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Teaching English in Burma: A Reflective Essay on Dialogic Pedagogy in a New Context

David P. Shea

There is a somewhat romantic appeal to the notion of teaching English in Burma that suggests allure and adventure. When a former student, now studying in the UK, heard of my plans to volunteer as an English teacher for five weeks in Yangon, he said that he would like to do something similar because it sounded so exciting. Certainly, the idea evokes colorful images of a unfamiliar part of the former British empire that appeals to travelers who wear Birkenstock sandals and carry *Lonely Planet* guides. But unlike my student – and colleagues who have journeyed throughout southeast Asia, I don't really like to travel. I rather enjoy the quotidian commute from my desk at home to the classroom at Hiyoshi, but when I was granted a sabbatical by the Faculty of Business and Commerce, I jumped at the chance to live in Yangon during the rainy season and teach in an academic preparatory institute there called the Pre-Collegiate Program (PCP). I thought that I could help, but it turned out that I gained more than I gave and, in the process of trying to implement dialogic pedagogy in the EIL classroom, had the chance to reflect on what it means to be a language teacher.

I have been to Burma before. In 2014, I joined the Learning Across

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School	Course Title	Goals	Day
PCP	Language, Culture, & Society	Academic Literacy	M, W, F
Connect	The Discourse of Advertising	Strategies of Persuasion	Tue
Connect	Popular Ads on the Internet	Oral Discussion	Sat, Sun

Borders study tour, led by Dwight Clark, traveling for two weeks as a regular participant along with approximately 20 students from Japan, most from Keio, including three from my own classes. For the week we were in Yangon, the 15 Burmese students enrolled in PCP acted as our guides, and I was deeply impressed by the commitment and intellectual maturity of the young students who showed us around the city, talking about culture, politics, history, and future dreams.

My experience on the LAB program led to my proposal to volunteer to teach at PCP. For a five week stay, however, visa sponsorship was needed, and that was something PCP could not provide. Another school loosely associated with PCP, Connect Institute, offered to sponsor my visit, and in return, I offered to teach classes for Connect as well as PCP, which is how I found myself committed to teaching three courses at two different institutions, six days a week, with little time for sightseeing.

In all three courses, I drew on my experience at Keio. The course I taught at PCP, titled "Language, Culture and Society," met for three sessions per week, and I modeled the class on the *saijokyu* seminar I taught for a number of years at the Center for Foreign Language Education. The goal of the *saijokyu* seminar was to develop advanced academic literacy, particularly the reading and writing skills needed to study at a U.S. university, which Keio students have the opportunity to do on the International Center's study abroad program -- as well as increasingly, in English-medium upper level courses at Mita like *Shogakubu's* Global Passport Program. PCP students

share a similar goal to study at universities in the States, but upon request of the director, I reduced the academic literacy component to one session per week, while adding a current affairs component, using news articles, film, and a short story, materials which I have used in the first-year English *jokyu* communication class in *Shogakubu*. A third strand of the course involved discussion based on an in-house text, *Touchstones*, which consisted of short readings on philosophy and ethics. For both Connect classes, noncredit-bearing electives, I drew on curricula I have used in the general education seminar I teach at Hiyoshi, titled the Discourse of Advertising, designed as a discussion based analysis of contemporary ads and commercials.

In this paper, I limit the focus of my report to the PCP class which was the primary reason for the trip and the most intensive of the three I taught. I talk about the theoretical principles I tried to follow, as well as some of the practical problems I faced, and lessons the experience allowed me to think about. I pay particular attention to the notion of pedagogic authority and my efforts to construct a positive class atmosphere. In the next section, I begin by describing the idea of dialogic teaching and what that notion entails.

Theoretical Principles

One of the fundamental principles of instruction I always try to follow in my classes is the enactment of dialogic engagement between teacher and students in a whole class setting. Specifically, I am referring to scaffolded talk about a topic, with the goal to develop understanding of both the issue and the way of talking as well as thinking about that issue. Most students enrolled in advanced English courses at Keio (like the students at PCP in Yangon) typically walk in the door on the first day of class with fluent conversational skills already in hand. Most know how to talk about everyday events with relative ease and accuracy, especially *kikokushijo* returnees

(Kanno, 2003), whose pronunciation is sometimes so natural that they are mistaken for native speakers. The problem with returnees (and other advanced speakers), occurs when proficiency is viewed in linear terms as a single construct, whereas in reality, there is actually a large gap between conversational proficiency and academic literacy, often referred to as BICS and CALP: basic interpersonal communication skills *versus* cognitive academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2008). While the difference between conversational ability and written literacy is sometimes exaggerated (Hall, 1993), the BICS/CALP continuum is nevertheless useful to highlight the kind of language study that advanced proficiency students need, particularly when the goal is to use English in academic and/or professional contexts.

A basic question of classroom pedagogy is how academic language proficiency actually develops. Teacher fronted lecture invariably works to position students in a receptive capacity, which is not particularly effective for language learning. SLA research has suggested that learners develop language ability through active engagement, using language to construct knowledge, synthesizing ideas and expressing thoughts and interpretations productively, both in writing and in talk. Swain (2000) has argued that productive output stimulates learning and mediates awareness of linguistic features, and Spack's (1997) longitudinal study of a Japanese student's academic socialization at an American university illustrated that the student succeeded, not by filling in the gaps in information she did not know, but by reading (and writing) constructively and creatively, "gaining ownership" (p. 4) of ideas through active participation and engagement.

A sociocultural perspective on second language learning (Edwards & Mercer, 2013; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) adopts the prospective that all learning is social. What is inside the head ("intra-

mental") is first experienced on the interpersonal ("inter-mental") plane of interaction where it is appropriated and internalized, often through scaffolded or assisted participation. Learning is not achieved by a transfer of information, like the deposit of knowledge into the bank account of the brain. Rather, students learn through expressive activity: what they do and how they interact with others. In other words, students develop academic literacy because they are engaged in academic literacy activities, taking advantage of opportunities to participate in "literate talk" (Gibbons, 2009). The issue is the quality of engagement that takes place: Are students involved in both synthesizing information from a source as well as constructing original interpretations based on their own ideas?

One of the stronger trends in recent second language acquisition research is the widespread endorsement of small group work. Peer to peer interaction is seen by proponents to maximize opportunities for "negotiated input" which works to increase awareness of linguistic structure and opportunities to talk, since there are always more group members than teachers (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012, p. 43–44). Ideally, small group work generates an information gap, where one partner has information the other does not, which produces a natural need for negotiation and clarification. Within the sociocultural framework, peer to peer scaffolding evident in group work (Donato, 1994) is widely endorsed since learners are seen to "provide mutual support to each other in order to solve linguistic problems" (Swain & Watanabe, 2013).

However, the role of the teacher in whole-class contexts is more fundamental to effective implementation of dialogic engagement (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Dawes, 2008). Only the teacher, arguably, is able to elicit and model academic talk, which means, in effect, to think aloud with students. To develop this shared cognition, the teacher takes a tentative

expression and expands it with recasts and clarifying questions, making the reasoning explicit and thus accessible to students. In effect, the "communication system that the teacher sets up shapes the roles that the pupils can play" (Barnes, 2008, p. 2).

The goal, however, is not too *tell* students how to talk. The idea is to actually engage them in increasingly sophisticated academic discussion, through such discursive strategies as modeling, soliciting, expansion/ extension, clarification, and reframing. Doing this requires what Gibbons (2009) calls a Janus-faced approach to instruction. The teacher knows both how to express ideas formally and academically and, at the same time, how students typically talk in informal, everyday discourse. The teacher steps back and forth between the two styles of expression, on the one hand helping to expand tentative ideas expressed by students into a more academic style; on the other hand, explaining academic concepts in simple language that students understand. Sensitive to both sides, the goal is to pick up tentative and half-formed ideas and transform them academically, while making complex ideas accessible. By standing in the middle between academic expression and everyday conversation, the teacher engages with students, collectively building concepts and interpretations, and collaboratively constructing ideas that students increasingly make their own.

Another principle of dialogic engagement in the EIL classroom is the focus on content over form. Content-based instruction is a highly effective way to learn the L2, particularly as shown by the widespread success of bilingual immersion programs that began in Canada and spread internationally, even to Japan (Bostwick, 2002). Content is the frame on which language is hung, and using content to provide language practice is widely regarded as effective, simultaneously promoting both academic skills and second language ability (Lightbown & Spada, p. 156). Content based

instruction has "clearly demonstrated" that immersion approaches "develop much higher levels of second language proficiency" than traditional approaches (Lyster, 2007, p. 14). Content-based approaches are also far more interesting than traditional instruction, making it easier for students to move away from a relationship with English as a required and troublesome "subject" of study, toward a more personal tool of social communication and expression of identity (Lin, 2010).

Lyster (2007) points out, however, that exclusive focus on content learned receptively almost always results in students being unable to develop grammatical accuracy. Without having attention drawn explicitly to structural features, particularly in areas where the L2 differs from the L1, Lyster argues, successful acquisition is constrained by an exclusive focus on content. Lyster is not advocating a primary, decontextualized focus on grammar, but a "reactive" and integrated intervention with the intention to facilitate more accurate and more articulate expression. One of the central problems, especially in content-based immersion contexts, is the emphasis on receptive comprehension and consequent neglect of productive skills. Following Swain (1985) and others, Lyster (2007, p. 77) argues that students need opportunities to express ideas and engage in "precise and appropriate use" of productive output, in a way that stretches students to the "leading edge of their interlanguage resources" raising attention and allowing practice of otherwise difficult to master grammar patterns.

While I agree that grammar is certainly an important concern, I would argue that the need for attention to form is broader than grammatical accuracy. Structural elements are only one part of what students do not get in content-based classes when the focus is on receptive understanding. Broader discursive elements related to voice and expression are are also at the heart of EIL, especially on the university level. Focusing solely on

accurate production does not in and of itself ensure that students have the opportunity to express ideas and articulate explanations. What I am pointing to here is the chance to build ideas in academic discourse, to engage as a recognized, validated participant in the dialogic exchange of ideas. Within this broader view of academic — or symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2006), the question becomes how students are positioned as legitimate speakers. Which is, in turn, related to the construction of an environment that encourages active engagement in English.

Burmese Students

Going into PCP, my goal was to create a classroom environment that built on the pedagogic principles of engagement similar to what I have tried to articulate in my advanced English classes at Keio. I was surprised to find, though, that students in Yangon were quite similar in terms of reticence and reluctance to express ideas. Like their "shy" Japanese counterparts, the Burmese students demonstrated a clear preference to sit silently and observe without participating actively or contributing to class discussion, even when explicitly asked to speak up. In spite of appeals, students were reliably quiet in face of questions and requests to talk – at least at first. Often this reluctance is described in terms of the "culture" of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013), and it is true that most PCP students are products of an education system that primarily uses "a transmission model of teaching" (Hardman *et al*, 2016, p. 17) that prioritizes knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and translation. Instruction in many high school English classes typically takes place in the L1, with emphasis on rote memorizing and close reading of designated textbooks (Sein, 2015). Students in many Burmese secondary schools generally ignore speaking and listening activities to prioritize written examinations (Sein, p. 98). Increasingly, English serves, arguably, as

a "sword" of social division (Kandiah, 1984), given the way it is used to determine university admission.

Among PCP students, there was a wide range of educational backgrounds and proficiencies. Many of the students attended public high schools that followed the government curriculum, although some attended private, English medium international schools. Most demonstrated an advanced, near-native conversational proficiency, with a handful who were actually native speakers who grew up with English in the home, with parents who had earned degrees abroad. Most of the students entered PCP after graduating high school, but there were a few who had already enrolled in university and had left, withdrawing from the Burmese career track mid-stream. There were 18 students, all who were planning to apply for admission to universities in the US, most likely small liberal arts colleges, many with tuition waivers or scholarship assistance.

Pedagogic Authority

I was surprised at two things in particular related to language pedagogy: First, there seemed to be a distance initially between the students that seemed to affect class discussion. There was what I felt to be a skepticism toward the outsider that took a while to overcome. The inside/outside orientation reminded me of the *uchi/soto* distinction that characterizes a lot of interaction in Japan, but the Burmese version was rather quickly overcome. Now it seems obvious, but going into the project, I had assumed that outsider status would not be an issue, since the program is selective and students were, I thought, strongly committed to study. By the end of the third week, the class had indeed coalesced and bonded, but in the first week of classes, I sensed that a key element was missing. In other words, a positive environment was not granted automatically; it had to be

constructed– or more accurately, negotiated. Students were not impolite, but neither were they cooperative simply because I expected them to be. Perhaps I had assumed that present experience would follow past example, and the students would be similar to the group I had met two years earlier while on the LAB program. Then again, I interacted with those students in 2014 outside class on mini tours and field trips, and there is a world of difference between spending time in the park with friendly students showing you around, and engaging students to participate in discussion based on substantial academic reading and writing assignments. It was not easy dealing with the obligations and expectations of pedagogic authority, trying to construct a positive class atmosphere, as well as increase attention and investment on the part of students.

Thi distance, or rather skepticism of students was noticeable in both overly relaxed attitudes during class discussion, as well as a somewhat loose approach to reading assignments during the first two weeks. I struggled to address the issue, and felt that I had to walk a fine line between encouragement and censure. On the one hand, I wanted to establish a positive connection with class members, to be encouraging in a way that made students comfortable while not instilling fear and trepidation. On the other hand, I felt obligated to do the kind of things that teachers are expected to do: impose order, make decisions about evaluation, and enforce participation in activities. These are contradictory commitments, and it is inevitably the teacher's job to juggle different, sometimes irreconcilable discourses of pedagogy, much as the traveler in Yangon must negotiate the streets by looking down to avoid holes in the sidewalk, while looking up to dodge low hanging awnings.

The second surprising point about teaching Burmese students was related to use of the L1. I don't speak Burmese and, going into the project,

never imagined that my lack of language ability would pose a problem. Looking back, I can now see that, while not insurmountable, it was certainly an instructive issue to face. I realized the problem on the first day of class when I asked what students thought about the reading. There was a buzz in the room as students turned and spoke to each other in Burmese, leaving me flummoxed. I had no idea what they were talking about, nor whether I should encourage the spontaneous talk or try to shut it down. For the next two weeks, I was clueless in my dependency on English. I had been positioned as an outsider, and questions about pedagogic authority had been raised.

I do not have a similar problem in Japan. As a long-term resident, I have a basic fluency in the language, so when students talk in Japanese among themselves, I know what they are saying. Further, I am able to interact bilingually, doing things like interject translations for key vocabulary terms without slowing the pace of the lesson. I confirm homework, and sometimes take individual questions after class, or add supplementary instructions about particular activities, all in Japanese. Speaking the students' L1 confers an intangible authority, which allows more control over the classroom, certainly in a good sense. Not speaking the L1, however, inevitably puts the teacher in a tenuous position and poses a distinct drawback to effective pedagogy. I found myself thinking that the English native speaker who doesn't speak the L1 of the students may in fact be reproducing post-colonial attitudes and unfair cultural assumptions. I then found myself thinking that maybe I had appropriated the cultural imperiousness of my mother, who used to be offended when my wife and I would use Japanese in her home, because she assumed – wrongly – that we were talking behind her back when we used a language she couldn't understand.

As the term at PCP progressed, however, and I began to develop a bond

with the students, the L1 seemed less of a barrier. In fact, my awareness of students using Burmese had faded by the third week, and I rarely noticed that students were not speaking English, and if I did, it did not bother me any longer. Now, I am not so sure about the need for a teacher to know the students' L1. It certainly offers an advantage, even though I follow the basic principle of using English almost exclusively to teach an English lesson. It seems that knowing the L1 strengthens the functionality of instruction, as well as symbolizes respect for the local culture – even though both goals can be achieved in various ways.

Perseverance

At one point during the planning stage, before I left Japan, the director of the PCP program remarked that a 2–3 week stay was likely too short a period to be effective. It would probably take, she said, at least 5 weeks before the class "gelled." Indeed, there was no explicit rebellion or resistance on the part of the students, but there was certainly laxity of attention during the first and second weeks, which took some effort to tighten up. I found it difficult to put my finger on the problem exactly, within the ecology of influences that characterize the classroom (van Lier, 2012). Although I now feel thoroughly positive about the program, my first impression of the students was, honestly, skeptical.

In my teaching diary, written during the first week, for example, I noted, with not a little frustration, how I would pose a question to the class that would be met with an awkward silence. I recall one incident when I called on one student, who offered an acceptable but abbreviated and not especially insightful answer. In response, I tried to pick up the issue and model how the answer might be expanded. I quickly stopped as the student was looking at me in what seemed to be anger. It was as if I had criticized her for proposing

the wrong answer.

There was, as one student wrote on the term-final evaluation, a lot of chitchat in the first week or two because "a few people hadn't read the article" which was certainly the impression I had as well. In sum, I was concerned about the direction of the class; the atmosphere was not as positive as it should be. The challenge, I thought, was similar to something I have faced in classes in Japan with a resistant group of students who prove honestly hard to like. In that situation, it's easy to turn off the class and doubt the students, but if the teacher doesn't believe in the students, it easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Achor (2014) relates the story of the Pygmalion effect, what happened when a teacher was told that three particular students were especially gifted, even though they were, in fact, quite ordinary. By the end of the term, the three students' scores had improved dramatically, due simply to the teacher's belief that they were above average. The reverse, of course, is true as well. If the teacher doesn't like the students, failure is far more likely, possibly inevitable. Knowing this tendency toward self-fulfilling expectations, mental aerobatics are called for, to convince students as well as oneself. I found that I was trying to convince myself in each class not to doubt students, holding on to the hope that the atmosphere would improve. In other words, I felt a pedagogic imperative to persevere in being positive. In the case of the PCP group, the classroom environment did improve, remarkably, which I attribute in part to the sustained effort to look for the positive, in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Writing Integrated into the Curriculum

Gibbons (2009) has noted the way in which oral talk leads to literacy, but it seemed clear that the opposite held true as well. The 1–2 page weekly writing assignment, introduced in the third week of the course, worked to

focus attention and orient students to class discussion in positive ways. In the first two weeks without an assignment, discussion seemed unfocused, lacking energy and significance. With the assignment due at the end of the week, class talk increased in value, since what was said by other students became a resource that could be picked up and used in composition. With increased attention, class talk became more valuable. Concentration was heightened, thinking thickened.

I noted in my teaching journal following the first week of class that I felt discussion was "unproductive" (p. 22). I also noted that I thought there would be more interest, with quicker uptake and response to questions. It seemed that not having a writing component allowed attention to wander. I wrote:

There's a lot of extraneous chit chat, and a lack of focus. One of the problems is that students don't take notes, which demonstrates a lack of investment. In addition, taking notes leads productively to an essay. In the film class at Hiyoshi, most students took notes diligently, and I remember a couple of times being surprised when students quickly sat down during stand-up activity to take notes on what someone else had said. Here, students don't seem to feel the pressure to pay attention, possibly because there is no writing assignment.

An essay wasn't possible the first two weeks for administrative reasons, but I introduced a short 2–3 page written assignment, due at the end of the third week. Gradually, the atmosphere began to shift, and in the class evaluation at the end of the five week term, a number of students noted that the writing assignment did in fact influence participation. One student commented that "the essay makes me understand more of other's thoughts" while another wrote that "As I see people writing I got motivated." The

essay was both an incentive and a lens. Knowing that it was there changed the overall tone of class talk significantly.

Of course, it's not as easy to grade an essay as it is to assign it, but to take pressure off the students, I adopted a grading policy aimed at encouraging reluctant writers. I promised students an automatic A if the essay was long enough, on topic, 100% the student's own words, and submitted on time. I wanted to shift attention away from grades, toward ideas. As a result, I specifically did not consider grammar, although I made a lot of editorial marks about grammar (as well as style) on individual essays. Mostly, I wanted to respond to the ideas that students were trying to articulate. I trusted that students were interested not only in the ideas they were trying to articulate, but also in improving their own written style. I hoped that my comments would serve as encouragement as well as stimulus to raise awareness about language use.

Relevance to Student Goals

I selected the readings for the class to give students an idea of what the college experience would entail, including academic requirements, expectations, and challenges. It was in the third week that students seemed to make a connection between the readings and their own experience – particularly their own goals for academic study. While the Morton, Storch and Thompson (2015) study dealing with student perceptions of academic writing assignments was accessible and relevant, it was Morita's study of reticence in the classroom that was the turning point in constructing a positive classroom atmosphere.

Comments from the PCP students were strikingly uniform. Many stated that, like the informants Morita investigated, they, too, felt reluctant to speak out in class, because of the risk of embarrassment and error. In particular,

week	Journal article	Theme
1	Spack (1997)	Development of academic literacy
2	Lin (2010)	English in personal and professional
3	Morton, Storch & Thompson (2015)	Perceptions of academic writing
4	Morita (2004)	Oral participation in graduate school classes
5	Kinginger (2004)	EIL study and identity reconstruction

Morita reports that one informant of the study, Emiko, asked permission to observe silently. Although the professor agreed to the request, Morita notes that Emiko felt "increasingly isolated" as it became "even more difficult" (p. 590) to join class discussion. In a sense, Emiko got the space she wanted but at the same time, lost the chance to participate, which she also wanted. Emiko's example shows that often we don't really know what we want. Or rather, we want contradictory things, which makes the classroom such a complex environment. In class discussion, I made the comment that it's natural to feel worried about participating actively in that it's much easier to listen passively and let others speak out. There is no risk, no chance of saying something stupid or making an embarrassing mistake. Then again, there is also little chance of improving language skills after withdrawing. Spack (1997) argued that the development of academic literacy is grounded in "constructing knowledge" (p. 33) which happens, not by just listening, but by taking the risk to speak out and express ideas. Participating, in other words is a key to learning English.

Students responded as if they had experienced a revelation. One commented, "I felt like the article was talking about me." Another said, "I feel exactly the same as Nanako [another informant in the Morita study]." With the discussion of Morita's study, the atmosphere of the class was transformed. Students had made an important connection. They had recognized the value of investment in the reading, that taking the time and

making the effort was worthwhile. In other words, persistence paid off: we were on the same page.

Reticence and Nomination

Many of the Burmese students were at first quite reticent about expressing an opinion publically in the classroom setting. In part, this reluctance seemed to be rooted in a cultural model of learning widespread in Myanmar, where students do not want to be seen as challenging the authority of the teacher. One of the PCP teachers said that it was like pulling teeth to get students to speaking class at the beginning of the academic year. To ask a question of a teacher, he said, is to risk loss of face and embarrassment.

Within this culturally situated disinclination to speak, I experimented with a non-voluntary nomination activity that I hoped would level the playing field. I began class with a stand-up activity where all students had to stand as a group and then volunteer individually to answer before they could sit down. The function of the activity is to push productive output and force everyone to talk, especially students who would normally not speak out, either from a sense of reserve or embarrassment at the possibility of making a mistake. Of course, the activity put pressure on students, but at the same time, it also worked in the opposite direction, to take the pressure off, since there was less risk associated with self-nomination. From the reluctant yet committed student's perspective, the push to make a comment was a needed nudge. Interestingly, the activity generated positive evaluations. One student wrote "we were forced to participate in class which is to me a very good thing as it helps people conquer their fear of expressing ideas." Another wrote "we want to share something in class, but we are not sure if it is correct or not." In effect, the activity helped students overcome uncertainty

and lack of confidence. That is to say, nomination affirmed student opinions and also worked to "position" students as speaking with authority and thus someone who deserved to be listened to.

Initially, there was resistance to the idea of stand-up. During the first two weeks of the term, a few students remarked that the activity "encourages participation" but more commented on the feeling of competition and having to compete to be nominated: "everyone is fighting to say their opinions." But as time passed, students became more invested in class activities. The more they recognized the value of generating ideas about an important topic, the more they valued, as one student said, being made to "go out of my comfort zone and write and discuss about issues I didn't understand before."

Humor and Personal Connection

A final category that seemed to contribute to making the class work: a sense of humor and personal connection. I put the two elements together, in part because I didn't feel that jokes were an integral part of the class. One student commented on the second week evaluation, by writing "I love your jokes." My response was that I hadn't told any. Well, there was one, when I was setting up a power point presentation and my desktop was visible on the projector. One of the most impertinent students said let me see what's in your folder titled jokes. I said, "If I open that folder, the only thing you'll see is a picture of you." Most everyone laughed, including the cheeky student himself, but I knew that my quip was more snarky than funny.

I mention jokes, not because I told any, but because I was aware of *trying* to – or rather, trying to keep the atmosphere of the class light and entertaining. There is of course a risk of undermining the seriousness of a lesson by adopting a lively, fast paced rhythm, but simultaneously, there is also the risk of putting everyone to sleep. It seems that the teacher's job is to

balance the light and the heavy, in pragmatic recognition of the performance that is at the heart of pedagogic identity. But I think there is a broader element at work here. Humor is a democratizing influence, Bakhtin reminds us, when laughter at the carnival was a way to make fun of ecclesiastical authority and turn social hierarchy on its head, so that the clown gained respect with wit, rather than garments. In other words, joking is a way of bringing balance into the classroom. It is also a way to connect to the personal ties that teacher and students share.

I used to make fun of professors who took their students out to lunch, but I have begun to rethink my position, to recognize the value of making personal connections with students, which I did at PCP. It's incredibly time consuming and it's not an option in every context, but it was the interaction outside class that helped establish a bond with students at the end. There were two paths along which this interaction traveled: The first was the arrangement that some of the students made for for me to join their internship programs outside school. Seeing students in a different setting offered a new perspective, a chance to see them acting like professionals, which generated admiration and respect. The second path was the individual consultations about the essays that I held during lunch. In classes at Keio, I always write a lot of comments on student papers, but I generally arrange meetings only in the rare case when there is problem. At PCP, I started off wanting to talk about particular features of writing style, so I made appointments during lunch break with anyone who was interested. More students came than expected, and the conversation strayed off topic in many cases, but I was surprised at how effective it was to talk informally, to learn not only about what the student was trying to say but also to get a better idea of the person behind the face. I changed my opinion of a couple of students I had considered cheeky, and it was easier to see them in a new, more positive

light because we sat together in the library and I asked " what are you trying to say here?"

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to offer a personal perspective on my five week experience teaching as a volunteer in Burma. I sketched the notion of dialogic engagement as a way to scaffold academic literacy. I also considered ways in which both the class atmosphere and pedagogic authority of the teacher were constructed. I noted that believing in students was not always easy, but I realized the value of a light tone, as well as the importance of making a personal connection with individual students outside class.

Upon reflection, I feel that there are a number of striking similarities between PCP students and Japanese, particularly in terms of reticence, advanced proficiency, and long term goals. At the same time, there is something special about students I met in Burma. They live in a country with an infrastructure that is in many ways broken. The traffic is horrendously chaotic, the water not always potable, the electricity often on the blink, and the government unduly influenced by a corrupt military. In spite of the challenges, there is a generosity of spirit and ambition to do something positive that I can only admire and try to learn from.

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