

## A Good Class?

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This study focuses on responses given by students in the English Department at Kwassui Women's College in answer to the question, "What is a 'good' class?" This was one question of a survey into students' perceived needs, preferences and motivation in relation to their English education. The responses are analyzed according to the criteria used by students in deciding whether a class is "good" or not. We find that the composite "good" class for our students is enjoyable and interesting, fostering the learning of knowledge and the development of skills, with a good teacher and good students, working well together in an active and pleasant environment. Student comments on each of these aspects are presented and discussed. The study concludes that whereas students may be interested in classes which promote their knowledge and skills, they focus more on the role of the teacher and the atmosphere of the classroom in deciding what a "good" class is.

### 1. Introduction

As the number of college-age students in Japan decreases and education becomes a "buyer's market", it is clear that not only must teachers provide what they themselves consider to be the best education possible, but that they must also consider what appeals to the

students. “Teachers are becoming more aware that how students feel about their educational experience is useful in innovating curriculum and class material and in many ways is as important as what is taught” (Long 1997:23). This study is part of research done to provide background information for discussion about possible changes in curriculum for the English Department at Kwassui Women’s College. A questionnaire was administered to all of the current students in the department asking students about motivation, study habits, priorities, goals, future needs, satisfaction, and opinions about desirable courses, and 380 responses were received. Responses were received in both English and Japanese. When quoted below, comments without quotation marks are the students’ own English; those in quotation marks are translated from students’ Japanese.

Here we consider mainly the responses to one question, “What is a “good” class?” supplemented by the answers to three further questions where these shed light on rather vague answers to the first: “Which class has been the most enjoyable for you?” “Which class has been the most interesting for you?” and “Which class has most helped you to improve your English?” However, the discussion will focus on the criteria applied by the students in deciding whether a class is “good” or not, and not on an analysis of which classes are mentioned. What, then, do our students consider to be a “good” class?

## **2. What is a “good” class?**

The student who answered “Nobody knows” in response to the question “What is a good class?” may have a point, but of the 302

students who responded to this question, 203 actually tried to give some kind of definition, rather than the name of a specific class that they felt fitted the description. It is the definitions suggested for a “good” class which are presented in Table 1. The specific classes are ignored here, as in the vast majority of cases they are cited again by the same students as “enjoyable”, “interesting” or “helpful”, in answer to other questions being considered. Also ignored here is the category “foreign teachers’ classes” unless the student went on to give a reason which could be considered to include an attribute of a “good” class. Some students suggested one aspect of a “good” class; others listed multiple ideas, and if all the aspects listed are considered as separate items, 270 responses were received. In Table 1, these responses are presented in decreasing order of occurrence.

**Table 1**

<b>Quality</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents citing quality</b>
Enjoyable	27%
Interesting	25%
Teacher is good	12%
Students have good attitude	12%
Developing knowledge/skills	9%
Understandable	9%
Can say own opinion	9%
Active participation	7%
Useful	5%
Good relationships	5%
Good atmosphere	4%
What I want to study	3%
Speaking English	3%

We can group these responses under six main headings, and if we put them together we can say that the conditions for a “good” class are that it is enjoyable and interesting, fosters learning of knowledge and/or the development of skills, has a good teacher, with good students, and a good class atmosphere. Frequently these six aspects have a bearing on each other, and what any one of them means in practice is of course open to individual interpretation. In as far as the students explained what they had in mind, either in answer to this question, or to the three others being considered, their opinions are discussed below.

### **3. A good teacher**

For some students, the requirement for a “good” class is a good teacher, but if as Yalden suggests, teachers “are monitor, counselor, consultant, orchestrator, and animateur” (1987:57), what exactly do our students mean by a “good” teacher? A number of students did not explain in detail beyond stating that a “good” class has a “good” teacher. At a minimal level of explanation, one did add the word “funny” in parentheses after “good”! Another said that “‘good’ class means the way teachers teach is good.” Those who gave further definition considered various aspects; for example, the class is good if the teacher is enthusiastic:

I think teachers have drive.

I think a “good” class is the class that the student can feel teacher’s goal.

if the teacher knows how to interest the students:

To arouse interest, [he] e.g. plays music and shows photographs.

The teacher's way of explaining makes the students interested.

or if the teacher helps the students understand:

When the students don't understand, the teacher will explain until they do.

Teacher's explaining is intelligible.

In the case of the students who say that a good class should be "easy to understand" we do not know for certain if they think this depends on the teacher, though this seems likely. The two who think that a class should be "lucid", however, presumably expect the teacher to explain clearly.

Whilst not exactly the same, the students' responses here are generally in line with the findings of Stephen Ryan in studies he has been involved in where students were asked, "What in your opinion, makes a good language teacher at a university?" He reports that the most frequent answers given by Japanese students were: "easy to understand", "enjoyable lessons" and "good communication". He goes on to comment: "The 'Japanese-ness' of these answers only becomes apparent when they are compared with answers to similar questions from students in other countries" (Ryan 10). For example, a 1997

study Ryan was involved in showed that for Russian students the key issues are “knowledge of subject-matter”, “being demanding” and “professionalism”. An earlier study had found that Japanese students are “much less concerned about the subject-mastery of their teachers” than Australian students. In comments by Underhill, however, on responses that he gets when he asks trainee teachers to look back and comment on those who taught them, it seems that the Japanese response may be one that is in fact more widely shared. Underhill explains that:

The answers to these questions usually have as much to do with personal and interpersonal variables (such as warmth, respect, understanding etc.) as with technical variables (such as teaching techniques, methodology, training background, knowledge of topic, etc.). Learners seem to know their teachers as much by the atmosphere they create as by their name, appearance, age or topic. (1997:61)

In the present study, there was indeed more focus on the way teachers dealt with students than on what they taught. When they commented on it at all, students felt that the subject matter chosen by the teachers should be of interest to the students.

Teacher give us many interesting information.

“A good class is when the teacher has an awareness of how the students are responding, and prepares well accordingly.”

The class that teacher can think thing with pliability, and find

something new and teach us is good class.

Clearly for some students responsibility for the success or otherwise of a class lies firmly in the hands of the teacher, but this may be seen as including the responsibility to involve students so that a “good” class occurs when:

Teacher have zeal in teaching and give students time to say their own opinions.

This brings us to the questions of the relationship between teachers and students, which is an important component of the atmosphere of the class.

#### **4. A good atmosphere**

According to the student responses, a good class is a “comfortable” one, where students are “studying in a good environment”, and “feel at home”. The creation of a good atmosphere is seen to result at least in part from the relationship between teacher and students.

It is to communicate between teachers and students in class.

It's able to work with teacher and students together.

The right atmosphere is important to encourage active participation, and many students focus on the results rather than the underlying reasons. One result of a good atmosphere is that students feel able to speak out. Some students hope that such communication will take

place in English, so in a “good” class people will be

Talking English, and students talk their opinion in English.

Others just focus on an environment where they feel able to express themselves. Richards (1998) discusses “the nature of teachers’ ‘maxims’—principles which ‘guide the teachers’ selection of choices from among a range of alternatives’” (p.3) and, summarizing work that has been done in this field, he lists such maxims as accuracy, efficiency, involvement, encouragement, conformity, planning, order and empowerment. Many of our students seem to respond well to teachers who hold the maxims of empowerment—allowing and encouraging them to express opinions, and involvement—creating the situation for lively classroom activity. So we find such comments as:

It’s an environment which is easy to tell my opinion.

It’s good class to say what I want to say.

Students can take part in the class actively by saying their own opinions.

Other students are more concerned with activity rather than freedom to state opinions as the key to a good class. The class should be “active (not only listening)”, or, more explicitly,

Students does not only listen to a teacher’s talk, but also they take part in a class.



For one student, a good class occurs when:

“During the class there is a constant sound of voices with the teacher and the students communicating with each other.”

However, whereas for a good atmosphere which fosters active participation and the willingness to express opinions, the teacher’s attitude and the relationship between teacher and students are important, some students see the key to a good class atmosphere as lying in student relationships. Here the key is on cooperation, exchange, support, and respect.

The people in the class co-operate in many ways.

“Everyone gets on well and enjoys class, supporting each other.”

“Even when there are different opinions, everyone’s opinions are respected.”

This is in line with Clarke’s comment that: “How learners treat each other, ... is just as important as whether they have mastered the details of the lessons” (pp.26–27). It is also recognized by some students that a good class depends not only on having a good atmosphere where it is easy to participate, but also on the willingness of the students to get involved. For some respondents, then, a good class depends on there being good students.

## 5. Good students

There has been an increasing focus in the past decades on learner autonomy, and on learners taking responsibility for their own learning. Usuki (1999) defines this as the learners' "self-directed awareness of their role as learners, whatever the learning situation happens to be" (p.6). Whereas many of the respondents in the present study have decided preferences for how they would like teachers to run their classrooms, Usuki suggests that "an autonomous learner is one who can learn from various teaching styles and develop and practice autonomy in a number of ways, depending on the context of the classroom." As one of the respondents in the present study puts it, in a "good" class:

"Each person has her own goals and works towards accomplishing them."

Murphy suggests that such a student who is self-motivated can create interest in a class for him/herself, and cites the example of a classmate who reviewed constantly by telling others what she was learning, and who "pretended (and then actually believed) that what her professors were saying was extremely interesting' (1998:21). By her own positive attitude, she created an interesting learning situation for herself. A few of our own students, we hope at least partly as a result of their Study Skills classes, give responses which show that they too understand their own responsibility for active learning. Rather than only expect the teacher to create an interesting lesson,

such students come to class with an inquiring attitude, and the will to learn and to “be diligent”.

The class has the will to study.

The students really want to learn.

Here the focus is not on the idea that students can participate so much as on the fact that they do.

Each student gets involved in the class positively and says her own opinion.

I think that everyone doesn't shy and they can positive announce own opinion.

Perhaps this is what the student had in mind who wrote that “both students and teacher” can “enjoy” a good class! Enjoyment can involve many factors, but we turn now to what the students had to say about enjoying classes.

## **6. An enjoyable class**

Any exploration of what is considered to be an enjoyable class should perhaps begin with recognition of the fact that you cannot please all of the people all of the time. However, certain trends do emerge in the data.

Among the students who replied “Enjoyable” when asked, “What is a ‘good’ class?” some said only that! Some, however, ex-

plained that they wished to study and learn something, and enjoy the process.

Not only learn but enjoy.

I think that class which enjoy studying is good.

One student hopes that progress and enjoyment can go together, but does not seem entirely convinced.

“If it’s possible to acquire English ability enjoyably, it’s good, I think.”

We then have the contrasting attitudes seen in the following descriptions of a good class.

We can study English hard, and enjoyable class.

What I can study easily and enjoy.

The second student here seems to support the observation that: “The average student wants to get his English credits. He or she would like to learn English as well, but not at the cost of hours of study” (Hansen 155). Although, fortunately, this does not seem to be generally true of our English majors, it is the case that very few wish to make the extreme effort required to become excellent in English.

Another student says that a good class is “enjoyable” so she can “learn naturally.” Of course it is true that enjoyment can help the

learning process. Byrne (p.21) points out that when grammar or vocabulary or pronunciation are presented in activities which are enjoyable, students remember them better. Murphy agrees that “if you really want to learn something like a language, which takes a good bit of time and energy - make it fun! When it’s fun you want to do it more” (p.27).

One of our students has realized for herself that enjoyment affects her motivation.

I think that good class is fun for me. Because the reason makes me more interesting for English.

If the increased interest leads to increased study and effort, then we can indeed say that the fun class was a good one for her. Unfortunately, some of our students seem to wish to ignore the fact that learning a language involves sheer hard work, and that improvement will not take place to any great extent only through taking part in fun activities in class. Murphey comments that: “What most people don’t realize is that the thing we are doing (for example, learning a language) does not itself have qualities of ‘fun’ or ‘not fun.’ It’s how we do it and how we think about it that makes it fun” (p.27).

The enjoyment of language learning has to involve the pleasure of success after effort, not only fun. One student comments, in response to the question “Which class (or classes) has been most enjoyable for you”, that she likes her writing class:

I can feel big achievements when I finish writing.

It is only a minority of students, however, who in answer to this question focus on improvement of skills or gain in knowledge as the main source of their enjoyment of a class. For such students, a class is enjoyable because

It is helpful to improve my English skill.

I can get many knowledges.

I can think many situation.

And there is an awareness that enjoyment and content are both important.

This class was very fun and can think about various problems.

More students, however, focus on the teacher and the way of presenting material to the class as the sources of their enjoyment. Ryan claims that "Japanese students are eager to have a teacher with a wealth of knowledge about life in general, a fund of jokes and funny stories, and wisdom in the art of teaching" (p.11). This idea is supported by some of the responses in the current data.

Teacher tell a good story every time.

He speak his experience.

Teacher was funny.

Teacher is humor.

Mr X teaches anything with a funny remark.

Although McBean claims that: “Teachers in Japan are entertainers of sorts, in some cases merely on account of their foreignness” (p.274), and Shimizu feels that “foreign teachers may feel burdened with having to fulfill student expectations that they are interesting, cheerful, and entertaining” because “foreign and Japanese English teachers are perceived differently” (1995:8), the comments above refer to five different teachers of whom three are Japanese. In the current research, the responses show considerable balance between foreign and Japanese teachers’ classes as regards perceptions of enjoyability, interest and usefulness, and similar comments are made about the teachers of “good” classes, regardless of their nationality. When students express a liking for “foreign teachers’ classes”, it seems to be due to an interest in practicing their oral/aural English skills rather than a comment on the foreign teachers’ entertainment value.

Factors cited as leading to an enjoyable class largely coincide with factors already considered in relation to what constitutes a “good” class in Sections 3-5 above. Liking the teacher is important, but relationships between students also figure quite prominently, along with the chance to discuss and learn from each other – especially among the fourth year students who are aware that such opportunities in classes will soon end.

I had a good time with my friends for group presentation.

I can know about English culture, and I can know my friend's thought about English culture.

I don't have many chance to talk about many things with foreigner and classmate.

Students also seem to appreciate classes that provide opportunities to make contact with classmates, so a class may be enjoyable because:

To communicate in English with my classmates is enjoyable for me.

I can increase my friend. I have chance to speak English.

Another, talking about her second foreign language, says:

It was almost the lesson by pair work (pair changed every time) and I could talk with a lot of people.

One new reason for enjoyment which emerges here is the attraction of learning something completely new.

I didn't know religion, so I could learn knowledge and a way of thinking.

The French class is freshness, and enjoy to study French.

These comments all relate to non-English specialization courses; we perhaps need to be aware as English teachers that the necessary review and reinforcement of language learning could be perceived as "doing the same old thing"; the "same thing" needs to be disguised



when it is recycled.

And one different slant on the “enjoyable” class. One student enjoyed the class when

It passed very quickly.

Her teachers can probably all agree with her on that one!

### **7. An interesting class**

The question “Which class (or classes) has been most interesting for you?) was asked in addition to the question about an “enjoyable” class to see if the students distinguished between classes where they had a pleasant experience, and classes where the content attracted them. Some did not, citing the same class in both categories, and of course it is perfectly possible for a class to be interesting and enjoyable at the same time. Also, although many students gave two different classes, the overall totals for the most frequently mentioned classes remain fairly constant, meaning that what is “enjoyable” for some students is “interesting” for others, and vice versa, but that there is fairly widespread agreement on which are good classes.

As with “enjoyable” classes, “interesting” classes may involve new experiences or new discoveries.

We could go to the court and watch the trial.

I didn't know American History very much. There are many things I was surprised.

The class makes me find new ideas.

I am being taught many expressions I didn't know.

Interest may arise from activating the brain, or from gaining a new perspective:

I could think deeply about modern current affairs.

I can review Japanese to teach it for foreign people.

or from a feeling of making progress, even if the class is challenging:

I learned to express many things in English.

It is very hard for me, but I think it is important.

Even if it is difficult to understand, I take the class that I want to learn (in which I am interested).

Although some students find classes interesting because they had decided in advance that this was something they wanted to study, others have found new or deeper interest as a result of taking classes.

I'm very interested in American society through the American literature.

Everything the teacher teaches me is really interesting, and it make me want to learn more and more.

“Hearing about the teacher’s overseas experiences, I have become interested in other countries.”

Some students relate interest and usefulness, with varying degrees of realism. When a student says she can study for TOEIC, she is interested in gaining a qualification which may help her to get a job. However, one wonders about the claim of one student that a class is most interesting to her because

We can learn real conversation and use it in our daily life.

Ideally, we would hope that all students could share the following feeling about a good class:

It’s that I can have interest in the class, and that every time the class is over, I have learned something.

This brings us to the last aspect to be considered about a “good” class; it brings about development of skills and/or knowledge.

### **8. A class which fosters learning**

Students who commented on increase of knowledge in their definitions of a “good” class say, for example

“It’s a class where I make a new discovery.”

I’ll get some knowledge.

There is a lot of substance.

One student says that a “good” class is

Acquiring education.

If we accept that “education is change” (Underhill 1990:3) and that if we “define learning as change...and...[can] not limit our view to academic achievement” (Clarke 26), then this definition of a good class ought to be one held by all our students.

In answer to the question “Which class has most helped you to improve your English?” one apparently satisfied student answers, “All classes”, and although one student claims she does not have such a class, happily most students have! They tend, understandably, to focus more on “knowing how” and developing skills than on “knowledge” in the sense of content. Students write in terms of “improve...”, “...better” and “I learned how to...” as a result of classes:

Compared with before, I think I can...

I think I improved it a little.

I can get three skills: writing, reading and speaking.

In considering how a class has been helpful in promoting English ability, students give a number of reasons. These may be related to content, to the instillation of useful habits, or to motivation and enjoyment:

“I had to find out about the topics to be able to do my homework.”

I can study about current topics in English.

I read the book every day. It became my custom.

“I like the class and I study hard for the class.”

After I took this subject, I became to like speak English more.

A number of students seem to show an acceptance of the fact that being challenged may lead to improvement.

This class is hard, but learn a lot of things.

I don't like writing, but I must write. I think I accustomed it.

I don't like to read long sentence or story etc. in English, so

I avoided it, but I think that I had very good time to read such reading.

These classes were VERY hard, “but my ability certainly improved”.

Although a lot of students focus on themselves, quite a number focus on classroom practice.

“Because there were many chances to write English, my writing ability improved naturally.”

This may be overstating the case, but as an underlying principle, it is true of any language skill that to some extent you learn to X by

Xing, so that any class which provides or requires practice should prove useful. When students say, however, that a class has been helpful because

We must speak English

it seems that we are back to the problem of students depending on the situation that the teacher sets up, rather than being self-motivated. Some students are indeed still focused on what the teacher does, rather than on their own learning. So a class is helpful because:

Mr X is good at teaching for us.

He helped me many times.

The teacher go to each student's desk and he helps us to improve our English.

Mr X teaches me easy understanding.

In contrast to the last remark here, the next comment shows that the student realizes that although the teacher can provide a stimulus, it is up to her to do something about it in order to develop.

Mr X gives me a useful question and I consider hard.

It is noticeable that the older students comment more on learning most from subjects that were difficult, time-consuming, or not particularly enjoyable, than the younger ones do.

## 9. Conclusion

As Long suggests, "At one time or another all teachers ask the question, 'What do my students really think of me and my teaching'", and although this is not the primary focus of this study, it is clear that the teacher is a major factor in whether the students consider a class to be "good" or not, and that the students have very definite opinions about the qualities that are desirable in teachers. It also seems to be the case that whereas many students express an interest in learning and improvement, for most of them having a pleasant and enjoyable experience with good relationships and a feeling of involvement is more important than the actual content of the class.

In contrast to the opinion of Shimizu that she has "always felt that students viewed [her] more as an entertainer than a teacher" and that "In contrast to [her] Japanese colleagues...[her] classes are not taken seriously by [her] students" (p.5), although the responses of our students suggest that they hope classes will entertain them, this wish seems to be general, rather than confined to their foreign teachers.

While recognizing majority preferences, however, we also have to recognize that there is "tremendous variation among learners; human beings do not behave, each one, like the other" so that "no single method suffices to answer all needs of all learners at all times" and a "cautiously eclectic" approach is called for (Brown 1987:246). We do not wish to aim for conformity; at the same time, as individual teachers we have to be aware of how our students are responding to our classes, and be willing to adjust and try different approaches. One student suggested that a "good" class should

Give pleasure to learn, give manifold wisdom.

If we can do that in our classes we shall have succeeded!

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