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<td>Author(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>長崎大学教育学部教科教育学研究報告, 30, pp.67-78; 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1998-03-25</td>
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<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/6166">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/6166</a></td>
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TQM in the language classroom

Giles PARKER

Introduction.

‘When people in an organization are empowered, you can walk in the door and feel the difference. People look you straight in the eye. They show a proactive, outgoing curiosity. You sense their confidence; it emanates from individuals, but it is supported by teams, by managers they respect, and by the empowering organization itself.’ (Foy 1993: 1)

The Total Quality Management (TQM) movement is most often related to attempts by industries to increase profits and reduce costs by providing quality service and products to both internal and external customers. Certain TQM precepts and principles have been transferred and applied in education, for example, Herman and Herman (1995); and Murgatroyd and Morgan (1993). These papers describe innovations using TQM principles in management at a district or school wide level. Meacham Wilson and Coolican (1996) explore teacher empowerment by investigating intrinsic motivation. Cole (1995) discusses the use of TQM principles on selecting faculty, and Browder (1994) investigates what teacher empowerment means to four teachers. For the majority of language teachers in Japan, management innovation leading to empowerment may be desirable, but, given the current cultural climate and employment practices in Japanese language education, teachers are unlikely to experience the benefits of organizational change in the near future.

Be that as it may, it is possible to apply TQM principles at a more practical and immediate level in the classroom where teachers act as managers and both teachers and students are working to produce something of quality. If we substitute ‘classroom’ for ‘organization’, and ‘teachers’ for ‘managers’ we can see that TQM may have some guidance for us. Thus this paper will discuss the relevance of TQM principles at the level of classroom management as a way of making teaching more explicit and productive, and as a way of improving the quality of the service - language. I shall begin by discussing the precepts that underline TQM. Then I shall suggest ways in which these ideas can be used in our classrooms. I shall outline problems in applying TQM and suggest solutions.

What is TQM? A general review.

TQM was originally developed by unsung American management guru Peter Deming in the 1950’s. Deming envisioned a way of empowering workers so that everyone within an organization could take responsibility on a quest for quality. Flood
(1993: 42) has summarised TQM theorists and provides a useful definition; “Quality means meeting customers’ (agreed) requirements, formal and informal, at lowest cost, first time every time.” Basic TQM principles include;

1) Empowerment
2) Customer needs = organization needs
3) Continuous improvement
4) Top-down commitment
5) Systematic measurement
6) Proactive management
7) Added value
8) Ease of communication
9) The human factor
10) Defining objectives
11) Agreed requirements

Implicit in each principle is the theory of empowerment. This is when workers are given the chance to create and take responsibility for achieving goals. What follows is a more detailed discussion of the principles within TQM.

**Empowerment**

A TQM oriented organization invests in its staff. It gives them responsibility for their work. It asks them how they could do their job better. It involves the staff in the decision making process. It includes their innovations and interests and sets requirements by consensus. In this way the staff feel empowered and responsible, thus leading to increased confidence and motivation. People begin to feel they 'own' their job and that they are investing in their work environment. It also implies empowered customers who are more interactive in the production process. Empowerment is a principle that runs through all following principles.

**Customer needs = organization needs**

A TQM oriented organization is focused on providing high quality service to its customers. It begins to do this by collaborating with the customers and finding out what they need. Thus TQM includes the use of needs analyses as a way of getting effective data. Customer needs and responses are also investigated after the service to get feedback.

**Continuous improvement**

A TQM oriented organization is committed to continuously improving quality. It will invest in training for the employees in an effort to increase skills and knowledge. It will encourage research and experimentation to improve the production process.

**Top-down commitment**

An important part of TQM is that everyone is involved and committed. This means not just the operating core at the production end, but throughout the hierarchy, including the strategic and tactical levels, and the support and techno sections.
Furthermore, commitment must be seen in the actions of the people who have executive decision making power. This means managers have to ‘walk the talk’. They should be aware of what teams are doing what jobs and be ready to give and take objective evaluation that will include praise and reward. Flood (1993) has suggested that ‘total’ in TQM implies complete commitment across all levels of the organization.

**Systematic measurement**

Another important part of TQM is the need for systematic measurement. This means creating regular, objective data collection devices as a means of monitoring the work done, often relying on statistical measures. Data gained in this way are used to pin-point success or failure and are reinjected into the process to increase quality. Teams are encouraged to ‘benchmark’ which means to share data and information with other teams to improve their own work.

**Proactive management**

A TQM oriented organization aims to predict successes and failures and seeks to manage towards them. It is not interested in reactive or fire-fighting crisis management. Employee empowerment enables proactive management.

**Added value**

Every job must add extra value to the product. There must be a sound rationale behind the process, and each action should increase the quality. Any act or process that does not add value in some objectively measurable way should be questioned.

**Ease of communication**

A TQM oriented organization will tend to view its employees more as equals. It will accept the validity of employees’ ideas. Communication needs to be short and responsive, not via long lines. This means a non-heirachical environment which encourages different styles of communication and language. Objective data provides the necessary criteria for the content of communication. However, TQM also encourages a personal style of communication, in that it recognizes employees as humans who have agendas and drives that exist beyond the work place.

**The human factor**

TQM oriented organisations recognise the need for creativity, responsibility, and fun as motivation factors necessary to encourage people to increase the quality of their work. TQM may highlight McGregor’s (1960) Theory Y managers who assume that; 1) work and study is as natural as play, 2) self-control is of fundamental importance in reaching goals, 3) everyone has the capacity to solve problems, 4) motivation includes social aspects, self-esteem and self-actualization, and finally 5) people can be self-directed and creative if properly motivated.

TQM also realizes the difficulty of relying on quantifiable data to describe processes and accepts the validity of qualitative data. This leads to a more humanistic approach to systems analysis and measurement.
Defining objectives

TQM oriented organisations set challenging goals that inspire the employees. They seek to increase the sense of a shared sense of vision. Employees are encouraged to take part in defining the goals and to have ownership of the mission and to maintain awareness of the relationship between their efforts and the goals or objectives.

Agreed requirements

Producers and customers define and seek to maintain a certain standard. This can be either a passive (not very negotiable) or active (very negotiable) agreement. Furthermore, both parties are aware of the criteria for measurements.

This concludes a brief summary of TQM. What follows is a discussion of the same principles and their applicability to language classrooms.

TQM in the language classroom

Empowerment

This implies a radical reevaluation of the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and the students. It is already found in classrooms espousing learner-centered principles as opposed to more traditional teacher-centered precepts. It holds currency with the current language teaching paradigm i.e., task based communicative language teaching involving small groups in problem solving activities that focus more on the process rather than the product. Any classroom that envisions language as a tool encourages the empowerment of the language users. Any class that teaches learner strategies, or interaction strategies, or that encourages learner awareness and responsibility or self-access is an empowering class. In this respect TQM is not an innovation, but a basic, credible theory that already supports many language classes around the world. It is implied in all the following principles.

Student needs = classroom needs

A TQM based class would investigate the needs of its students via questionnaires, self-reports, interview transcripts or diagnostic testing. It would also investigate the needs of the sponsors including programs of further education e.g., universities, and employers, parents, and society as a whole. This needs analysis would then be used to inform the content and style of the class. Currently many classes throughout Japan seem to reflect the needs of the textbook, the teacher, and perhaps the teacher's perception of entrance exams. However, student generated material that is relevant to student life and interests and desires would probably increase motivation and the quality of the class. Is there a reason why so many teachers don't ask their students what they want to learn, or how they want to study? The information gleaned from the needs analysis would be discussed with the students so as to create a more reflective and relevant syllabus. This would be a first step in improving the quality of our classes.

Continuous improvement
A TQM classroom would include an explicit awareness by both the teacher and the students of the issues, roles, responsibilities, and goals of a lesson. The teacher and students would be able to ask for feedback that is acted upon. For example, an activity that the teacher has designed would involve a feedback section. The teacher needs to know how this activity can be improved. She would ask what its strengths and weaknesses were and whether the performance goals and criteria were realistic and attainable. On the other hand, students also need to know how they can improve their performance during a task. They need confirmation that they are fulfilling standards. A TQM classroom would provide chances for feedback to lead to improvement in both the teacher's performance and the students'.

**Top-down commitment**

If a teacher is going to apply TQM principles then she should show commitment by involving the students in the decision-making process. The teacher needs to 'walk the talk'; that is, she needs to embody the commitment to TQM. Students and teachers sharing their learning/teaching journals would help to show commitment. Teachers interacting with students on a more equal basis, and valuing their opinions and experiences would also help. If the teacher leads by example students may gain in confidence and begin to be more interactive with their learning environment.

**Systematic measurement**

A large part of any class is the way the effectiveness is measured. How do we know our students have learnt anything or changed in anyway over the last lesson? Obviously this is a very important issue; it is the way we know we are doing what we are paid for. TQM suggests measurement should be agreed between the students and the teacher. What is the most efficient way of measuring the effectiveness of an activity? Measurement should be objective, meaningful and responsive. Recently teachers are beginning to suggest students take responsibility for measuring each other's performance (O'Sullivan 1996). Measurement should also be acted upon. The implications from the measurement should be put back immediately into a lesson. Students and teachers need to be able to pin-point success/failure and to be able to improve the quality.

TQM does not imply sole reliance upon statistical measurement, however. Teachers and students should be able to create questionnaires and interviews and other qualitative data collection devices in an attempt to get more reflective information.

**Proactive management**

Teachers need to be aware of the issues concerned in making an activity (Ur 1996). We should be able to anticipate and solve problems that may arise. We should be able to trial lesson plans, making sure of content, resources, and timing by doing it ourselves, or piloting the activity on a similar population. We should ask students to anticipate problems and successes themselves. Teachers often only see their side of the classroom. The students often perceive and experience something completely
different. We should ask students to check our activities so that we can improve them for next time. Furthermore, in our classes we often see different groups performing at different speeds. In such cases, the teacher should have contingency plans ready to help maintain momentum. Proactive management is implicit in the discussions about defining objectives and agreed requirements.

**Added value**

In a TQM classroom, the teacher should be able to justify each activity. Why are we doing this in this way? Can we explain the rationale for each activity? Are the students aware of this? Each activity should be meaningful; time should not be wasted. This may mean a compromise. Ur (1997) raised the issue of how to use our time more efficiently, arguing that at times it is expedient to use the L1. This may detract from the quality of the language in the classroom, but on the other hand, when we are working under restricted time it may useful to refocus our aims on enabling students to perform a task.

**Ease of communication**

A TQM oriented classroom would allow for easier communication between students and teacher. This means reducing the sense of hierarchical difference that is found in traditional teacher centered classrooms. Students should be allowed to interact with the teacher on a more equal basis. For example, the teacher should provide chances for students to use clarification strategies, and to ask for help and explanation. Giving students the vocabulary and the security to ask questions will inevitably empower them and improve the quality of the class.

Ease of communication also implies a different view of what can be said. An empowering, TQM oriented classroom would encourage positive feedback. The teacher would reward and encourage students in visible and personal ways (Whetton & Cameron, 1991). Students’ motivation would increase with public praise and reward, and by pointing out how and why the group or student succeeded, thus aiding ‘benchmarking’.

**The human factor**

The people in a classroom should realise that they are human beings, not automatons. They have their own agendas, desires and fears, and have a drive towards self-fulfillment. A TQM oriented classroom would capitalize on the human factor by realizing language interacts with human experience. Therefore we should encourage student generated activities and material. This would increase diversity and make the language classroom more meaningful and motivating, because it would reflect student experiences.

**Defining objectives**

Finally a TQM classroom would reach consensus about the goals and procedures and timing for an activity, in accordance with proactive management. Students would be aware or reminded of the objectives. For example, a teacher at a recently observed
class at the Nagasaki University Fuzoku Junior High school made a point of writing
the goals, procedure and timing for each activity on the board. She also made sure
students were aware of their responsibilities. Furthermore, she gave ample opportu­
nity for students to seek clarification. This lesson proved to be extremely efficient
precisely because the objectives and procedures were so explicit.

**Agreed requirements**

During class it is useful to discuss the aims, measurements systems, and proce­
dures for an activity. Students will perform much better if they are aware of the
rationale behind a language task. They will produce higher quality language if they
know how they will be evaluated, and what the correct – and by implication the
incorrect – procedure for an activity should be. Nunan (1988) has argued for more
negotiation in the classroom and suggests this will increase language learning.
Research by Griffee and Templin (1997) has suggested that goal setting improves task
performance, which implies increased quality. It can also be argued that students
should be more aware of the processes in language learning and learn to take more
responsibility.

**Five critical factors of successful TQM verses a permanently failing organization**

We have seen that many of the principles enshrined in TQM are also found in
communicative language teaching, especially the more recent learner-centered para­
digm. It may be useful to continue this comparison further and investigate the
differences between learner-centered classes and teacher-centered classes using a
comparison by Myer and Zucker of successful TQM verses the management style of
a failing organization. Myer and Zucker (1989) describe five critical features of a
successful TQM run company in comparison with those of a permanently failing
organization. They begin by explaining that a successful TQM oriented organization
will involve all levels of employees in a commitment to a shared vision, while on the
other hand, in a failing organization there is no sense of a shared vision and so no sense
of commitment to anything other than what each individual can get out of the
company. In classroom terms, this suggests that in a learner-centered class, both
teachers and students are aware of the goals and procedures of an activity, and that
their responsibility lies in groupwork and peer teaching and that the activity is
something that has been created based on their needs. However, in a teacher-centered
class, students are ignorant of the goals and procedures for an activity. They are
forced to do the activity which does not reflect their needs.

The second critical feature is concerned with the drive to provide quality for the
customer. The goal of a TQM oriented organization is to provide a process that
produces quality. However, a failing organization is focused only on survival and self
-perpetuation. Thus, a learner-centered class would inform students of how to
operationalize quality, in terms of language and action, allow for evaluation to be
negotiated, and finally give them chances to experiment, practice and improve their performance. On the other hand, a teacher-centered class would probably concentrate on maintaining movement through a textbook in accordance with a syllabus, and would focus on product to show ranking. It would allow the teacher to maintain his position of power by judging what is correct or not, with little reference to the students. The students are probably unaware of the relevance of the activity to other activities, or to the world in general. It is not something they took part in designing.

Thirdly, a TQM oriented organization is flexible enough to create small, focused teams and to invest in team development. Furthermore it will encourage changes to be made in the performance management system to aid teamwork. On the other hand, a failing organization has a very rigid hierarchy and many levels of authority. Decisions come down the line while information goes back up. The operating core is divorced from the tactical and strategic levels. They endure decisions made about them by levels that are not related to them. In a learner-centered classroom we can see small groups focused on performing tasks. Students work as teams in a spirit of cooperation. The teacher moves about the class monitoring and facilitating and offering advice. However, in a teacher-centered class, students work individually, performing tasks from the textbook that rarely reflect their interests.

Fourthly, the TQM oriented organization will develop challenging goals to increase performance outcomes. It is also very interested in the process to achieve these goals. However, the failing organization maintains simple, modest goals. Production processes are in normal lock-step improvements. These organisations are more product oriented. Learner-centered classes are inclined to promote more 'holistic' language production. This means they encourage tasks where the goals are beyond an immediate focus on the language. Tasks include the use of realia, authentic language and situation, student-generated material, for example poster presentations, role-plays, fashion shows, video-reports, and other activities where students are using the language to produce something more than language. On the other hand, teacher-centered classes are apt to focus on the correct production of language, usually a specific grammar point or 'keyword' or pronunciation. Tasks often take the form of individual grammar drills, or multi-choice tests, or Q and A sessions where the teacher asks the class in rote. It is doubtful whether students find these kinds of activities effective, motivating or fun.

Lastly, the TQM oriented organization uses systematic management by effective measurement and feedback. Regularly provided objective and qualitative information is injected back into the process to encourage continuous improvement. However, the failing organization has very little feedback about the effectiveness of the work. The appraisal system is based on competition rather than clear objective data. There is a movement towards conformity and mediocrity. Learner-centered classrooms often do not rely on statistical measurement to evaluate performance. However, teachers may
be well aware of who has performed well and who needs more work. These teachers will enable students to evaluate their own work having discussed criteria. However, in teacher-centered classes, the teacher's criteria dominates the activity. Students must not deviate from this norm.

Myer and Zuckers' analysis seems to be relevant to our classrooms and contains many hints that allow us to improve our classes. However, there are still problems in implementing TQM principles in business and in language classes.

Some potential problems in implementing TQM in the language classroom.

Thus far, I have discussed an ideal; that of TQM oriented classes. However, in practice TQM may seem to be more difficult to implement than it initially appears. Earlier I briefly mentioned Flood's (1993: 42) definition of TQM: “Quality means meeting customers” (agreed) requirements, formal and informal, at lowest cost, first time every time.”

A fundamental question concerns the principle of 'quality'. What is 'quality' in the language classroom? How do we define it? How do we measure it? How do we make students aware of it? TQM suggests that quality is based upon customer needs. Therefore our definition would take into account the requirements of both the students and the teacher. It would be based on the data gathered through the needs analysis. I have also suggested that 'quality' is something that can be found within our activities. A definition of 'quality' in this respect might include notions of 'academic time' (Richards and Lockhart 1994). This means teachers should create activities that increase the time when students are learning or practicing something new. In Richards and Lockhart's view, classroom time is divided between allocated time for a task, time-on-task, and academic learning time. Therefore 'quality' might also involve an attempt to increase academic time in the language classroom. Finally, 'quality' also implies something that is measurable. However, are we going to focus on measuring the product result, or the processes towards the product? A definition of 'quality' must take both into account.

Another problem in applying TQM in the language classroom could be in the lack of commitment from the teacher. Parry (1993) points out that TQM programs in businesses often fail due to ill-prepared management. For teachers, TQM and the subsequent change in roles imply less power for the teacher. As Simmons et al (1993: 187) explain; “Many managers are reluctant to let subordinates make their own decisions for fear things will get out of control”. For many teachers it is enough to go through their career never challenging their assumptions or asking how they can create more efficient classes. They teach as they learnt. Empowering students would be like letting the fox guard the chicken coup. Some teachers might feel threatened by this and fear a reduction in discipline and standards.

A further problem concerns the lack of awareness in the students of the opportu-
nities provided by TQM. As Foy (1994: 158) puts it "people who have been hostages take a long time to adjust to freedom...." Students need to be shown the benefits of empowerment and TQM. How will an active, motivated attitude help each individual? Doesn't it seem like more hassle to be actually taking part where once all they needed to do was to just keep their heads down? What are the benefits for taking responsibility for one's own learning?

Other problems include poor planning by the teacher. We need to be aware of all the issues involved in empowering our students. We should also be wary of poor data collection devices and unvalidated questionnaires and surveys. We should watch for over-concern with measurement and untested tests. We should try to maintain a balanced focus on goals and process. We should eliminate unrealistic goals.

**Conclusion: Hints on successful TQM implementation.**

Empowerment and TQM are not phenomena that take place immediately after a fresh faced earnest teacher bounces into a classroom and decides to treat her students as friends. Empowerment comes through a gradual process of taking responsibility. If we accept that language classes in Japan encourage a passive learner awaiting pearls of wisdom to drop from the teacher who is the source of all power in the class, then we must also accept that empowerment might cause some painful experiences for both sides. Perhaps the first step must be a willingness to question assumptions and beliefs about language teaching. This would include questioning the role of the teacher and the student, and investigating the efficacy of current classroom content and style. Teachers can begin to empower their students and increase the quality of their classes by heeding some simple hints.

1) Empowerment needs a strategic step-by-step process that prepares students to take more responsibility (Holpp 1994). Students need time to get used to their new role, therefore teachers need to create activities that will slowly broaden their horizons.

2) Parry (1993) suggests managers develop action plans. Maybe we can make our students more aware of the lesson plans we use and the procedures and timing we expect from each activity.

3) Students also need basic training in how to interact and express themselves. Task-oriented groupwork demands different interactive skills and language. Teachers should lay the groundwork for these skills so as to improve the quality of the task.

4) Furthermore, students need to be aware that the risks they take through personal empowerment will be taken in an atmosphere of support and security. Personal involvement could be improved by generating personal development plans or writing contracts between the students and the teacher.

5) Empowerment also needs to be defined operationally (Holpp 1994). This means
the teacher needs to be able to set out definitions of what students will be able to do and what responsibilities they need to be able to take at which times and under what conditions. In this way students will be able to measure their own progress and the teacher can judge students' strengths and weaknesses.

6) Parry (1993) gives us a relevant list of competencies that aid quality management. He makes the distinction between skills - which are specific to certain situations - and competencies - which are generic and applicable in every situation. He argues that empowerment is greatly aided by increasing 1) analytical thinking, 2) the ability to ask questions, 3) the ability to listen to and organize information and 4) the ability to reinforce appropriate behavior. These competencies might constitute learning strategies which would prove useful in any situation. It would improve our classes if these basic competencies or strategies were introduced early on to our students.

7) We can also encourage coaching and benchmarking. Another way of putting this would be peer-teaching. This is already current terminology among writing teachers using process approach ideals such as peer-editing. Students can be encouraged to teach each other, and to monitor each other.

8) Finally, we need to create appropriate activities that will foster TQM precepts and empower our students. Foy's (1994) suggestion that action-learning approaches are good ways of implementing empowerment can be transferred to language teaching. Her view that problem-solving is an opportunity to instill TQM ideals correlates with the current language teaching paradigm in ESL situations that task-focused group activities engenders greater language use, thus increasing the quality of a lesson. We can also create chances for self-study by organizing self-study materials and activities or creating a self-access center. Problem-solving means creating a product or performance such as poster presentations, group-made videos or reports to the class. In the English department at Nagasaki University, students are often asked to create short lessons and activities and then to use them on small groups of their peers. For example, students have created their own listening tasks and their own reading tasks with great success leading to increased motivation.

Many of the ideas found in TQM and empowerment should not surprise us. They are already reflected in our classrooms when we advocate and teach learner strategies (Wendin & Rubin 1987), when we use needs analysis and negotiation to meet students requirements (Nunan 1988) or when we use collaborative groupwork (Coelho 1991) or when we create a communicative, learner-centered class. In this way we can see that TQM is more than just a business practice for strategic level decision making; it is a relevant and practical set of principles that already inform our classes and will lead to more efficient language teaching.
Bibliography


