ISSN 1883-7409 (print)
ISSN 1884-0183 (on-line)

Outside the Box: The Tsukuba Multi-Lingual Forum

Volume 3, Issue 1

Autumn, 2010

Foreign Language Center

Tsukuba University

Japan

Theory and Other Dangerous Things

Teaching Tips & Techniques

Around the World

Creative Writing

Pointing to the Moon:
Teaching Religious Studies as a Second Language Course

Simon Kenny

Saitama University

Abstract: This paper explores the core methodology within religious studies, especially in relation to the development of critical thinking skills and strategies, such as making reasoned judgments, showing empathy, and developing self-awareness. Parallels within the ESL field are made, with particular reference to second language acquisition.

The author will argue that developing critical thinking skills can encourage second language learning to take place, and that a dynamic, interactive approach to teaching offers a viable method to actualising learning at all levels - mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual - and therefore encourages students to take control of the learning process itself. Latent learning attributes can then be made part of a collaborative inquiry by students and teacher in an open-ended dialogue that lets all views and opinions be heard in the classroom.

Keywords: empathy collaborative learning differentiation key skills

To be able to learn about other cultures and ways of living is one of the prime motivational factors for learning another language. As to know something about another culture is to move outside of our own boundaries, and to engage in a reflective process that encourages the growth of new ideas, thoughts and beliefs.

Religious studies has been at the forefront of this process of cross-cultural study, and it has shifted from focusing on learning about Western religion and culture, to learning about other ways of life, and making comparisons between different belief systems. In this paper, I will draw upon my experiences as a religious studies teacher in the United Kingdom, and highlight some of the ways that the study of religion can help develop *critical thinking* skills, and foster better cultural understanding. I explore some of the core pedagogy within the religious studies field, and make some parallels with learning acquisition within ESL. Finally, I will show how I have adapted and implemented some of these ideas when teaching my *Introduction to World Religions* course at Saitama University.

In the United Kingdom, religious studies[1] is a core curriculum subject from primary school to secondary school. This is different from many other countries, where the study of religion is either the study of Christian history and philosophy, and therefore essentially a theology course, or where any form of cultural study comes under the all-inclusive 'social studies' umbrella. However, religious studies as a core subject is taught to all students in UK schools for one hour a week, and the curriculum is therefore extensive, and it covers a lot of ground through incorporating anthropological, sociological and theological approaches to religion. The former prime minister, Gordon Brown, has suggested that the teaching of religious studies in schools is a vital part of the school curriculum, and an ideal way to fight religious intolerance and ignorance at all levels of society (Wilce, 2008, p. 2).

In the UK all students will learn about the five major world religions,[2] and as religious studies is part of the secondary school compulsory examination program, it holds a status and degree of importance that subjects

[1] I refer to the subject as religious studies, rather than religious education. In the UK, the subject is often called religious education, especially in primary school education, but as a secondary school GCSE examination course, it is referred to as religious studies. This reflects the focus on studying for oneself, instead of being educated about religion. By law, around 50% of the religious studies syllabus will focus on world religions other than Christianity.

[2] The five major world religions are defined by the amount of adherents for each religion. In order (greatest first) they are: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. In the UK, Sikhism is often classed as a sixth major world religion.

like art and information technology currently do not enjoy. The evolution of the subject in the UK has been long, and since the end of World War II, it has changed from being based on Christian theology, to incorporating a study and comparison of the world religions (comparative religion), and more recently to engaging in the moral, social and spiritual aspects of religion, and asking students to develop their own opinions and beliefs on important topics (moral and social education).

Why is religious studies such an important area of study? There are three key areas to consider.

Dynamically Learning about Other Cultures

Religion has had a huge influence for better or worse on the historical development of cultures all over the world. To learn about religion, is essentially to learn about culture, as the two are intrinsically linked. If culture is defined as the cumulative deposit of experiences, values and attitudes, or as Tylor put it, "culture, or civilization, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871/1924, p. 1), then religion can be perhaps described as the glue that binds the cloth together. Religion provides people with a focus and a common bond, and members of any community or society who share the same beliefs can communicate their hopes, aspirations and fears to others in a variety of ways, such as through storytelling and music for example. The personal then becomes the collective through the knowledge and use of cultural motifs, myth, ritual and common religious practices.

The study of religion can lend itself very well to the promotion of 'dynamic learning' in the classroom. For, if learning is a complex combination of learning aptitudes and learning styles as defined by Gardner's eight intelligences,[3] and is best actualised by allowing students to use their latent skills and talents in their own particular way (see Gardner, 1983 and 1999), then religion has a number of mediums through which to engage in and learn from, with song, religious ritual, sacred art, festivals, and drama being just a part of the multi-faceted, organic whole that students can connect with. As culture is all about living experience and action, and defines the way we live and think, learning about different religions in an interactive way can provide an ideal window for expanding a student's knowledge of the cultures of the world, through a diverse approach that fits well with the principles of learner styles as proposed by Gardner.

High school classes in Japan are especially reliant on text and words, rather than picture, film, drama or music. When learning English at high school, over 90% of respondents to my university class survey said that they had always studied grammar and reading in every English class at high school (Kenny, 2010). This reliance on reading and logical deduction can leave other areas of the brain untouched, and also alienate a large number of learners who are more artistically or spatially aware. Within religious studies there are a number of classroom activities that you can do to connect with various learning styles: roleplay a parable from the Old Testament, draw a picture of Buddha and his disciples meditating in the forest, watch a video of a Hindu funeral next to the river Ganges, discuss food laws, and so on. The possibilities are numerous, and when the student is *reenacting* religious stories, *drawing* important images or *watching* video of festivals they are learning in an active and fun way about important cultural concepts that are quite different from Japanese culture, and this encourages them to step outside of themselves as they consider new ways of living quite different from their own.

This 'stepping outside of oneself' is a classic principle within religious studies, as it encourages people to put themselves in unusual and foreign frames of reference, and to attempt to view ideas about diverse cultures and traditions from a different stance. If

[3] The Eight Intelligences determine how a learner will best process information in the classroom. They are, as highlighted by Gardner: Verbal/Linguistic, Mathematical/Logical, Visual/Spatial, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Musical, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Naturalistic.

learners are using methods of learning that they can personally connect with, then it can help facilitate their ability to understand cultural views from a wider number of angles, as they are more intimately in tune with themselves, and consequently more relaxed and open to new ideas.

In the classroom, the interactive approach to teaching can help promote knowledge and understanding of key learning objectives as the physical body as well as the mind are stimulated by input on an intellectual, emotional and kinetic level. This holistic approach to teaching can facilitate understanding in a more complete way, and open up all areas of the brain. Recent research by neuroscientists at MIT into long-term potentiation (LTP), has found that learning in new ways can actually strengthen synaptic connections between brain cells, and help improve memory and the ability to process information (Halber, 2006). If learners have only had sustained practice in one or two particular areas of study (such as grammar or reading) then other areas of the brain will be comparatively weak, and they may well find it difficult to interact with others during class tasks that require more dynamic activities such as one-to-one communication, movement and group discussion.

In my experience this indeed is the case. I often find that first year university students lack some fundamental communicative skills. They cannot move their bodies easily, they don't know how to start a conversation, and they are not comfortable voicing their opinions. Therefore, in my first four or five weeks of class, I will introduce them to tasks and exercises that require them to question classmates, and move around more than they are used to. I find that after a few weeks, once they are used to my voice and my methods, some marked improvement can be detected in how they respond to more interactive tasks such as brainstorming, presentations and small group discussion. This would be in line with the idea that the brain can learn new skills quite quickly with the right stimuli.

Examining Religious Ideas Together

Another key area that religious studies addresses is to examine different religious teachings and practices as they exist in today's world, and to collectively discuss and evaluate them. Why do women wear a veil in Islam? Why am I vegetarian? Why do Christians believe in the importance of marriage? Why do Hindus venerate the cow? These kind of questions can open up a new world for students, a world that has uncommon rules and different answers. The use of news stories, internet articles, blogs, YouTube videos, films, and books can help illustrate how people live and think in other countries, and be good primers for encouraging discussion. Presenting students with a wide variety of different material that covers issues that they may not have encountered before is essential for the development of empathy and the tolerance of other's ideas. Although they are considered higher level cognitive skills, the justification for attempting to encourage and promote their use seems sound, and especially so in the rather frightened and divided world that we presently inhabit.

Empathy is a key skill, and the sharing of experiences, and knowledge of new and unusual ideas, can initiate a movement away from self, and indeed blur the line between self and other, as people begin to connect with one another at deeper levels. To begin to consider why other people might perform certain actions, and think in certain ways, can help students develop empathy and tolerance for a variety of ideas and views that come up during discussion time in class. These are valuable assets for their overall personal growth.

As a trained religious studies teacher, I know that there are many hurdles and pitfalls to avoid or step over when confronting difficult discussion topics. Should you discuss abortion, women's rights, death, or gay marriage? How can you explain a certain type of practice that goes against your own values and beliefs? This is being at the cutting edge in the classroom, and the choice that the teacher will make can go a long way to defining the learning dynamic that is created during class time.

One useful method of overcoming some of these problems is to get to know students better. A student questionnaire at the

beginning of the course can help the teacher understand something about the students and their own beliefs, as well as opening up the opportunity for using them as resources in class. I often find that at least one or two of my students have a father or grandmother who manages or works at the local Buddhist temple. This is an ideal opportunity to utilise their experiences, and to let other students hear about them. The added bonus of this is that information is not only coming from one person, but from others, and this helps to move the authority and power away from the teacher, and on to the student. This has always been an important part of learner autonomy with the ESL classroom, but it is especially important when teaching about religion, as the assertion is clearly made that all opinions are valid, and that everyone can make a contribution.

This kind of collaborative learning when discussing ideas is a vital ingredient in establishing a good atmosphere within the classroom. Each student is empowered to learn, and they can feel that their opinion has a value. With the strong focus on reading and writing in Japanese high schools, it is often the case that the student does not really feel that his or her opinions actually matter, and this can lead to disenchantment and low motivation. If the learner feels that what they say does have some value (through interaction with other students, and feedback from the teacher) then the level of communication within the class is likely to improve, as the teacher-student relationship has entered a new stage, and everyone is giving and taking in a more free and spontaneous manner.

In an ESL context, there is a lot of crossover in how a teacher could present and promote discussion in an English class, and the approach that can be taken when teaching a class on religion. In fact, in the UK there is often a strong link between Religious Studies departments and English departments within schools, with both emphasizing key skills in literacy, oral discussion, and dramatic expression.

Considering Beliefs through Critical Thinking

The sharing of views and beliefs is at the heart of religious studies. Personal values are assessed inwardly and outwardly, and views are asked for on all sorts of earthly and divine matters. As a teacher, when explaining about student's opinions, I always tell my students that *there is no correct answer.* All well thought out contributions are to be listened to, and taken into consideration. I always say that the magic word is 'because', as in, 'I think that eating animals is wrong because we should respect all life'. Or, as a counter to this, 'I think that we can eat animals because they have always been used as a source of food for a long time'. Ian Jamison, who won the secondary school teacher of the year award at the UK national teaching awards, puts it like this: "It's about knowing what you think, and being aware of what others think. What I want is for all my pupils to be able to explain themselves. To be able to say: this is what I think, and why I think it. Too often they are just led by their peer group and [this leads to] their standard response to everything" (quoted in Wilce, 2008, p. 3). Japanese students are well known for standard responses, and so how can the teacher get them to move into a space and mode of action that will encourage them to actually offer individual opinions?

One possible route is through focusing on the development of critical thinking skills. This has been an integral part of the religious studies curriculum for some time. The idea is that essentially people like to talk about interesting and profound topics, and that the problem is not so much that a certain topic can be difficult, but rather that the approach to it can leave students confused or unsure. If students do not have the skills to engage in debate or discussion, then they can feel alienated and unable to offer any opinions. The method through which they acquire information is paramount here, and if we take note of learner styles as defined by Gardner's psychological profiling, and the teacher has allowed the student to acquire information in a variety of ways (newspapers, artwork, video, text, drama, oral communication, etc.) then there is a greater chance that the most important ideas can be processed and

evaluated, and that everyone will have something to share. The student needs to build up his/her skills and knowledge step by step, and set the foundation from which to move. Some of the major blocks to learning and acquiring new skills arise from being pushed too quickly, or being lost in complexity. When learners are taking control and responsibility for their learning, and making choices in how they learn, then differentiated and steady learning is usually evident in the classroom, and, from this basis, critical thinking skills can emerge and develop in time.

A general definition of critical thinking skills could be, "judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe" (Facione, 2000, p. 61). It is essentially the process of making judgments, comparing ideas, and evaluating your own views. One of the central points of critical thinking is the movement towards developing perception and self-awareness. Teaching religious studies as a second language presents certain problems in this regard, as the language ability of the students is often fairly low, and the ability to develop or show perceptive views or self-awareness in class can be minimal.

A way to address this is to encourage students to keep a journal and to write up the keywords of the lesson at the end of every class. So, words such as *moksha*, *karma* and *hajj* are written down and placed into a vocabulary box. These words are explained, and examples are given as to what they actually mean (I often use storytelling, drama, music or video to emphasize the central ideas). I will reinforce this vocabulary throughout the course by doing quizzes and word match exercises as warm-up activities in the following classes. This is useful for the students and me, as I can do concept checking as I walk around the classroom, make sure that the central ideas of the last lesson have sunk in, and see if the learning objectives related to the development of critical thinking skills have been achieved.

The attainment of lesson objectives is something that many teachers probably focus too little upon. This is where some self-awareness on the teacher's part can actually go a long way to creating the right environment from which critical thinking skills can mature and flourish. If targets are set, and written on the board, and the teacher can concept check in the following class, while reinforcing the key points of the lesson, then there is a real opportunity for learning, as everyone is working together with clearly defined targets. Self-evaluation on the student's and teacher's part can create and foster a co-operative learning atmosphere, and help set up an interactive dynamic within the classroom, where everyone is assessing and evaluating their views, and this includes those of the teacher.

Once the central ideas of the lesson have been explained and reinforced, I will give students time to analyse the information, and then write down their answers. This is their quiet time for reflection, and it is a chance for them to start to use some critical thinking, and to provide views on what they have learned. I will start with factual questions such as: what is the name of the Prophet in Islam? What are the names of the two parts of the Bible? What are the Four Noble Truths? (*Comprehension.*) And then I will move onto more fertile ground with questions like: Why do Muslims fast? What is karma and how does it work? (*Interpretation.*) What are some of the main differences between Hinduism and Islam? (*Comparison.*) Starting from the bottom and working the class up towards the higher end critical questions is a worthy process, and also has the added benefit of incorporating differentiation into classroom management, as all students no matter what their ability have the chance to offer their opinions on a variety of topics.

It has been noted during research on second language acquisition that learners actually learn new languages better if they have something theoretically challenging to work out, rather than lots of information that they already know something about (Sharp, 2006, pp. 56-57). Stretching the students by setting gradually harder questions and tasks that require high level critical thinking skills is then an ideal way to encourage second language acquisition. The approach to setting up the task, the variety of options that are presented to the students in order for them to come up with their own answers, and the

atmosphere of learning that is prevalent in the classroom will define the success in developing second language vocabulary, and in seeing what kind of opinion rises up from the linguistic pathways of the brain.

Conclusion

Teaching religious studies in Japan has been challenging and rewarding for me. The students often know little about other religions, and they are starting from the ground level. Indeed, in Japan being religious is often perceived to be quirky or something unusual, and the level of commitment and discipline showed by various religious people that I highlight during my courses is surprising to them. Japan being such a technological and materialistic culture, the spiritual values that many religious traditions hold dear such as silence, charity, prayer, community, and virtue are often seemingly at odds with the values and aspirations of many students.

With the right methodology and approach, this uncertainty or tension can be used as a positive element for classroom interaction, with everyone openly exploring their own views and values, no clear answers to be found, and where students can encounter new ideas that help develop and expand their language skills, and open the mind up to new ways of thought.

The classic zen idea of pointing to the moon is a clear reference point to the process of developing self-awareness within ourselves. The finger is pointing to the moon, and if we look at the person pointing, then we miss the essential allure and beauty of the moon. We must look for ourselves, and trust our own instincts and ideas. From a classroom perspective, the teacher should continually examine his or her own motives and beliefs, and keep shifting the pointing finger back to the student, and encourage participation in a open learning experience where everyone adds their own colour and shade to what they experience in class.

References Cited

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Gardner, H. (1999). *Intelligence reframed: Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Halber, D. (2006, August 24). MIT provides first evidence for learning mechanism. Retrieved February 10, 2010, from http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2006/ltp.html

Facione, P. (2000). The disposition toward critical thinking: Its character, measurement, and relationship to critical thinking skill. *Informal Logic, 20*(1), 61-84.

Kenny, S. (2010). [Saitama University, General Education Faculty survey]. Unpublished raw data.

Sharp, D. (2006). Getting across the street: An examination of second language acquisition. *Eloquor, 1*, 53-69. Saitama, Japan: CEED, Saitama University.

Tylor, E. B. (1924). *Primitive culture. 2 vols.* (7th ed.). New York: Brentano's. (Original work published 1871)

Wilce, H. (2008, January 10). Keep the faith: Why religious education is booming. *The Independent Online*. Retrieved February 5, 2010, from http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/keep-the-faith-why-religious-education-is-booming-769322.html

About the author: Simon Kenny is a lecturer at Saitama University. He has a deep interest in Asian religion and culture, and has carried out field studies in India, Pakistan, and Israel. He received his MA in Asian Religions from Lancaster University. Simon's current research is on Japanese views of the spirit world.