

Survey of an English Discussion Class on Women's Issues :

Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Life Long Learning Course at Fukuoka Women's Center

Tamah L. Nakamura

BACKGROUND TO THE CLASS

The course "Discussing Women's Issues in English" was organized jointly by Fukuoka Jo Gakuin's Life Long Learning Center and Fukuoka Women's Center (Amikas) in 1994. It was held three times under the original title Eigo de hanasu kokusai josei mondai : October / November 1994, May / June 1995, and May/June 1996. The title was altered slightly to Eigo de hanasu Women's Issues for the following three times : May / June 1997, May / June 1998, and May / June 1999. The class was held in the evenings from 7-8 : 30 p.m. from 1994 to 1996, but was changed to an afternoon time slot of 2-3 : 30 p.m. from 1997 to the present. Subtopics of discussion under the main theme of women's issues for each class varied as follows :

1994 : Women's and Men's Speech Patterns

1995 : Women in Asia

1996 : Beijing Platform for Action

1997 : A Borderless, Global World : Women's Perspectives

1998 : Introduction to Women's Issues Through the Internet

1999 : Exploring the Movement on Women's Issues

Each course met for 8 weeks, once a week for 90 minutes. Although The Life Long Learning Center offers courses for three sessions per year, this class observed Amikas' policy of providing only one initial structured course with the formation of independent study groups as follow-up to allow further empowerment of the participants. Thus the course was not offered in the second semester.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

Amikas is located a convenient 5 minute commuter train ride from Fukuoka city center. Facilities on site include a library with materials and resources on gender, United Nations activities and policies, and women's issues. Childcare is available on appointment for the users of the rooms. Meeting rooms may be reserved three months in advance. The staff is well grounded in women's issues. A staff member attends the English discussion class both for her personal development, and as a resource person for Amikas. The services outlined here are limited to those pertaining to the discussion class, although additional amenities are offered at Amikas for the general public.

Demographics requested from participants for registration are contact numbers and age. The survey described in this paper asked only for the year/s of attendance. Therefore a general description of the participants is from the author's notes and memory. Ages in both the afternoon and evening classes ranged from mid-30's to 60's, with younger women who had child-rearing responsibilities usually attending afternoon classes. Other women attending afternoon classes were self-employed (architect), temporarily unemployed (math teacher on contract at sr. high school), and homemakers. Women employed full time were only able to attend in the evening. Some of these were NGO members or employed by the city. Over the six years that the class has been held, the participants in each class included only a few repeaters. This is in line with Amikas' policy aimed for empowerment and self-development by offering the class one semester, after which the partici-

pants continue independently under their own organization. Finally, registration is limited to women participants according to Fukuoka Jo Gakuin's Life Long Learning Center policy.

SURVEY PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Post-course participant feedback elicited by the Life Long Learning Center after each of the classes for six years has always been positive and supportive. However, as the course has been held for six years with request for continuation through participant feedback, with an aim to improve the course the author wanted to determine 1) what the participants had learned (knowledge), 2) how the participants felt about what they had learned (connectedness/awareness), and 3) what kinds of activities they were pursuing as a result of the knowledge (empowerment). A questionnaire was developed incorporating these three points.

Questionnaires were mailed to 93 former participants of the classes under the name of Fukuoka Women's Center (Amikas). It was hoped that as the participants did not know the instructor would see the answers, they would feel comfortable to respond with both positive and negative feedback without reservation. No demographics were included in the questions except for the year/s of participation. Thirty-four participants returned completed questionnaires while 17 questionnaires were returned undelivered due to change in addresses of the participants. The original questionnaire answered by the participants was in Japanese. The translated English version appears in the Appendix of this paper.

FINDINGS

Questionnaire answers were tallied by numbers of participant responses in each category. Written answers were translated into English, then categorized and tallied by number of responses. The following questions were chosen as central to the purpose identified above by the author : Table 1 : Reason for Taking the Class (participant expectation), Table 2 : Knowledge and Awareness Outcomes (participant expectation fulfillment), Table 3 : Ongoing Development (empowerment through self-development), Table 4 : Good Points of Class.

Table 1 : Q I 2 Reason for Taking the Class

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>No. of participants</u>
English skills	29
Women's Issues	20
Transportation convenience	19
Reasonable fee	13
Time schedule	12
Topic of study	12
Lecturer	8
Location	5
Child care available	3
Make friends	1
Others	1

(wanted to get involved in NGO activities)

Table 2 : Q I 4 Development of Knowledge and Awareness

<u>English ability :</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>Women's Issues :</u>	<u>23</u>
Terminology for women's issues	6	Pre/post Beijing study	1
Give presentations	6	Women's health/FGM	2
Confidence in speaking/ listening skills	6	Global women's issues	6

Encouraged to improve Eng.	5	Environmental problems	2
		Do research on an issue	2
		Other women's perspectives	1
		Gender issues	2
		Learned about women's issues	7
<u>Changed as a woman :</u>			<u>28</u>
Empowered by meeting other confident women			9
Have become more aware of women's issues and other perspectives			6
Want to take action rather than only talking			1
Have become more assertive			5
Found myself more			4
Got on internet and email			2
Try to stop letting my gender restrict my actions			1

Table 3 : Q II 1 (3,4,5,6) Ongoing Development

<u>No. of participants</u>	<u>Activity</u>
6	Founded "Mint Kai" ; meets once a month ; an English discussion group on women's issues ; (from 1998 to present)
2	"Eigo de hanasu Women's Issues-Part II" ; meets every other month ; discuss women's issues, read related books or articles, e.g., "A Half Step Behind" ; (from 1997 to present)
3	Members of the 1999 class are writing a paper about their class presentation to be published in December 1999
3	NGO activities
4	Volunteer activities : care of the aged at nursing homes, community administration, hosting foreign students, interpreter/guide
1	"Koko no kai" : revising the family register system

Table 4 : Q I 3 Good Points About the Class

<u>Points</u>	<u>No. of participants</u>
Good lecturer	22
Learned about women's issues	20
Made friends	13
Internationalized thinking	10
Reasonable fee	9
Developed Eng.	8
Good facilities	7
Content of lesson	6
Others	3

Giving a presentation in English was a good experience.

Motivated to do volunteer work and start my own study group.

Lecturer's teaching gave us confidence.

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS' AND FACILITATOR'S DEVELOPMENT

Participants : The purpose for the participants choice of the class was mirrored in their outcomes. For example, in Table 1, to improve English skills and learn about women's issues was noted as two of the goals of the participants. Table 2 reflects that English ability and women's issues were perceived more clearly as knowledge areas under the two main headings. Therefore, it is suggested

that a knowledge of the components which compose English ability and women's issues were more specifically defined by the participants. Further outcomes which were not listed as expectations before the course, are apparent in Table 2 : How Have You Changed as a Woman, Table 3 : Ongoing Development, and Table 4 : Good Points of the Class. Through meeting and interacting with other women of similar mindsets, exchanging experiences, setting those experiences into a framework of what it means to be a woman, the participants validated their experiences and thinking. Some of the results are apparent in the comments of "found myself", "became more assertive", "want to take action more than just talking". Activities undertaken by participants independently after the class may not be overwhelming in numbers, but those participants who do continue independently can be seen to be empowered by the consistency of their activity, i.e., regular meetings from inception to presently ongoing status.

Facilitator : Both preparation for and interaction in the class have contributed to personal and professional development for the author. She has developed not only knowledge of the U.N. women's movement but also of women's issues in Japan from a local to a national level. She recognized the need to research women's issues to professionally improve the course and to "internationalize" her own thinking as a woman in her second culture.

PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE CLASS

The following tables present participant responses on the points to be improved of the class (Table 5), as well as additional comments in general (Table 6), the final item of the questionnaire.

Table 5 : Q I 3 Points to be Improved in the Class

Points	No. of participants
Too short	10
Didn't develop Eng. Skills	8
Content of lesson	5
Lecturer	0
Fee	0
Facilities	0

Additional comments :

- 5 Would like to have the course 2 or 3 times a year, not just once.
- 1 The advertisement did not make it clear that this was a discussion class which is different from the other English conversation classes offered by the Life Long Learning Center.
- 1 Some participants asserted their opinion too aggressively.
- 1 The English proficiency level of the participants was unequal so it was difficult to discuss

Table 6 : Additional Comments (post survey question)

- 1 Should focus not only on women's issues but also on gender issues.
- 1 Need to have a lecture in Japanese before this class to learn basic terminology for women's issues.
- 1 Want a reading and discussion group on women's issues in English.
- 1 Hope to have some lectures by non-Japanese women about women's issues in their countries or other professional lectures on women's issues.

In response to the item on the duration of the course being too short, the Life Long Learning Center's courses are all 8-week courses, although they are all offered for 3 sessions per year. In the case of the joint Amikas course, it is offered only one session in line with Amikas' policy on empowerment of the individual. After an initial structured course, participants are encouraged to take

advantage of Amikas' resources and amenities to continue their study independently. The formation of groups is encouraged.

Responsibility for the description of the course in the advertisement is the lecturer's. A clearly outlined language skill goal incorporated into a discussion on women's issues will clarify the purpose of the course, therefore eliminating confusion as to how the course is different from others offered by the Life Long Learning Center. The May/June 1999 course focused specifically on points for giving a presentation in English on women's issues. One of the comments in Table 4 refers to this as a good point.

A further suggestion which will have a direct effect on the May/June 2000 course is to include 'gender' issues, not only women's issues. The title of the course will be changed to Eigo de hanasu Gender Issues in reflection of the participants' suggestions as well as the U.N. policy toward gender study as a result of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In addition to participants' suggestions for improving the class, the following points need to be considered to improve this study.

1. An analysis of the approach to the class and the outcomes of the participants should be set into a theoretical framework of feminist epistemology and education.
2. A comparison of this class with other English discussion classes on women's issues might support the theory of feminist epistemology. Two discussion groups, for example, are held at MOVE Women's Center in Kitakyushu and Forum Yokohama in Yokohama.
3. To determine participants' language skill development, the facilitator might a) take a video of the discussion class for an 8-week course, b) prepare a pre/post course questionnaire for participants on their interaction skills development, c) maintain a participant-observation journal.

With this type of qualitative data in place, a more critical analysis can be undertaken.

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to Yasuko Otsu, Fukuoka Women's Center resource person, and Yoriko Taniyama, a member of the class, for their valuable cooperation and assistance.

REFERENCES

- Aloiau, Edwin. (1996). U.S. College Survival Kit For Those Who Dare : Giving Presentations ; Participating in Discussions. Asahi Weekly Newspaper, October 20.
- Belenky, Mary, et al. (Eds.) (1986). Women's Ways of Knowing. New York : Basic Books.
- Goldberger, Nancy et al. (Eds.) (1996). Knowledge, Difference, and Power. New York : Basic Books.
- Hooks, Bell. (1994). Teaching to Transgress. New York : Routledge.
- Klippel, Friderike. (1984). Keep Talking : Communicative Fluency Activities for Language Teaching. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- McMahill, Cheiron. (1997). Communities of Resistance : A Case Study of Two Feminist English Classes in Japan. TESOL Quarterly, 31, 612-622.
- McMahill, Cheiron. (1998). Questioning Gender Through the Study of English in Japan. Gunma Prefectural Women's University Research Journal, 2, 23-35.
- Tannen, Deborah. (1994). Gender & Discourse. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Ur, Penny. (1986). Discussions That Work. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Former Participants of Amikas Discussion of Women's Issues in English

I . About the class :

1 . When did you take the class : 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999

2 . What was your purpose for taking the class?

- 1 . English skills 2 . Women's issues 3 . Time suited schedule 4 . Good transportation
5 . Good lecturer 6 . Make friends 7 . Friend's recommendation 8 . Topic/theme of study
9 . Good location 10. Nursery/babysitting service 11. Reasonable fee 12. Others

3 . What were the good and bad points :

Good points : 1 . Made friends 2 . Developed English skills 3 . Internationalized thinking 4 .
Developed women's issues 5 . Lecturer 6 . Content of lesson 7 . Good facilities 8 . Reasonable
fee 9 . Others

Bad points : 1 . Too short 2 . Didn't develop English skills 3 . Contents of lesson 4 . Lecturer
5 . Fee 6 . Facilities 7 . Others

4 . What did you learn?

About English ability

About women's issues

How did your awareness and thought as a woman change?

II . Ongoing Development

1 . What kind of activities did you do after the class was finished?

(1) Independent study group : group name, activities, how often, duration

(2) Seminars or lectures on women's issues :

- a. women's studies b. women's labor c. education d. child rearing e. family
f. international exchange g. women's development h. human rights i. day care
j. environment k. others

Who organized the activity?

- a. women's center b. university c. public hall d. private company (newspaper, etc.),
e. local public body f. others

How many times? a. 1-2 times b. 3-5 times c. 6-10 times d. more than 10 times e. others

How often did you attend? a. weekly b. monthly c. annually d. practically never

(3) NGO activities

Name, responsibilities, how often

(4) Volunteer activities : name, your responsibility, how often

(5) No activity

(6) Others

2 . What kind of activities are you interested in

- 1 . independent study group 2 . Seminars or lectures on women's issues 3 . English class
4 . occupational skills 5 . volunteer activity 6 . NGO activities 7 . Others

Additional comments :