any of the questions (above or below) that you feel are important, and see how others in your group respond.

- Career Entry
  - Were there any surprises when you began teaching in Japan?
  - Was your first-year teaching in Japan an easy one? Why or why not?
- Stabilization
  - Have your day-to-day experiences of teaching Japanese students English been more, or less satisfying than you had expected?
  - Why did you decide to stay in teaching?
  - Has coming to Japan helped you to accomplish any goals, or dreams?
  - Since the time that you have been teaching, are you becoming more dependent, or less dependent on EFL pedagogical material?
- Experimentation
  - Have you tried out any new approaches or teaching styles? If so, what?
  - Have you decided on what definitely works and what does not for Japanese students?
  - Was there any one thing that you learned that really helped you in teaching here?
- Reassessment
  - Has teaching in Japan gotten easier or more difficult for you? Why?
  - In teaching, what have you learned and what do you feel that you now need to master?
  - Have schools, educational materials, and students improved over your career? Why or why not?
- Serenity and Relational Distance
  - Has anything helped you to like teaching in Japan?
  - Has there been any change in how you relate to your colleagues over your career?
  - Has your impression of Japan and Japanese learners changed since you have been in Japan?
- Disengagement
  - Have you ever thought about leaving EFL or Japan, and if so why?
  - What do you not like about teaching in Japan?



- Do you want to retire early? Why or why not?
- Advice
  - What should EFL teachers new to Japan know if they are going to be successful in teaching here for the long-term?
  - Do you have any advice about Japanese schools or colleges?
  - How can new EFL teachers best adapt to life in Japan?
  - How can teachers make teaching here more fulfilling?

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