



“Dhu Rein in Spein Steis Meinly in dhu Plein.” ’s That Roit, Professor ’iggins?

Time flies. Time does fly. Time has flown. Time flew. Time did fly. This is not the conjugation practice of the verb “fly,” but now that you’ll go soon, I have mixed feelings about the passage of time. How about you, Michael, dear friend, no, Dr. Higgins? You are Professor Dr. Michael Leo Higgins in this special issue dedicated to you to commemorate your retirement in March 2011 from the Faculty of Engineering cum the International Student Center, Yamaguchi University, where you have taught for a short twenty-six years since 1985.

Dr. Higgins first arrived at YU in 1985 as a part-time professor, the instructor of the “English Conversation” course provided in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, which was abolished in 1996 and whose faculty members were in one way or another relocated. In 1989 he became a full-time faculty member, and a full professor in 1995. All through the years to this day, he has been a unique professor, no simple instructor of English conversation.

From the start he has stood on the pivotal point as far as his education and research are concerned. In education he has practiced what is generally practiced today when class is given. The point of his assertion at the time was that classes have accountability and be so standardized as to bear relevancies among them (Higgins: 1988). To this we had been total strangers. The 1980s were still an Arcadian period of time for Japanese universities. In what sense “Arcadian”? The existence of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, for one. Only lately is this being recovered, though not an exact restoration, judiciously debated. In many ways what liberal arts had to offer is indispensable to higher education. It fills in what specialty education is incapable of. The heads of the tender years must be stuffed with the very basics of humanities and social and natural sciences to form the rich and pliable foundation of their specialties no matter what they are. Pay the piper or eat humble pie. For another, tradition-trammeled classes for professors to give and for students to take. There was no nothing: no syllabus, nor standards, nor accountability, nor assessment, nor any specific pedagogy to subscribe to; but the conformation of the “academic quarter,”

a quarter of an hour truncated on either end of a class. Class per se was a trammel. Personally, however, I was happy about all that. Those were the days, right, old buddy?

In the pursuit of his professed area of concentration, Professor Higgins has all along proposed a set of components in English education, which made him sound like a soapbox speaker. But in the course of time this set came into effect at large. His commitment is to

1. Method of English education: communicative approach, in part uniquely by recourse to the Sound Approach®;
2. Contents of class: content-based and student-centered with the focus on consultation and presentation about world issues, which require highly ethical mettle and insight for the learners to develop in living as they do in the contemporary times; and
3. Administration of class: classes should be, at the mechanical end, standardized, relevancy-related, and accountable with standardized assessment; and at the emotional end, caring and sharing.

He was most active when the YU English curriculum saw a dramatic shift in 2002. In preparing for the shift, he proposed a pilot course of the kind that would realize the aforementioned set. He and three colleagues, four of them, got together and split into two pairs, used self-made materials covering all four skills of communication, and devised a six-week course for the engineering students. Let us skip. It worked! The students were satisfied that they were immersed in English, their first experience; and the professors had a new experience. Later, Professor Higgins compiled the pilot course into graded textbooks. They have been used in the current curriculum and after having been through several revisions they are distributed in China, too. However, his set requires a wee bit of luck and pluck on the part of non-native speakers of English. Teachers must learn some gambits of the “communicative approach” and play them in our classes. And in class get our students to perform on their own – don’t teach it but let them find it through their performance. If we look at how English is being taught, we’ll have the heart for one plucky baby step forward, work together with our eager students if we’re lucky to be blessed with ones, and meet what the world needs now – love, yes, but tools that enable English to come naturally to us. Over the years Professor Higgins has promoted the development of the tools, which we should acquire the skills to use and which we should learn to use better.

The Sound Approach® is one of the tools Professor Higgins has been devoted to over the time, in order to facilitate and better our students' English pronunciation, viz., for them to be more communicable in English. Unlike the IPA, this approach only uses 26 letters which are all from the English alphabet to represent pronunciation dictated by the erratic English orthography. Since pronunciation is barely taught in the current education, it has to wait, confronting the reality that the sound of English is less and less voiced in classrooms. To its chagrin, the Sound Approach® will take time to get to English learners. It needs time enough and an impetus as does a paradigm shift promulgated by Thomas Kuhn in his well-recognized thesis. Buddy, you've got to live long enough for your students to be able to sing phonetically correctly, "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." Art is long.

Personally, I see myriad Michaels in the Michael Higgins. Here are some. He's a musician, composer-cum-instrument player. That's why his interest is directed to sound spellings. He's a painter. That's why he must put everything in perspective. He's a writer. That again is why he's always book-thirsty, for pulp – oops, sorry gramp, yep, yarns spun about the making of history. He's an athlete. That's also why he's often on crutches and a cane, and in a cast. He's a home builder. That's why his home is floating on the paddies. He's a guru or a pundit. That's why . . .

I thought I saw in a foxed film, the renaissance Michelangelo, born again in this age, might be making a painful effort, blue in the face, vying with the contemporary Michaelangelo – oh you gotta luv yerself called that way, buddy.

December 2010

M. Miyazaki