



Vol.9 Sterling M. Plata

Associate Professor at De La Salle University

Developing independent learners  
enhances a country's competitiveness

Pioneers of Education  
for Intercultural Understanding

Sterling Plata, Associate Professor in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics of De La Salle University in the Philippines, is a person with strong interest in testing and assessment methods of the English language, who combines well research and practice. She believes that the English language skills are essential for the Philippines in order to achieve economic growth in the advancing economic exchange in the ASEAN, and she challenges the technique called "portfolio assessment" to help the students learn independently. Her viewpoint had much in common with Kanda University of International Studies' longtime commitment to the "Independent learning" education style. (Text: Takeshi Yamaguchi, Photos: Yutaro Yamaguchi, /titles omitted)

For Sterling Plata who was fond of reading English books from an early age, it was perfectly natural to major in English. When Plata entered the Graduate School of De La Salle University, she majored in "English for specific purpose". Together with her academic study in the field, in order to teach English as required in the field of work, Plata had to build a curriculum, and got involved in various training projects.

For example, in a project for the Philippine Airlines, she did training on the topic how to write "adjustment letters" to the staff who works in the luggage claim area. Plata taught the English expression required for the processing of these letters when an airliner passenger has lost his or her baggage.



In addition, the labor costs in the Philippines are cheap compared to Europe and the United States, and since English is the official language, there are many call center companies with U.S. capital. The query calls made from the United States are answered by staff who is on the other side of the Pacific Ocean in the Philippines. Plata was involved in one company's project that made her study thoroughly the differences between the Philippine and the American English.

"Philippine English problem is in the subject-verb agreement. When the subject changes, the verb does not change. In the background of these issues there are Philippines-specific circumstances. First of all, we do not have a reading culture in the Philippines. Much of the information is obtained from the TV rather than a newspaper or a book. The parents who are struggling cannot buy a book to their children. Schools lack budget, and sometimes there are cases when not enough teaching materials can be distributed."

Plata says there is also a problem with the English education in school. Many of the junior high school and high school English classes dedicate a lot of time on grammar, reading comprehension, and writing. On the other hand, listening and communication lessons seem to be put off. In high school, some English tutors teach very difficult grammar.

Plata is currently responsible for courses to train English teachers at the university, so she sometimes emphasizes that "since high school students won't necessarily become linguistics scholars, it is not necessary to teach them such a difficult grammar". Plata points out that reading environment at home as well as teaching materials shortages and tutoring content biases in school are stopping the Filipinos to improve their English ability.(1/4)



## Practice "portfolio assessment" to raise the academic achievement through students' self-assessment

Plata got her doctorate degree in July 1998 and began teaching English language at her alma mater, De La Salle University, also focusing on research of student evaluation methods. In the background, there was her awareness of the issues behind the necessity to reform the "English education for sake of the test". Student performance is also an evaluation of the teachers, and evaluation of the school. The exam questions of the unified test the government implements are the multiple choice format. Teachers are planning the contents of the lessons in order to teach the students how to get good points on the test. They don't intend to teach communication skills or writing skills that are required in society.

In April 2000, Plata obtained a "Specialist Certificate in Language Testing and Assessment" from the Regional Language Centre of The Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and started gaining experience related to the reform of English education in Singapore.

In 2001, the students who were taking the English courses in the faculty of the De La Salle University she was teaching in, began to say that they don't want to take the final exam. In response to that, Plata proposed the introduction of "portfolio assessment" method to the faculty.

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The syllabus of the university has learning goals specified for each subject. In general, teachers evaluate the degree of student's attainment level by performing exams at the end of the semester. By contrast, the portfolio evaluation is a method which allows the students to evaluate themselves while constantly reflecting on what was learned, and with this technique to raise their academic achievements towards their goals.

The mentioned here "portfolio" refers to files such as notes, printouts, presentation materials, reports, or in other words artifacts which were created during the student's learning process toward their goals. Plata who implemented this approach, evaluated to what extent the students created their portfolio along with the rules and whether they completed it. Plata describes the results obtained through the portfolio assessment in the following manner.

"Once students get out of the class, they don't receive guidance from teachers whether their knowledge is enough. If students have their own portfolio, and evaluate themselves on their own, even without the help of the teachers they can learn independently.

Students do not understand their own strengths, but they know their weaknesses. To overcome the weaknesses, they must first set their own goals and direction. In order to achieve the goal, they learn ways to improve their abilities, and methods to evaluate themselves. This also means that students themselves are responsible for their own learning.

When they enter the world of work, in order to increase the performance of the company, they have to find problems on their own, discover method to resolve them, and also to evaluate the results. Since the students are learning on the assumption that they are going to work in society, I think that school should adopt some of the common evaluation methods society has.(2/4)



**The center of education should be changed from "teaching" to "learning"**

Plata's commitment to try helping students acquire the power to learn independently has a lot in common with the education in Kanda University of International Studies. In 1989 the University founded ELI (English Language Institute) as independent English learning institution. Francis C. Johnson who was a professor at Department of English served as its Director.

The Australian-born Johnson wrote numerous textbooks for the people who learn English as a foreign language while teaching in Papua New Guinea and the University of Hong Kong. On the other hand, he studied the concept of "independent learners", and practiced its achievements in Kanda University of International Studies' ELI.

The ELI had full-time resident faculty. The teachers were native English speakers, young people in their 20s who held master's degrees in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Teachers not only from the United States and England, but also from Australia, Singapore, South Africa, and Scotland gathered there. Students spending time at ELI had the opportunity to develop English speaking abilities through communication with foreign teachers close to their own age, while experiencing a wide variety of English from around the world.

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At the time, the idea of teaching a foreign language in faculty lecture was common for universities of foreign studies. On the other hand, Johnson was considering that it is important for the students to plan their learning on their own, cooperate with classmates, and learn English while building a large experience in communication, and that ultimately building a curriculum that meets the proficiency degree of each student was what is important. Indeed, an independent learner training.

Students learn passively in the Japanese style of foreign language education. Independent learning students learn by acquiring voluntarily foreign language skills. The two ways are fundamentally different. Since ELI's inception, there was a lot of opposition from teachers of the Department of English. From this side story one can understand why ELI was a revolutionary phenomenon. But, ELI's efforts were soon to be appreciated.

In 2003 SALC (Self-Access Learning Center) opened at Kanda University of International Studies as an aggregation of ELI's research. Students communicated in English with ELI's English teachers, and increased their learning motivation. Extensive teaching materials and equipment were aligned to the facility, and learning advisors assigned. Currently, as an educational inter-university cooperation project in the Kanda University of International Studies, the curriculum and faculty of SALC are provided to other universities as comprehensive solutions. Johnson says the following about the direction of the education that Kanda University of International Studies should advance into.

"I think teachers need to change their emphasis from teaching to learning. It's what the learner does that matters, not what the teacher does. Good teaching is measured by how much is learned by the learner. I think if we can spend our time thinking about that then I think we will make a great contribution."(3/4)



**To increase our competitiveness in the ASEAN Economic Community we need independent English learning and intercultural understanding**

On December 31, 2015 was established the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). 10 countries are participating, the total population of the region reaching about 620 million people. Huge economies with total production value of 2.5 trillion dollars (about 300 trillion yen) began to move. Based on the assumption that economic activity in the AEC region is activated, Plata points out that the English education must be also reviewed.

"We have a strong interest what will happen with the English as a common language in the AEC. Since in the ASEAN countries different English is spoken, we have to respectively understand and speak various types of English. We must also change the English speaking classes taught at the university. The intercultural communication point of view is also important. When you have different cultures, there are different things that are OK to talk about, and also different things you shouldn't talk about. You must learn what topics of conversation are not rude to the other party. We need to learn the culture and norms of the communication of the other side.

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With a huge budget, Brunei is having English training for its government officials at East-West Center, a research institution in the Hawaii state of U.S. In the future, the Philippines must compete with countries such as Singapore and Brunei. If the Filipino's English skills are not good enough, we will be left behind. I would like to continue my education and research activities for the English education in the Philippines and in ASEAN by aiming to introduce the student self-assessment method. "

With the development of a new economic region, ASEAN begins dynamic people-to-people exchanges. To strengthen the country's economy, independent English learning is necessary, Plata says. Japan is also onto the wave of globalization. For the Japanese people it is essential to improve their English communication skills in order to deal with the people from Asia and other foreign countries. To enhance communication skills while spontaneously interacting with other people, and continue to learn as independent learners. It can be said that the time has come to appreciate the value of Kanda University of International Studies' pioneering work to introduce this teaching method.  
(4/4)

**Sterling M. Plata**

Born in 1965 in the Philippine's Province of Laguna. Received her Ph.D. (in Language and Literature) from De La Salle University in 1998. Involved in curriculum development of the English language training such as professional training in companies, and continues to study and practice the "portfolio assessment" of the students who continue to learn independently. Eager to reform the English education of the entire Southeast Asian countries, in April 2000 she receives the "Specialist Certificate in Language Testing and Assessment" from The Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization's (SEAMEO) Regional Language Centre. Currently she is Associate Professor in the English and Applied Linguistics Department of De La Salle University.