

The Role of the Teacher in Improving English Classes

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First of all, on behalf of the Tokushima Prefectural Board of Education, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and respect to all the JTEs and ALTs for promoting high school English education in Tokushima. This summer, we were happy to attend The Annual Tokushima Prefectural High School English Teachers' Meeting online. We were able to gather for the first time in a while and I hope that meeting was very informative and meaningful for all participants.

As you know, National Curriculum Standards were revised. The key concepts behind the revision are the following.

First, what will students learn? The National Curriculum Standards in foreign language set goals in five areas, which are “listening”, “reading”, “interaction and presentation”, and “writing”, through elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school.

Second, how will students learn? For this, we as teachers should improve classes by considering the learning process from perspective of proactive, interactive, and authentic learning. In English classes we need to set specific tasks, conduct activities with an awareness of the purposes, scene and situations of communication, and improve learning through utilizing knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar in actual communication in the five areas.

One of the significant differences in this National Curriculum Standards, compared to previous versions, is that there is more emphasis on the question “What students will be able to do?” The current situation we are facing is tough in many ways and could be even tougher in the future. As a teacher, I always think about what I can or should do for students' future. In that sense, the development of the competencies necessary for a new era and enhancement of learning are needed among all the subjects from elementary school to upper secondary school. So, how does this apply to our English classes?

To start with, students in English class should acquire knowledge and skills related to English in order to be able to use them in actual communication. National Curriculum Standards clearly state that English class should be a place for communication. Students should be exposed to a large amount of English and they should have many chances to use English.

In addition, students should develop their ability to understand, express, and communicate according to the purposes, scene, and situations of communication, which leads to development of the power to think, make decisions, and express themselves in order to respond to any

unknown or unexpected situations.

Finally, students need to cultivate an attitude of communicating independently and autonomously while understanding the culture behind English and giving consideration to others.

This year, I visited and observed English classes at 8 high schools across the prefecture. What I have noticed by observing English classes was that there were many positive things happening. I would say that all the teachers I have seen were trying hard to make their classes better for their students. They made effort to teach in English and also to make good use of ICT and tried to create many opportunities in class for students to be engaged in language activities. In a class, the teacher asked students to make a speech about their opinion. The teacher said, "Any volunteers?" Nobody raised their hands, nor were they willing to make a speech in front of their friends in English. Finally, the teacher chose a student to make a speech. After the speech, the teacher asked "Any questions?" Nobody asked questions. Finally, the teacher asked some questions to the student. There was an interaction between the student and the teacher only. I think this case would often happen in many classes. Why did most students refuse to make a speech in English? The answer is simple. The daily communication and interaction between a teacher and students in English is very important. Every class, every lesson, and every time, we teachers must continue to make chances for students to communicate with each other in English without any preparations in advance from the students. Through these tiny, yet vital experiences of English communication, we can make a warm, comfortable, anxiety-free classroom environment. Moreover, there are still some areas that can be improved. For example, students should have more chances to work on open-ended questions. Teachers still tend to expect students to give one right answer. There are times when this might be important, but the process of students' learning and their awareness of how they are learning are also very important. Recently, I had the chance to observe a math class. While the students were working on math problems, the teacher told them, "There is no right or wrong answer. What is important is to think about what strategy you are using and to be able to give reasons for using that strategy." This is exactly what the National Curriculum Standards are aiming at. The words of that teacher reminded me of what a teacher I respect said: "Does there always have to be a right answer, especially when students are learning?" He was the very teacher that taught me how to conduct the student-centered English class.

Indeed, we are living a difficult time as a professional English teacher, but, at the end, I'd like to share the points about what we should do for our students, again. First of all, build a classroom environment where students feel comfortable using English to communicate with each other. Then, enjoy using English as a tool for communication. Don't talk more than students in English. Expose students to a variety of ideas and opinions through English. Improve all students in language activities. The mission is difficult, but I strongly believe we can make it, if

we widely have professional bonds for mutual help both in our schools and outside.