

College Scholarship Essay

Ever since I started learning English at the age of 12, I had wondered why nobody taught me how to communicate in English. All I learned in school was how to produce complex grammatical sentences to outrank the competitors on entrance exams. While I followed teachers' instructions, I was constantly thinking how to apply such knowledge into real-world communication, and eventually, how to teach English better to make English classes more engaging.

When I entered in XXX University, Japan in 2006, I made a firm decision to seize any opportunity to use English and start teaching English. I joined an international club called “@home”, where we supported international students and organized a number of events in which Japanese and international students interacted with each other. In the meantime, I started teaching English at a cram school in my freshman year to cumulate teaching experience and experiment communicative teaching. I moved back and forth between an English user and English teacher for four years, because I knew that would help me become an outstanding teacher.

In my junior year, I was nominated as a Vice President of the administration team for the 25th XXX University International Festival, one of the biggest international events in the region where the university was located. As a Vice President, I was responsible for various jobs including holding weekly meetings with the administration team of both Japanese and international students, holding meetings with international exhibitors, and negotiating safety and budgetary issues with university. Although these responsibilities necessarily involved sensitive considerations about cultural differences, religious/country relationships, and safety/monetary issues, I consulted with the club advisor, Dr. XXX many times, discussed with team members and university repeatedly, and finally led the festival to success by attracting more than 3,000 guests.

Around this time, I was making my mind to contribute to Japan's English language teaching (ELT) and guide it to a more communicative direction. It was a lonely and tiring journey as few people around me were familiar with my current specialization, Language Policy and Planning (LPP) and degree-seeking study-abroad, but I did not give up because my passion toward Japan's ELT became part of my identity. There were not helpful programs for me at my university, so I emailed professors around the world or took courses from another university to learn where I could learn LPP and influence Japan's ELT policy.

I advanced to the Master's program at the University XXX in 2011. Initially, I was naively thinking that studying LPP would magically make me an “influential” teacher, but what I learned was the reality that language policy is beyond one person's control as it is inseparable from history, culture, politics, and money. Japan's ELT policy, for instance, cannot be discussed without addressing a common belief that learning English brings social success. My Master's program told me a realistic lesson that it would not be easy to change the language policy without knowing how policy is made.

With this understanding, I first became an English instructor at XXX University (CQU), China in 2015. I chose China to observe Japan's ELT from a broader perspective, as China has had a historical impact on Japan's educational system. I knew that there was a low chance to be hired, because many studies in applied linguistics have shown that non-native (and/or non-White) English teachers, regardless of their teaching ability, are almost automatically seen inferior to native-speaking teachers in many societies. I decided to apply nevertheless because I was confident in my teaching and I knew that somebody had to challenge this common belief. I was very lucky because both CQU and my bosses, including my referee Ms.XXX, were so open-minded that they decided to hire me, by evaluating my teaching ability, not my race or linguistic background.

As a young, only one Japanese English teacher at CQU, I devoted most of my time to preparing teaching materials and thinking about students, not only because I liked teaching, but also I believed that teaching was about human-to-human relationship after all, and sincerely thinking about students and their development would beat racial/linguistic stereotypes. I made teaching materials almost from scratch because there were no prepared textbooks, provided multiple feedback on 60 students' speech drafts, video-recorded the speeches and provided feedback, talked with them in office-hours, and did much more. I worked as hard as possible not to show off my teaching or English ability to students, but to grapple with stereotypes that exist in non-native-speakers' mindset. I was on a constant pressure that I might be called a “bad English user”, which automatically meant a “bad teacher”. I knew that I could not change China's ELT policy, but I devoted myself to changing my students.

My hard work was appreciated by my bosses and my students. The overall evaluation from students reached 96.2/100 in my final year at CQU, ranked top 10 among the 33 international instructors, 31 of whom were either White or native speakers of English. I received many comments from students that my teaching was different from other teachers that they had met, my teaching changed their views toward Japanese people and their English, and they felt less stress from the teacher because I was welcoming. Some students whom I still contact with decided to study abroad because they were inspired by me and my teaching.

However, I was not fully satisfied because I knew that many international teachers were occasionally confused with cultural differences in China. It was detrimental because that confusion caused distrust among my colleagues against CQU, resulting in poor communication between them, which then affected overall teaching quality. I could not be a bystander, and asked Ms. Li whether it would be possible to involve me in an administration position. Having known that I was interested in language policy, Ms. XXX kindly agreed to my request.

In the second year at CQU, I was promoted to a Level Coordinator and led the team of two new teachers. In addition to the responsibility as a coordinator, the first thing I did was compiling XXX University Lecturer Handbook, a 50-page handbook that clarified school rules and advice to teach in China, which was later distributed to all international English teachers. I also discussed with Ms.XXX and launched the first Writing Center at CQU in order to meet students' needs to improve their academic writing skills. Furthermore, I made a list of references and ELT textbooks to launch a resource center for international teachers, as the CQU library did not have enough resources that were written in English, which was another factor that could affect teaching quality.

As a Level Coordinator, my job was to create ELT syllabi that reflected CQU's teaching philosophy, students' needs, and teachers' own preferences. This was harder than I thought, as professional and experienced teachers have their own philosophy, which may have not aligned well with CQU's philosophy all the time. Though it was the first time for me to lead a team of professional teachers, my experience at @home and from teaching did benefit me, that is, leading a team is after all about human-to-human relationship: I met team members as often as possible, respected their philosophy, and tried to be honest and flexible as much as possible. I believed that it would build a good relationship, and certainly, we did have a good relationship as a team.

I advanced to a PhD program in 2019 and I was very excited to be part of the University of British Columbia family. Faculty members are excellent and open-minded scholars, and on top of that, I am delighted to work with my research supervisor, Dr.XXX, who has conducted a number of studies on language policy in Japan from critical perspectives.

During the time I have spent with her as a supervisee and a Research Assistant, Dr. XXX has always inspired me by her passion to learn more to change the world, her sincerity to respect every language and culture, and her effort to always self-reflect to avoid becoming anti-egalitarian as much as possible. Carrying out “good” language teaching is challenging because it is inextricable from history, politics, and money, but as Dr. XXX always advises me, one must never stop. Although I have just stepped into the PhD program, I already feel my philosophy about language policy gets deepened and sophisticated day by day under her supervision.

My dissertation research is what I have hoped to pursue for a long time. Through connecting every learning in my life and career — communication, political aspects in ELT, and how policy affects practices, I will try to answer what the current ELT policy in Japan wants to achieve, and how teachers carry out their own teaching in the current situation.

Now that I have learned that language policy is complex, I am not too naïve to say that my dissertation alone will change Japan's ELT policy or practices. However, I can say with confidence that I will keep learning the meaning of a “good” ELT, and the way to realize it. My life and career have convinced me that keep learning and having a good human-to-human relationship with teachers are the keys to change policy and reality. Whether I end up being a researcher, administrator, or a Government employee, I will keep them in mind and lead Japan's ELT to a “better” direction.

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