

College Scholarship Essay

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

When I entered XXX University in 2008, I made a firm decision to seize any opportunity to use and teach English. I joined an international club called “@home,” where we supported international students and organized events in which Japanese and international students interacted. I started teaching English at a cram school in my freshman year to accumulate teaching experience and experiment with communicative teaching. I moved back and forth between being 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 became vice president of the administration team for the 25th XXX University International Festival, one of the biggest international events in the region. I was responsible for various jobs, including holding weekly meetings with my team of both Japanese and international students, holding meetings with international exhibitors, and negotiating safety and budgetary issues with the university. Although these responsibilities necessarily involved sensitive consideration of cultural differences, religious/country relationships, and safety/monetary issues, I consulted with the club advisor many times, discussed issues with team members and the university, and led the festival to success by attracting more than 3,000 guests.

Around this time, I was making up my mind to contribute to Japan's English language teaching (ELT) and guide it in a more communicative direction. It was a lonely and tiring journey, as few people around me were familiar with my specialization, Language Policy and Planning (LPP), and desire for study abroad, but I did not give up, because my passion had become part of my identity. There were no helpful programs at my university, so I emailed professors around the world and took courses from other universities 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 naively thought 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 taught me that it would not be easy to change language policy without knowing how policy is made.

With this understanding, I became an English instructor at XXX University (CQU) in 2013. 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 of being 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. Nevertheless, I decided to apply because I was confident in my teaching and knew that somebody had to challenge this belief. Both CQU and my bosses were open-minded enough to hire me based on my teaching ability, not my race or linguistic background.

As the only 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 because I believed that teaching was about human-to-human relationships, 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 rounds of feedback on 60 students' speech drafts, video-recorded the speeches and provided feedback, talked with them during office hours, and did much more. I worked as hard as possible not to show off my teaching or English ability, but to grapple with non-native-speakers' stereotypes. I was constantly afraid 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 students. Overall evaluation from students reached 96.2/100 in my final year at CQU, and I ranked in the 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 that of other teachers, my teaching changed their views toward Japanese people and their English, and they felt less stress because I was welcoming. Some students with whom I am still in contact decided to study abroad because they were inspired by me and my teaching.

However, I was not satisfied, because I knew that many international teachers were occasionally confused by cultural differences in China. That confusion caused distrust of CQU among my colleagues, resulting in poor communication that affected overall teaching quality. I could not be a bystander, and asked my referee Ms.XXX whether it would be possible to take on an administrative position. Knowing that I was interested in language policy, she kindly agreed.

In my second year at CQU, I was promoted to level coordinator and led a team of two new teachers. The first thing I did was compile the XXX University Lecturer Handbook, a 50-page handbook that clarified school rules and offered advice for teaching in China, which was later distributed to all international English teachers. I also launched CQU's first Writing Center in order to meet students' need 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 written in English -- 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 expected, as professional and experienced teachers have their own philosophies, which may not align with CQU's philosophy. Though it was my first time leading a team of professional teachers, my experience at @home and from teaching benefited me, as leading a team is also about human-to-human relationships: I met with team members as often as possible, respected their philosophies, and tried to be honest and flexible.

I advanced to a PhD program in 2019 and was very excited to be part of the University of British Columbia family. Faculty members are excellent and open-minded scholars, and 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 inspired me with her passion to learn more to change the world, her sincere respect for every language and culture, and her effort to always reflect to avoid becoming anti-egalitarian. 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 begun my PhD program, I already feel my philosophy about language policy deepening and becoming more sophisticated day by day under her supervision. Through connecting learning in my life and career — communication, politics in ELT, and how policy affects practice — I will try to answer what the ELT policy in Japan wants to achieve, and how teachers should teach.

Now that I have learned that language policy is complex, I am not naïve enough 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 “good” ELT and the way to realize it. My life and career have convinced me that continuing to learn and having good human-to-human relationships with teachers are the keys to changing 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 in a “better” direction.