
Opinion and Perspective

The Age Factor: Teaching in Later Years

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In many corners of the world, veteran TESOL professionals face the problem of ageism, which impacts harmfully not only on their careers and personal lives but also on the quality of education available to students.

Ageism relates to the pernicious, prejudicial policies and practices that persist against older teachers and workers in other fields. It is the reluctance or outright refusal of school officials to hire teachers over a certain age and to extend the employment of teachers beyond a certain age. It includes the affronting, asinine assumption that older teachers lack the energy, motivation, and innovation of younger teachers, and thus must be replaced in their positions by those presumed to be better because they are younger.

I have experienced the impact of these policies and practices on some occasions during my long tenure in Japan, though admittedly I have been lucky to escape the worst of their crushing consequences. In this article I will relate my own stories and debunk the assumptions of ageism, while firmly asserting the enormous capacity and value of older educators. In conclusion, I will suggest some practices which may help teachers to face this issue, to defend themselves against age bias, and to reduce the existence of the problem itself.

A Personal History

In 1984 I applied for an English language teaching position at one of Japan's then premier two-year foreign language colleges (*senmon gakkou*). At that time I had ten years of teaching experience, including seven years as a teacher of English as second language (ESL) in adult education in Los Angeles, California

(USA). Despite that, the directors of the institution were hesitant to hire me solely because of my age - 38. In the end, I was hired by that institution, where I stayed for 14 years. By my second year there, I was openly recognized by the academic director as the highest rated teacher, based on his close classroom observations of all the teachers and subsequent detailed reports. A few years later, I was appointed the academic supervisor of the English program and held that position for more than eight years.

In 1999, at the age of 53, I was hired as an associate professor at a private university and promoted to full professor after three years. Yet, from generally acquired information over many years and knowledge of anecdotal cases, I feel assured to say that was, and remains, a rather rare appointment for someone at that age, especially a non-Japanese English language teacher. However, at age 65 I was forced into mandatory retirement from that position as well as from a part-time position I had held concurrently for 11 years at another university.

Now as an entirely part-time instructor I teach more classes per week than I ever have—at two universities, a junior college, a high school, and a company—yet my earnings are only about half of what they were when I was a full-time professor. At the same time, based on the authority of the consistent responses of my students on course questionnaires given at the universities and the junior college, I can assert that I teach with as much or more passion and quality as I ever have.

However, my part-time post at one of the universities will be terminated mandatorily after the next academic year when I will have turned 70. With me will go the highly specialized and well-received English for Science and Technology [EST] courses I developed and have taught for a number of years for electrical and mechanical engineering students, as it is extremely unlikely that the engineering faculty will find anyone else willing and capable to take on such courses.

Moreover, at the end of every academic year I anxiously wonder whether I will be dismissed by any school administrator - who has never seen me in my classes, never spoken to me about my work, never spoken with any of my students, never seen their responses on course questionnaires regarding my instruction,

and never read any of my publications which report ongoing innovative teaching ideas - merely because of the number that is my age and the utterly misguided notion that “younger is better.” In truth, that usually translates to mean “cheaper to hire” and “easier to fire” (Templer, 2003, p. 2).

The Value of Older Educators

Having narrated some of my personal history, and as I proceed to rebut the premises of ageism as applied to teacher performance, I wish to be careful not to fall into a reverse stereotyping and dismissal of younger teachers in the way that older ones have been so treated. I will be guided by Ronald Reagan, who during one of the 1984 U.S. presidential campaign debates when asked if, at 73, he was too old to be President, and referring to his opponent, former vice-president, Walter Mondale, then 56, disarmingly quipped, “...I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience” (<http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-quotes-detail.aspx?tx=2238>).

Those blinded by age bias fail to see what genuine educators on the front lines recognize in quality veteran teachers. I leave it to one young teacher (Ripp, 2011) to make the case concisely and meaningfully when she asserted that they bring to their classrooms “knowledge, expertise, methods that work, and a deep-seated passion [for their job],” (para. 4) and in their role as mentors they share with younger, less experienced teachers their knowledge and inventiveness. “I saw everything that had drawn me to teaching: passion, dedication, innovation, and an unstopping sense of urgency to reach all students,” (para. 7) she added, reflecting on her first year of teaching and the mentors she was able to turn to at that time.

I have been fortunate to have had such a role as a mentor for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) at the high school affiliated with the university at which I was professor, and where I have taught weekly classes since 2004. These lessons not only have expanded the range of my own instruction but further, the school’s designation by the Ministry of Education as a Super English Language High School (SELHi) from 2004 to 2010 provided me the opportunity to be

a member of the school's advisory committee for that program. This involved, over the years, dozens of classroom observations of the JTEs and follow-up discussions and advisement both within the committee and privately with individual teachers. They also have observed my lessons at the high school from time to time and discussed with me their views in the spirit of a true community of practice. I have been very grateful for this chance to give back something as a mentor to these teachers as I had lacked any such person in my early years of teaching.

One of the great advantages to teaching at my age (70) is the fact that I have lived a longer life in Japan than any of my students. I have been through a cycle of life in Japan with my family. That includes births and deaths, growing up and going through school, job hunting and living on one's own in society for the first time, marriage and raising a family, three-generation family life and care for very elderly parents, and more. I know the lives of my students. I know what they bring to the classroom and what lies outside the classroom for them. I bring my personal experience of life in our society and my understanding of the students themselves to the classroom, to my relationships with students, and to the meaningful lessons I prepare for them. I believe that students sense all of this and readily trust me, as in turn I respect them.

Indeed, an integral element of students' advancement in English language proficiency is the opportunity to express their thoughts, opinions, and feelings, and to state their knowledge and information, on matters within their life experiences and in the society around them. Using content from students' own society and culture, and from their personal lives, in the English language classroom greatly facilitates, encourages, and motivates their self-expression, cognitive growth, and language development. Furthermore, such an instructional focus constructs a necessary and vital bridge for many students that connects to a wider and deeper understanding of other peoples, cultures, and issues.

It is simply foolish and wrongheaded to think that young students want twenty-something teachers close to their age. They simply want a *good* teacher, one with experience and demonstrated expertise in classroom instruction and classroom management, one they can trust and follow with confidence. Sulich

(2004, p. 33) states convincingly that “expectations and perceptions influence classroom interaction from the beginning” and that research among younger students shows that they see the teacher in the following six dimensions: keeps order vs. cannot keep order, teaches vs. does not teach, explains difficult concepts vs. does not explain well, interesting lessons vs. boring lessons, fair vs. unfair, friendly vs. unfriendly. Not “old vs. young”!

I believe these views relate as well to college and university students in Japan. Both teachers and school officials here would do well to keep in mind these observations, particularly in the increasingly difficult classroom teaching atmosphere of today, as more and more universities increasingly fill places with students that lack fundamental academic skills and orientation for university studies, and bring to campus the baggage of poor and inappropriate academic and personal behavior (Porcaro, 2002).

Quality veteran teachers know the critical value of concepts like respect, authority, discipline, morality, responsibility, integrity, character - and their existential application with students in the classroom. When it comes to classroom management - including the need to correct misbehaviors, to balance limits and leeways, and to establish a positive productive working environment for all students - seasoned teachers have great sensitivity toward these issues; they understand their importance; they carry recognized moral authority to address these issues; they exercise effective command of the situation; and they effect constructive outcomes.

Lemov makes distinctly clear what such teachers know from the certainty of long experience of practice: that it is utterly false to think that warmth and strictness in the classroom are opposites. The teacher must be both; indeed, often at exactly the same time. “When you are clear, consistent, firm, and unrelenting and at the same time positive, enthusiastic, caring, and thoughtful, you start to send the message to students that having high expectations is part of caring for and respecting someone. This is a very powerful message” (Lemov, 2010, p. 213).

A brief excerpt from a poem, *What teachers make* by Mali (2002), written as a defiant, stirring reply to an ignorant cynic, rests the case.

I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could....

I make kids wonder,

I make them question.

I make them criticize.

I make them apologize and mean it.

I make them write.

I make them read, read, read....

I make them understand that if you've got the brains,

then you follow your heart....

Let me break it down for you, so you know what I say is true:

Teachers make a goddamn difference! Now what about you?

For All Teachers To Do

There is little or no reason to expect any time soon any broad institutional changes in policies and practices in Japan regarding age discrimination against teachers, let alone the passage of any legislation that would proscribe even overt manifestations of ageism within the field of education. Having noted that, however, I appreciate the recognition I have received in some quarters for my teaching skills and experience, and the opportunities afforded me at my age to continue to contribute to instructional programs and the professional development of other teachers.

Moreover, Japan is well-known and admired for its honor and reverence of active masters of traditional performing arts and crafts. Older accomplished and still productive individuals in ordinary fields of work, including education, too, should be acknowledged and valued by their employers and communities for the excellence of their labors and contributions to the people they serve.

Meanwhile, there are several good practices that all teachers can adopt, worthwhile in themselves and which address the age factor discussed in this article. I would like to end with some suggestions.

Older teachers especially must maintain their passion for their work, and continue to hone their instructional expertise of many years of experience and to innovate in their classroom practice, to include as well an understanding and

appropriate application of educational technology.

Both veteran teachers and younger teachers should reflect on their life experiences as teachers and come to understand the evolving meaning and relevance of it all. Through such inquiry they can “uncover who they are, where they have come from, what they know and believe, and why they teach as they do” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p.5). They need to tell their stories in writing for professional publications, at teacher gatherings such as JALT chapter meetings and conferences, and informally among colleagues at their workplaces. These shared narratives of teaching experiences can bridge generations and promote real communities of practice within each workplace and across the wider domain of the teaching profession.

At college and university faculty meetings at least safely tenured teachers can point to the value for students, faculty, and the institution itself of retaining good teachers and hiring simply the best teachers available regardless of age. At the same time they can point to the counterproductive effects of releasing good teachers merely because of their age and hiring less than able teachers of any age for expediency.

Veteran college and university teachers should seek and accept opportunities to mentor younger teachers at their institutions and to expand their role in the community by presenting guest lectures and classroom lessons to students particularly at local high schools. These activities not only are very rewarding in themselves but also can serve to build relationships with teachers at these other schools and establish one’s reputation as a respected senior teacher in the community.

As parents, we should encourage and support those teachers in all educational settings who provide all their students with a full and rich learning experience, thus making us active stakeholders in our own children’s education. This is particularly opportune for pre-primary to high school levels at open classroom days, meetings with teachers, and PTA meetings.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the age of teachers in itself is an arrant irrelevance, and in the end it is always the work of good teachers of any age that raises educational standards for the benefit of all.

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