

# Observations of Japanese students by a 30 years of British veteran

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## **Abstract**

The following is a slightly edited version of remarks addressed to the Japan-UK Education Forum's 6th Annual Conference, held at Kinran University, Aug. 28th, 2017. The author chronicles his major observations of Japanese students while teaching first in Japanese Prefectural high schools for 3 years, then in Japanese private colleges in the Kansai region. At first, he assumed that the anomalies he noticed were due to Japanese cultural influences (e.g. bare classroom walls being the influence of Zen), but later questioned whether perhaps the influences were not so ancient or traditional, but rather stemmed from the purposes of Japan's mass education system adopted in the 19th century and modeled on a European system designed to unify and militarize a nation.

First, I wish to thank the UK-Japan Education Forum, and in particular Prof. Ueda Manabu, for inviting me to speak at this symposium. It has given me the opportunity to organize my thoughts about 30-plus years' of experience in Japanese education from the perspective of a language teacher in Japanese high schools and colleges. My field of study is English language teaching.

This paper, therefore, is not an academic presentation, but a collection of observations from the "chalk face" as it has been called – from practical classroom experience.

In this paper, I would like to point out a few things I have noticed, and some tentative conclusions I have formed or am forming. I will not make suggestions, as I do not believe I am qualified to make any.

In the course of preparing for my presentation, I realized that there was an evolution in my thinking. When I first came to Japan, and made my first observations of Japanese classrooms and students, I automatically assumed that what I was noticing which was different from what I would expect in a British or European environment was due to the Japanese culture or social norms. I am now a little sceptical of that view, and tend towards a different interpretation – namely that some (perhaps many) of the unfortunate behaviours I have noticed in the classroom were less the natural presentation of Japanese cultural behaviour and rather the result of centrally organized and planned compulsory education, the model for which, far from being of ancient and traditional origin,

was Prussia and was introduced barely 150 years ago as Japan yearned to become a nation-state like those of Europe and the West. This model was copied by many nations, all at more or less the same time. The system of education that I went through in Britain on the one hand, and the Japanese system on the other are more similar than dissimilar for the reason that they are both based on the same Prussian model of compulsory schooling.

Background. I came to Japan in 1980 on the JET program before it was called that, and I taught in prefectural schools in Hyogo Prefecture for three years. After that time, I obtained a position at a private Liberal Arts university in Nara, and have been there ever since.

In Japanese high schools, when I asked a student a question, they often did not answer immediately, but turned to their friends and consulted. Why? Teachers on the JET program always mention this as something they notice, and almost without exception these young JET teachers find it annoying. I do not think British schoolchildren will respond in this way. I assumed it was an example of Japanese collectivist behaviour.

Also in high school, I made two other observations: one was that the walls of the classrooms and schools were almost entirely bare, whereas secondary schools in Britain frequently have posters and pictures and maps, as indeed do most teenagers' bedrooms. I assumed this was the influence of Zen, but I now suspect that, while that may be an influence, other factors, more in line with the purposes of the compulsory schooling model introduced in the Meiji period, may be involved. An art teacher whom I befriended at a high school agreed with me that it was odd and regrettable that the walls should be so bare, but also could not explain exactly why this was so, only that it was so throughout Japan.

I have always been interested in music, and studied music theory at A-level. When I came to Japan and noticed that "Music" was on the curriculum, and being eager to learn about Japanese music history and musical instruments, I asked the music teacher if I could observe a class. She kindly agreed. Imagine my surprised disappointment when the music class was all about Western music, the walls were covered with posters and information about Western classical music, and there was not a single mention anywhere of Japanese musical traditions.

In 1983, I got a job teaching at a small private Liberal Arts college in Nara. When I first started teaching there, my Japanese colleagues frequently asked me 「学生は勉強してくれますか」 *gaku-sei ha benkyo shite kuremasuka*, "Are your students studying for you?" I could not understand why they added the "for you" part (くれる). Why should they study "for me", for the instructor? Do they have no other motivation? What about for their own future, for their own improvement, for future qualifications, to graduate? Do Japanese students not study for themselves, but only for others? Do Japanese teachers want or expect students to study for their teachers and not for intrinsic motivation? While I could understand the question had it referred to primary school children, it seemed quite inappropriate to speak in such a way about young people on the cusp of adulthood, or in some cases already adult. I subscribe to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and believe that lan-

guage forms mirror thought. I now suspect that this language form (asking “Are your students studying for you as opposed to simply “Are they studying?”) reflects a value placed on obedience. Its particular role in education, particularly in schooling, is a matter perhaps for inquiring minds to investigate further.

“How many times have I been absent?” Why do students so often ask this question? Why do they not ask, “Am I learning in this class? Am I making progress? Am I improving?” Students have learned somewhere, somehow, that if they are absent too many times, they risk failing a course. I did not tell them that, and in most cases this “rule” is not even written in the syllabus. So where did they learn this? I understand that in many colleges there is (or was) a rule, sometimes explicit, that students who attend less than two-thirds of a course are ineligible for the final exam. However, students still frequently ask this question, even where this rule is not stated anywhere.

When a student recently asked me this question, I asked her why she asked. She replied that she did not know. I realize that she was probably just being careful. She did not know what answer would please me or anger me, so she just said “I don’t know,” meaning, “No comment.” Her inability to answer my question did not make a good impression on me, however.

Students do not speak or answer in complete sentences, not only in English, but also in Japanese. Complete sentences show the relationship between the different parts of speech. Single-word or double-word utterances cannot. Complete sentences reveal the intellectual development of the student, and so they should be expected from students from junior high school upwards.

All students hate studying. Then why are they at university? Is it possible to teach students who hate studying? A young lady wrote an essay for a class of mine in which she described her astonishment and relief at being told by her cram-school teacher to study for pleasure. This came to her as a revelation. When I read her essay, I was shocked that this should come as a revelation to her. I asked her why it is that so many students in Japan say they hate studying. She replied that, from a young age she had been told she must study – by her teachers in school, her parents and grandparents. Everyone tells you, you must study, apparently. It is no wonder, given such social pressure, that young people develop an antipathy to what should be an exciting intellectual adventure.

All students have the same opinion. How is that possible? I teach some writing classes, and have discovered that most students have the same opinions. For example, the way to stop global warming (apparently, according to so many students) is for every shopper to bring their own shopping bag to the supermarket. Where did they get this idea? Clearly, as so many students express the same opinion, they did not arrive at this conclusion through independent thought. It more probably reflects what they have been told. Other examples of commonly held opinions are, the way to solve any problem is for the authorities (local or national) to do something (private initiatives are never mentioned by students in “problem-solution” essays); all controlled substances are bad and are rightly banned by law. When I question students individually about their topics,

and mention that, for example, there are dissenting opinions about the existence and the cause of global warming, they say they know that. Yet their essays reveal no diversity of opinion, but are universally one-sided.

Again, where do they learn this? It must be either in the media, or more probably in school. Are schools used to form the opinions of young people, not merely to nurture and develop their intellectual abilities? Are they being given the “party line”, the official opinion which they are supposed to hold? In the immortal words of British satirical magazine *Private Eye*, “I think we should be told.” Is it acceptable for university students to repeat opinions unthinkingly and uncritically without being challenged?

Japanese students are well-behaved. I once observed a class where the teacher was shockingly unprepared. There were long pauses while instructor read the text to try and understand the correct answer. The pace was very slow. I sat at the back extremely bored and angry that this teacher could waste the students’ time in this unprofessional manner. Yet nobody said anything. Nobody complained. The boy in front of me twirled a pencil between his fingers, then at one point, he looked down at this desk, sighed and dropped the pencil. Was that his expressions of boredom and frustration?

How important is obedience as an objective of Japanese education? What are the disadvantages of training children to be highly obedient?

What is the purpose of education? I propose that there are at least two sets of concepts about the purpose of education: one is the beliefs of individual teachers, the other is the over-arching purposes of the system itself, which may differ.

For what it is worth, here is my personal set of objectives:

- ① To teach young people to think for themselves,
- ② To help them become independent.
- ③ To help them learn to know as opposed to simply believing, and to be able to tell the difference.

While teachers may have their own ideas about what education is for, the system that is now in place has its own purposes and objectives which may or may not match the beliefs and values of the teachers. It is instructive to examine the original purposes of the present system, which is essentially the same system in Japan, the UK and the United States. It is a state-organized and centrally planned system of compulsory schooling, originally designed to create a unified state with a strong military ethos. In fact, the Japanese high-school uniform reflects this ethos and purpose: the boys’ uniform is a replica of the Prussian military uniform. (I am unsure about the origins of the girls’ “sailor” uniform (see-*raa fuku*).

John Taylor Gatto (Gatto, 2001) has written a fascinating account of the origins of American compulsory schooling. His writings, based on the speeches and texts by those most closely involved with the setting up of nation-wide compulsory schooling in the 19th and early 20th centuries, reveal

some interesting facts which might be of interest to those involved in education in Japan, as the model used in both countries is the same.

In addition, and perhaps of more practical interest to Japanese educators, Gatto describes some of the key characteristics of elite educational methods, some of which Gatto modified and tried to implement in his own teaching. In essence, he felt that a) these methods helped develop key skills which most public schooling did not (or did poorly) , and b) these methods need not be limited to the elites, but could, with modification, be successfully applied to almost anyone. (In the Q&A section of the symposium, Dr. Kinmonth mentioned that in his experience, students at prestigious universities such as Waseda certainly did not give single-word answers to questions, which leads to the question, what kind of training do those students get? And, if it works, can it be reproduced or extended to non-elite students?)

Afternotes. The following are afterthoughts that did not form part of either my main address or my comments in the ensuing Q&A session, but which might be of interest to readers.

1. Dr. Kinmonth mentioned that in the United States, education is managed by the individual States, not by the federal government. While this has been true historically (the Constitution makes no provision for federal management of education), an examination of various federal initiatives in recent times, for example No Child Left Behind (mentioned by Prof. Kinmonth) and its more recent incarnation, Common Core, reveals that less and less is being left in the hands of the States and more and more is centrally planned and controlled at the national level.

2. Dr. Kinmonth mentioned that the media attention on the Japanese (and more recently the Chinese) educational systems and methods came in the aftermath of those countries' economic prosperity. However, as he pointed out, other countries which are doing very well both economically and educationally (as measured on the PISA scale) are not considered newsworthy. Dr. Kinmonth did not speculate as to why that might be, other than ignorance. However, there is well documented history of American financial support for Communist regimes (Allen, 1971) as well of the activities of tax-exempt foundations (Tax Exempt Foundations Hearings Reece Committee 1953, n.d.), and the infatuation of the intelligentsia with Communist societies (Muggeridge, 1934). In this context, the apparently mistaken fixation on Chinese educational methods takes on a different hue. On the other hand, retired public schoolteacher Gatto claims to have been hired by Chinese authorities several times to advise them on educational methods, because "they've been trained not to initiate ideas". (GnosticMedia, 2011)

3. In the Q&A session of the symposium, no distinction was made, either by the speakers or by the floor, between structural or institutional problems and solutions on the one hand, and those which individual teachers might implement in their own classes.

4. After the symposium, I came across the following quotation: "this is where the gulf of misunderstanding between modern parents and the educational system begins. Parents believe a child goes to school to learn skills to use in the adult world, but Dewey states specifically that

education is “not a preparation for future living.” The Dewey educational system does not accept the role of developing a child’s talents but, contrarily, only to prepare the child to function as a unit in an organic whole - in blunt terms a cog in the wheel of an organic society.” (Sutton, 2002)

5. Finally, I offer a comment given to me by a Japanese gentleman, not an educator: “The present educational system was created in the Meiji period for the purpose of quickly creating a unified and militarized nation. However reasonable that purpose may have been at that time, it became obsolete after 1945. It is not suitable for the people and society of today. Many teachers themselves are unaware of the original purpose of the educational system in which they work.”

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