A Visit to Mongolian Foreign Language Classrooms

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Think of Mongolia and a host of images may appear in your thoughts: the ger (traditional Mongolian house), sumo-style wrestling, sheep roaming the mountainside and perhaps children riding horses would be among them. This September, I visited Mongolia and indeed these images among others were my daily reality for a brief period of time. Ms. Dunai Demberel, a former exchange student of Utsunomiya University, was my guide and informant introducing and explaining all that I saw and experienced. Beyond this she also afforded me the opportunity to explore my interest in foreign language education. With her help, I was able to observe three foreign language classrooms in two schools and to briefly speak with two teachers. Unfortunately, it was the beginning of the new school term. Classes were still being organized and things had not quite "settled" yet. Nevertheless, this experience was informative and provided insight into some current practices in foreign language education. This essay will report on my visits and observations.

I. Schools

I visited two schools, Public School #1 and #84, both in Ulaan Bataar. They were both fairly large and of Russian architecture. The first school we entered was enclosed by a black wrought-iron gate and in front of the school was the national flag. Students were milling about talking or playing games. The school was a four-storey white building. The second school was a six-storey blue building. Students were lining up by class according to teachers' directions and getting ready to enter the school for afternoon classes.

Schools in Mongolia house grades 1 through 10. Compulsory education in Mongolia is from age 6 to 16, and the current literacy rate stands at 83% (World Almanac & Book of Facts, 2002). The main foreign languages taught at present are Russian and English. The teaching of English as a foreign language in the schools began in the 1990's. Other foreign languages include Japanese and German among others (Ravdan, 2001). In the earlier grades classes meet four times a week for 40 minutes. From 7th grade, the classes meet three times a week, also for 40 minutes. According to the teacher I interviewed at Public School #1, Ms. Enkhjargal, foreign language education begins in the 5th grade. However, the Japanese class I observed was a class of 3rd graders who had started their Japanese lessons in the 2nd grade and the 5th grade English class I observed also began their study in the 2nd grade. In order to resolve this discrepancy, I searched for concrete information from written materials on the topic of education in the Mongolian People's Republic. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of information concerning education in Mongolia in general. However, it may be possible to speculate that perhaps foreign language education must begin in the 5th grade according to the Ministry of Education but the schools themselves may be free to begin before the 5th grade if they wish.
II. Teachers

Mostly, the teachers of English and other foreign languages are former Russian language teachers who were retrained in a two-year, cram program. Some teachers also take summer courses to improve their language skill. Most teachers are Mongolian, have little or no experience living in the country where the target language is spoken nor have much contact with native speakers. Ms. Enkhjargal commented that, "Just 'teaching' English helped me to become fluent."

It is also often the case that teachers teach more than one foreign language or subject. The teacher of the Japanese class I visited, Mr. Ulam-Urnukh, was also an English teacher. And one of the English teachers whose class I visited, Mr. Bayanmunkh, also taught the traditional Mongolian script called Uighur, which was reformed to Cyrillic in 1946 by the USSR, but was brought back by decree in 1995 (Sermier, 2002).

III. Classrooms

In both schools, the foreign language classrooms were rather typical. There were pictures and/or maps of the UK in the English classroom along with the alphabet and classroom English phrases. As well, pictures and a map of Japan and posters of the hiragana and katakana scripts were hung on the walls in the Japanese classroom. In addition, pictures of typical Mongolian scenes such as the ger, children riding horses or people wearing del (the traditional Mongolian dress) were posted. The teacher has a chair and desk at the front of the room, usually off to the corner. Students sit in pairs at orderly desks. The classrooms for foreign languages were rather small, accommodating between 20 to 25 students. Students' homeroom classes, which compromise 40-50 students, are divided in half for foreign language instruction.

IV. Materials

From what I could observe and what the teachers reported to me, materials are limited. Students did not have textbooks per se, but copies of a textbook. While there are textbooks chosen by the government, teachers seem to be able to choose a textbook or materials of their own liking if and when available, according to Ms. Enkhjargal.

V. Students

Mongolian students seemed to me to exhibit behaviors that many teachers would find appealing. I saw students who were attentively focusing on the teacher and the lesson. They completed the exercises with or without a partner as instructed. They were participatory. They raised their hands to answer questions, and if they were not called on, they whispered the answer to themselves. They were well disciplined. No students were talking to their neighbor or sleeping or doing anything out of the range of the classroom activities. I have no idea whether these same students act the same way in other classes. I don't know if my presence had any influence or not although I doubt that since my presence seemed to cause little attention among both students and teachers.

VI. The first school visit

We entered the school building of Public School #1 and to the right hand side was a receptionist. She was sitting behind a wooden counter, similar to a ticket window at a train station. She was crowded by students and parents or other visitors to the school. Ms. Dunai pressed her way through to the front and in a flurry of conversation she asked where we could find the teachers' room.

Once we found that information, we headed up some stairs and into what was obviously the teachers' lounge area. Surprisingly, no one paid us any notice although it was obvious that we
were out of place. We were supposed to attend the classroom of her daughter’s English class. Ms. Dunai asked about this classroom and this teacher but found out that the teacher had not come to school that day. However, one teacher kindly invited us to her next class. I was impressed with her spontaneous volunteering, especially because she had absolutely no opportunity for preparation.

The first class I visited was a 10th grade class. The number of students attending the class that day was 19. No students were late. The students were not stirred by my presence, nor did the teacher pay any special attention to my presence. She did not introduce me or say there is an observer today. The teacher opened the class in English, asking such questions as, “What day is it?” and “What’s the date?” She explained, in English, the plan for the day. They would review vocabulary and do textbook exercises.

The teacher went back and forth using English and Mongolian in her directions, explanations and questions. The students seemed quite comfortable and relaxed with the mix. Students actively and eagerly answered questions and were visibly happy, sometimes proud when they produced a correct response. But I did notice, as Pritchatt did about 30 years earlier, that questions were basically one-way, teacher to student interactions (1974).

The textbook used in this class was a set of copies of the text Longman Grammar Series-Intermediate Course. Each unit contained four-skills application practices focusing on one aspect of grammar. That day, the students were working on future tense and/or the ways in which the future can be expressed in English. Some of the exercises students did in pairs. They were actively and conscientiously working on the exercises. They progressed through the various exercises to the one-page reading passage about the future of transportation. The teacher did not translate the passage for the students but used translation as a means to check for the comprehension of words.

VII. The second school visit

The second school visit went more smoothly. I was to visit one Japanese class and one English class. We arrived and met with a teacher who was related to Ms. Dunai. She guided us through a maze of wooden hallways and staircases to our first classroom.

The first class I visited at Public School #84 was a 3rd grade Japanese language classroom. The teacher of this class, Mr. Ulam-Urnukh, also did not acknowledge the presence of observers. The students sat orderly and at attention as the teacher opened the class with greetings in Japanese. They proceeded to review some basics from the previous term such as “いま、なんじですか?” (What time is it now?) and its response, “いま、いちじです” (It's one o'clock now) written in hiragana on the blackboard. He went on to drill and repetition exercises with the whole class and then called on individual students. Next, he added はん (half) to the practice and followed the drill repetition pattern. The class proceeded in this basic drill repetition routine while the teacher introduced various simple sentence patterns and new vocabulary. Finally, Mr. Ulam-Urnukh conducted a quiz like practice of numbers saying various numbers in Mongolian while students translated and said them in Japanese. At this point, no kanji characters had been introduced.

The second class I observed at Public School #84 was a 5th grade English classroom. In this class, the teacher, Mr. Bayanmunkh, opened the class with English greetings. Following the greetings he then instructed each student to recite a short reading passage which they had memorized earlier. This teacher then, to my surprise, not only acknowledged my presence,
but basically turned the class over to me asking me to come to the front of the room and instructing the students to ask me questions while he moved to the back of the room. I said my name only so that the students would be able to think of a lot of questions. Students raised their hands and asked me questions such as "How old are you?" and "What's your hobby?" When they couldn't produce anymore questions I began to ask them questions of the same sort until the end of the period.

VIII. Discussion

"When are you coming back?" was the first thing Mr. Bayanmunkh asked me after the students had left the classroom. Both he and Ms. Enkhjargal expressed that they would like to have native speakers attend their classes or schools. Especially Mr. Bayanmunkh seemed to feel that native speakers were essential to teaching good pronunciation. This is not to say that there are no native English speakers anywhere in Mongolia. There are a few language schools where native speaker teachers work and there are Mormon missionaries to be found who will willingly practice English with the students. Perhaps Mongolia would enjoy a team-teaching approach such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme where a native speaker of the target language teaches with a Japanese teacher who speaks the target language as a second language. Mongolian teachers such as Ms. Enkhjargal and Mr. Bayanmunkh would certainly make the best of such a situation.

The fact that the Russian language teachers were retrained to be English language teachers is quite interesting. Certainly, learning a foreign language is not easy but they accepted the challenge casually and as a matter of course. The world is changing and English has become the so-called international language. Their acceptance seems to represent a fundamental attitude of Mongolians towards foreign languages. They are not new to the idea of speaking foreign languages but instead consider it a normal activity, not a novelty. The students themselves are well aware of the need
for English proficiency in terms of their career and educational opportunities according to Ms. Enkhjagal.

IX. Conclusion

My visits to these three Mongolia classrooms were merely a glimpse into the current situation of foreign language education in Mongolia. Ravdan (2001) points out that much work needs to be done to raise the standard of foreign language education and the training of teaching staff is crucial. Based on what I observed and learned, there is great potential: The teachers I saw were capable and devoted and the students are motivated. More than material resources, these are essential elements to their success.

References


要 旨
今年の9月、私はモンゴルを行った。この機会に、2つの学校を訪れ、3つのが外国語教育の授業を観察することができた。その3つの授業のうち、2つが英語の授業であり、1つが日本語の授業であった。私はまた、短時間ではあるが、2人の教師と