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Developing an Awareness of Death for Nursing Students Through English Education



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This paper aims to bridge language education with life/death education, which should be one of the most important issues for any health care student. Currently, the mortality rate between hospitals versus other locations (such as patients' homes) exceeds 80% (Yamate, 2014). Therefore, clinical nurses will have many opportunities to come into contact with terminally ill or dying patients. However, even though nursing students will study the rationale of palliative and terminal care in nursing curricula lectures and practice, they rarely witness actual scenes of death in hospitals. Moreover, few of them have experienced death in modern society due to the proliferation of nuclear households (Yamate, 2014). However, when they graduate from nursing college and start their careers as nurses at hospitals, they will routinely be faced with death.

Keywords: *belief systems, death education, patient care*

Yanagisawa et al (2012) conducted a meta-analytical study on the conflicts that nurses face regarding terminally ill patients and their families. According to the study, nurses interact with terminally ill patients and their families based upon idealistic notions of nursing care, but they struggle with the fact they cannot maintain these

ideals because of a deficiency in skills, a lack of collaboration with other medical staff, or an inadequate healthcare environment, leading many of them to feel 'guilty'. Kitano et al. (2012) also reports that, in addition to their concern and empathy regarding the reduction of the patients' pain, many terminal care nurses carry out their duties trying to contain their emotions simply by putting on a smile.

It seems reasonable then that, as the research above indicates, regardless of how much knowledge and skill nursing practitioners can gain in palliative care and terminal care, related stress and psychological conflicts will never disappear, at least as long as they regard death as something that one should detest and/or avoid. Thus, for college nursing students, having an opportunity to think about death or 'views of life and death' at an early stage in their education could play an instrumental role in preparing them before experiencing direct contact with terminal patients, either in clinical training or practice.

The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines palliative care as follows:

Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and accurate assessment and treatment of pain and related problems: physical, psychosocial, and spiritual.

In line with this definition, this paper will argue that English education can contribute to the field of terminal patient care by initially enabling nursing students to develop a positive attitude toward death. This was achieved in the author's nursing English class primarily by making use of the documentary video *Gaia Symphony*. During the 2017 academic year at the University of Miyazaki, *Gaia Symphony No.3* was introduced to first-year nursing students in order to enable them to more deeply consider life and death. The basic contents and philosophy of the video is explained in the following section.

The Philosophy of 'Gaia Symphony'

According to the film director Jin Tatsumura, *Gaia Symphony* is a series about individuals with very insightful messages for the future of the Earth in the 21st century. Each one of them features an ordinary person who is making an extraordinary contribution to help create an ideal future for the planet. Tatsumura mentions the reason that it is becoming harder for human beings to feel a sense of being alive on mother earth ('Gaia') can be attributed to the fact that death has become obscure in everyday life. Rather, the fact that we live depends on the reality that every moment of life is made up of countless deaths. Our lives now depend totally on the infinitely continuing ring of a 'life or death' cycle, and we are kept temporary alive by Gaia. But this cold, hard fact cannot easily be realized in the current era. The message is that 'death' is not a defeat,

'death' is not the end, but rather, 'death' is the moment that encourages 'life' in those who keep living, and it is this moment that the gratitude and joy for being alive on the Mother Earth Gaia should awaken (Tatsumura, n.d.)

One part of the series, *Gaia Symphony No. 3*, is dedicated to the late Michio Hoshino, a photographer of Alaskan wildlife, who died immediately before the production of this film began. The film traces Hoshino's life and death while introducing people surrounding him, such as a native American storyteller, a wildlife guide, a whale researcher, a canoe builder, and others who chose to live their lives according to the rhythms of nature. Their stories eloquently illustrate the eternal cycles of life on Mother Earth, or 'Gaia'.

One of the people introduced here is Freeman Dyson, an astrophysicist and mathematician, who talks about the meaning of life on a cosmic scale, incorporating both his broad scientific views and deep insights into human nature. Although in the author's classes topics on both Hoshino and Dyson were employed, this paper reports only on the section based on Dyson due to space considerations. Dyson intends to, "...awaken our deeply-stored memories from over five thousand years ago, and take our thoughts to the 'mind of Gaia' and the 'mystery of life'" (No.3, 2007).

To do so, in the characteristic manner of a scientist, Dyson explains and compares the life and death of Gaia and those of human beings on a grand time scale. He

says:

We have to live with Gaia. That is to say, we are part of the earth and the earth has its own processes, which are very slow compared with our own. So, for example, there was a huge disaster which happened 200 million years ago when something went wrong with the oceans (...) We really don't know how it happened. But what we do know is that Gaia recovered, that the earth after this disaster recovered, and new creatures arose to take the place of those that died. It took 5 or 10 million years to recover, and it's hard for us to even be aware of what was going on because it's too slow -- our lifetimes are so short in comparison. We don't see very much change within a human lifetime, but it is still happening. We have to learn that we have to live on the long timescale as well as on the short timescale, and that is not easy (Tatsumura, 1997).

Dyson thereafter mentions three important factors in the evolution of life: death sex, and diversity. He notes that:

...when life was started, of course, it was immortal, there were just little... bacterial cells which divided, but did not die a natural death. Except for accidents, they would continue living forever. Also in the early times there was no sex. So for life to become more complicated, to become more advanced, three factors had to be

introduced. First of all, death, to enable the future to be different from the past, so the old memories would die and new ideas could originate. It is important that we don't live forever. It means a very much more rapid evolution, and more chances for interesting new developments to happen. And, of course, life itself on the earth has been so successful because it has always produced such a huge variety of creatures. If it were not for death, sex, and diversity, early disasters would perhaps have removed life altogether from the planet (Tatsumura, 1997).

This seemingly paradoxical but intriguing scientific fact invites us to reformulate our concept of death, one distinct from that which seems to be commonly shared by the majority, namely that death is a defeat and the end of everything. Instead of taking life and death as finite, self-contained, and isolated events, Dyson positions them in a much broader spectrum and depicts them as ceaseless revolving cycle of lives, created and succeeded by Gaia. Answering the question posed by the director as to 'why must people die', Dyson claims that it is "*...lucky that we die, because we have to make room for the young people. It is a very healthy thing that death exists -- it's not accidental that all creatures beyond a certain degree of evolution have natural deaths*" (Tatsumura, 1997).

But, while Dyson employs an analytical and intellectual point of view, he is also

mindful of the humanistic perspective toward death. For example, in the video he says:

So why should one despair? It's very stupid to lose hope. I mean, hope is, of course, so important. Not that one should be always expecting everything to be beautiful ...I mean, the world is tragic. One has to have a tragic view of the world, because that is reality. But tragedy is not the same thing as hopelessness (Tatsumura, 1997).

Despite this perhaps imparting viewers with a sense of sadness, given the cold hard fact that we all, in the end, have to depart from loved ones, these encouraging messages from Dyson are accompanied, in the final scene, by the vista of an orca leisurely swimming in sunset, with the calming tones of the tune *Unchained Melody* playing in the background. This conveys to the audience a sense of life's eternity.

Course Content and Theoretical Background

In late 1997, the DeSeCo Project (Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations) was started by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) who stated that their aims were to provide, "...a sound conceptual framework to 1) inform educators about key learning

competencies, 2) to strengthen international assessments, and 3) to help to define overarching goals for education systems and lifelong learning" (DeSeCo, n.d.). Three categories of those 'key competencies' – interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, acting autonomously, and using tools interactively – are grounded in a holistic model of competence, constituting a core element of DeSeCo's overarching conceptual framework. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology explicitly advocates this approach, described as 'ikiru Chikara (strength to live)', in its educational guidelines.

According to the OECD's definition of key competencies, as articulated by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), "Acting autonomously is particularly important in the modern world, where each person's position is not as well-defined as was the case traditionally. Individuals need to create a personal identity in order to give their lives meaning, to define how they fit in" (PISA, n.d., p. 14). In other words, one of the required competencies described is to act within a big picture. Thus, English education should also be designed to facilitate these learner competencies such that students can declare their 'positions' explicitly in the world, draw their own scenarios of life, and move forward in their lives by themselves using language(s) as a tool. It is this theoretical foundation that informed the author/teacher's pedagogical focus, the use of the video, and the accompanying

classroom contents.

Students in the author's class were shown the video of Freeman Dyson, which was divided into four parts, constituting four classroom sessions. The video was played in English, although specific sections were occasionally sub-titled in Japanese. For each part of the video, corresponding written in-house materials were distributed. These included English skill tasks involving the following activities:

1. word and phrase comprehension based upon the video text, involving matching terminology with general terms
2. dictations of short sections of the video
3. true or false questions based on the video contents
4. general comprehension questions based on the video contents

All of these activities and materials were developed by the author (Yokoyama). Since some of the concepts presented in the video seemed to be unfamiliar to, and difficult to understand for, first-year college students, these lessons were further conducted by including both peer and instructor support, such as sharing both language and concept questions among students in small groups, student-student discussions on set topics related to the video content, plus further explanation by the instructor while monitoring student comprehension. These support activities were generally conducted in Japanese.

Feedback from Students and Pedagogical Implications

At the end of the semester, a questionnaire survey was carried out regarding the students' impressions of the video and any resultant changes in their beliefs about death. This was conducted anonymously using a 6-point scale ranging from the most positive (1: Strongly agree) to the most negative (6: Strongly disagree). One of the questions the students (n=30) responded to was, 'My beliefs about death have changed through this film/class' (see Figure 1).

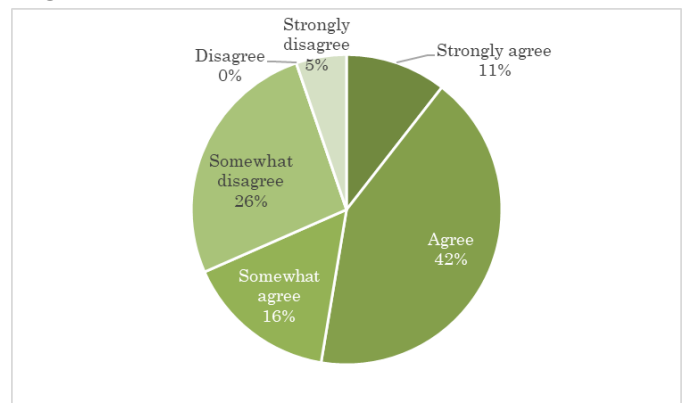


Figure 1. Changes in beliefs about death

The result shows that 69% of the students feel that their views about death have changed in varying degrees. The most striking point of this result is that the students who agreed seemed to have absorbed the message of the film and instructor's intention positively. Some of these thoughts were expressed in detail in the free response section provided below the questions. Following are some excerpts (translated from Japanese):

Excerpts from 'Strongly Agree'

I thought of death as sad and pitiful and have been avoiding it in talking and thought. The lives of Hoshino and Freeman reminded me of many senses of values in life and therefore the variety of attitudes toward death. This helped to dissolve my own belief that death is scary, and I started to think about facing my life along with death.

I used to have a fear of death. When I thought about my death or that of my family, I was scared to even imagine that time advances. But, now that the lessons have finished, that idea has changed a bit and it seems that a positive idea about death can be somewhat possible. I think it beautiful and amazing to be able to think that time never stops and keeps proceeding, that evolution continues, even after I die.

Excerpts from 'Agree'

I have long been interested in views of life and death. When I was a high school student, I once had a chance to think about death and realized that religions in different countries teach us that death is not something we should be afraid of, but I understood this only as knowledge. Since I was impressed by Dyson's idea to consider Gaia or the earth as a life comparable to our own, it seems that a new view has been introduced to me.

I had a scary feeling toward death, but

in the course of learning Dyson's ideas, I started to feel that death is indispensable.

I have had doubts about why we have to die until now, but through this classes' lessons, I learned and understood that the future is brought about by death.

Although I did not have a positive impression of death, I realized it was somebody else's death and evolution that supported our lives. It is, nonetheless, still neither negative nor positive.

I came to see death as a part of my life-cycle.

I used to think that all of us hold a negative image of death, but found out in the class that there were people who view it positively. I came to see that not all about death is bad.

Excerpts from 'Somewhat Agree'

Dyson's assertion that it is lucky that we die sounded very stimulating to me.

I used to think that death means a liberation or release from pain and suffering, but I never thought of it as lucky. That way of thinking is not necessarily acceptable to me yet, but I started to think that death is not only a painful thing.

I had held a vague anxiety or despair

regarding death, but I started to think that death brings us some hope.

In this class, I had a chance to think about death over the long term.

I had a chance to learn that there can be a positive attitude towards death.

Many of the students mentioned that they were inspired by Freeman's unique points of view and philosophy, which reminded the students of their own limited perspectives about life and death. It seemed that the characters' words often resonated with them, as if a new horizon had appeared. This may suggest that for many modern students, rather than providing words of comfort or a story of life after death based on religion, a scientific 'narrative', such as the one in which Dyson positions the finite individual life in the larger cycle of evolution created by Gaia, will resonate in students' minds (and hopefully hearts) as a natural and healthy interpretation of life and death. As Dyson mentions in the film, "there are two windows looking out at the universe, which are looking from different sides, and we cannot look through both together. You have to choose: sometimes religion, sometimes science, but we cannot see them both at the same time. And that is true with Gaia. She has her religious side and her scientific side, and they are separate. But nevertheless, they work together."

This might be something that teachers

should take into consideration if and when we take up the topic of death with college students because some of them feel immediate resistance to it, labeling it as a topic of 'religion'. But whether treated as a religious narrative or in the manner expressed by Dyson, they will all have to confront the notion of death themselves at some point in order to become effective nurses.

Conclusions

Death often presents us with profound questions, such as the meaning of life, the existence of the soul, and the possibility of an afterlife. Individuals faced with death, including those of their relatives, and their families, often rely on ingrained belief systems that help them meet the challenging concepts related to dying and death (Jafari et al., 2015). But before giving specialized education for terminal patient care, it might be a good start for nursing students to more deeply explore their own beliefs about death and establish their own healthy belief systems, which will become a foundation when caring for the dying. It is also believed that this approach will contribute, in due course, to the more comprehensive palliative care education to be delivered to students later on. In this sense, the type of English lessons described here could play a new and significant role in English for Nursing Purposes courses.

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