Appreciative Inquiry: The Fundamental Questions of AI's Validity and Appropriateness in Transforming English Education in Japan

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Abstract

Foreign language education in Japan is currently undergoing educational reform with the implementation of a newly revised course of study which mandates that English classes be taught solely in English (MEXT, 2019). Despite these efforts, it appears to be an illusion as the government limits and controls the contents of English education and instruction. School curriculums are controlled by the National Course of Study and the textbooks used are predominantly chosen from government authorized individuals based on reviews by prefectural boards of education. This has provided many roadblocks to English education in Japan as decisions about curriculum has failed to involve key stakeholders such as teachers and students. Hence, the teachers are not prepared to handle the guidelines in the curriculum in teaching English courses and the demands being placed on them especially with changes to the content and their teaching styles. This traditional way of thinking and decision making has significantly affected the performance of student's English competence. Therefore, as educational leaders it is imperative that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is recognized as much more than an organizational development tool and therefore utilize its strength to reshape the practice of learning, design and development- an orientation to educational change. This paper outlines the principles of AI and its applicability to language education reform in Japan; illustrates AI practices and compares AI to traditional approaches of organizational change and its validity and appropriateness. The study highlights recommendations that can be used by educational institutions in successfully managing transformational change.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Organizational Change, English Education Reform, Educational Policy, EFL, Educational Transformation, Leadership, Management & Administration, Organizational Change

Introduction

Great emphasis has been placed on English study in Japan, both in the public-school system and through the enthusiastic use of thousands of private English training centers. Nonetheless levels of English among adults are below the world average. This is particularly striking when compared to the astoundingly high quality of achievement in math, which is consistently demonstrated in international tests. An over-emphasis on rote learning, relatively low levels of exposure to foreigners in everyday life, and teacher-student norms which impede conversation practice all contribute to the problem (English First Report, 2017)

In the past six years, Japanese adults have not improved their English. If anything, their skills have declined slightly. During the same period, other Asian countries, most notably Indonesia and Vietnam, have made enormous progress. Despite being a far wealthier and more developed country, Japan is struggling to teach its students English for use in a competitive global economy. While all students now study English at some point during their education, English has only been taught in Japanese primary schools since 2011, and instructional methods at all levels rely on transcription to the Japanese alphabet, memorization, recitation, and, at higher levels, translation. Additionally, there is little emphasis on English as a tool for international communication. A series of education reforms has been implemented in an attempt to improve English proficiency, so far with no measurable impact on adult learners communicative skills.

The approaches to problem solving and organizational change affect the capacity to act strategically as leader managers. Our mindset and thought processes can affect how we drive organizational change. It is important that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is recognized as much more than an organizational development tool and therefore utilize its strength in research to transform organizations. As posited by Watkin & Mohr (2001) AI can be used to reshape the practice of organizational and educational learning, design and development; an orientation to organizational change. Understanding and applying appreciative inquiry can affect the influence and change process as managers and decision makers to approach organization problems with skills and perspectives that are informed by thought that address the context, complexity and significance of organizational situations.

Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry according to Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) is the study of what "gives life," energy and vitality to organizations, teams and people when they are at their best. Appreciative Inquiry does not assume that any person or organization is always at its best. It does however posit, that both research and experience show, that people learn, and organizations change most readily when they focus on, study, and engage in dialogue about strengths, patterns of success and who they are at their best. Based on this purpose, the Appreciative Inquiry process engages large groups of people in dialogue and deliberations about their individual and collective strengths, their hopes and dreams for the future, as well as opportunities and plans for collaborative action.

In their book titled, *"Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change"* Cooperrider &Whitney (2005) proposed "a new model of change leadership" (p.2) for organizational improvement. Appreciative inquiry demonstrates that within organizations nowadays, many leaders, professionals, and staff members focus on how to identify and solve problems, how to overcome their weaknesses and defects, and how to cover and polish their disadvantages. In this way, everyone is surrounded by a myriad of problems, difficulties, and weaknesses that give rise to a negative feeling of their organizational environment. Within such an organization, both leaders and staff members are passive and possess a low morale. However, appreciative inquiry calls for people to "approach the problem from the other side" In essence, problems are not to be ignored, but to be examined from a positive perspective, because appreciative inquiry "suggests the idea that collective strengths do more than perform- they transform" which in of itself is organizational improvement.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach to learning, change, planning and implementation. Using AI as a process to design a curriculum produces organizational learning opportunities and creates the conditions for a remarkable implementation. Applying AI to the capstone project involves the 4D cycle which includes: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Likewise, understanding and applying appreciative inquiry can affect the influence and change process as leader managers and decision makers to approach at the Board of Education with skills and perspectives that are informed by thought that address the context, complexity and significance of organizational situations.

AI can be used to redesign the practice of organizational learning, design and development- an orientation to change (Cooperrider &Whitney 2005). Through AI, curriculum transformation can occur as all stakeholders will be involved in 4D process hence they are involved in creating and implementing the transformation based on personal and collective strength.

4-D Process

According to Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) the process generally follows the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Process: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.

Figure 1. Appreciative Inquiry "4 D" Cycle (Cooperrider &Whitney, 2005).
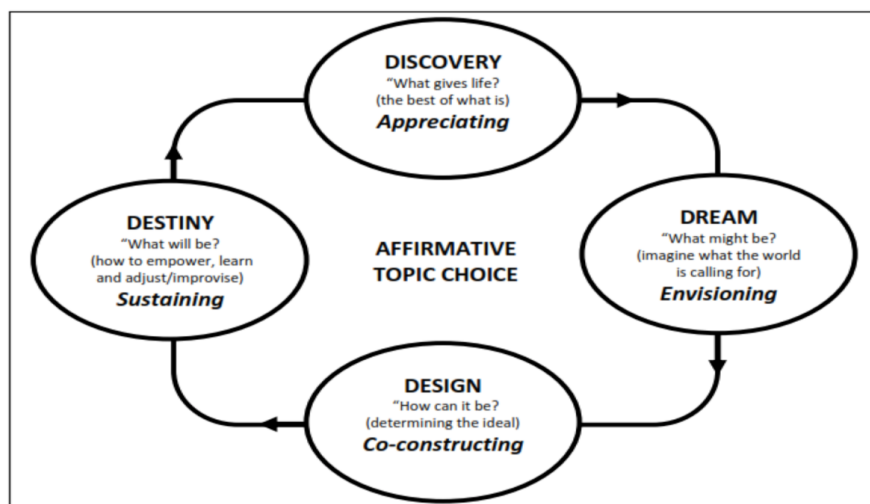
The four key phrases of an AI process includes:
Discovery

The first phase in the model it consists of participants interviewing each other and sharing stories about their peak experiences.

Dream

Based on the information obtained from the interviews, employees envision themselves and their organization functioning at their best. Through various kinds of visualization and other creative exercises, participants think broadly and holistically about a desirable future.

Design

Based on these dreams participants propose strategies, processes, and systems; make decisions; and develop collaborations that will create and support positive change. They develop provocative propositions or possibility and design statements that are concrete, detailed visions based on what was discovered about past successes.

Destiny

In the Destiny phase, participants begin to implement both their overall visions of the Dream phase and the specific provocative propositions of the Design stage. This phase is ongoing as participants continue to implement changes, monitor their progress, and engage in new dialogue and Appreciative Inquiries. AI is so structured that it engages employees to identify and co-create an organization's future. Understanding and applying appreciative inquiry can affect the influence and change process as leader managers and decision makers to approach organization problems with skills and perspectives that are informed by thought that address the context, complexity and significance of organizational situations.

Open Ended Interview Questions that Address Organizational Improvement

AI is so structured that it engages employees to identify and co-create an organization's future. Understanding and applying appreciative inquiry can affect the influence and change process as leader managers and decision makers to approach organization problems with skills and perspectives that are informed by thought that address the context, complexity and significance of organizational situations. According to Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) the AI interview process generally follows the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Process. The discovery phase, which is the first phase in the model consists of participants interviewing each other and sharing stories about their peak experiences.

The AI interview questions are structured to address organizational issues and problems from a more constructive perspective by reframing problem statements into statements that focuses on strengths and successes. In formulating AI interview questions Vogt, Brown & Issacs (2003) believes that examining each question is crucial to the interview process. The researcher should therefore ask themselves:
•   Which questions assume a solution?

- Which assume error or blame, leading to narrow discussions or defensiveness?
- Which stimulate reflection, creativity, and/or collaboration among those involved?
- What assumptions or beliefs are we introducing with this question?
- How would we approach this issue if we had an entirely different belief system?

Vogt et al (2003) adds that paying close attention to the construction, scope and assumptions of the questions asked will connect ideas and find deeper insights that may create a forward movement.

AI and organizational Improvement

An example of the appreciative inquiry process is outlined in the case of Nutrimental Foods of Brazil (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cooperrider & Whitney (2005)explains how the closure of the plant for a full day brought all seven hundred employees together for a day of discovery into the factors and forces that have given life to the system when it had been most effective, most alive, and most successful as a producer of high quality health foods. With cheers and good wishes, a smaller group of one hundred fifty stakeholders from all levels, suppliers, Appreciative Inquiry distributors, community leaders, financiers, and customers went into a four-day strategy session to articulate a new and bold corporate dream. With the stories from the day before in mind, people were asked to dream: "What is the world calling us to become?" "What are those things about us that no matter how much we change, we want to continue in our new and different future?"

After four days of appreciative analysis, planning, and articulation of three new strategic business directions, the organization launched into the future with focus, solidarity, and confidence. Six months later, record bottom-line figures of millions of dollars are recorded; profits are up 200 percent. Co-CEOs Rodrigo Loures and Arthur Lemme Netto attributed the dramatic results to two things:
1. Bringing the whole system into the planning process
2. Realizing that organizations are in fact "centers of human relatedness which thrive when there is an appreciative eye—when people see the best in one another, when they can dialogue their dreams and ultimate concerns in affirming ways, and when they are connected in full voice to create not just new worlds but better worlds."

These meetings and discussions with various stakeholders and collection of data showed how as a system they were all dependent on each other to achieve organizational objectives. Understanding and applying appreciative inquiry can affect the influence and change process and approach organization problems through the provision of skills and perspectives that are informed by thought that address the context, complexity and significance of organizational situations.

Traditional Approach to Organizational Change vs Appreciative Inquiry

Figure 2. Problem Based questions versus Appreciative Inquiry Questions on Education Reform

Problem Based Interview	AI Interview Approach
Main Focus: Problem Question 1. In what ways does your understanding of the current education reform impact your classroom instruction? 2. What is your systematic approach to incorporating the strategies and structures of the education reform in your teaching?	Main Focus: Discovery 1. What do you appreciate most about the education reform? What aspects of the education reform do you feel encouraged to use in the classroom? 2. Since the start of the education reform, what are some of the positive outcomes you have experienced from using the strategies and structures of the education reform in your teaching?
Main Focus: Solution Questions 3.What measures can you employ to increase your knowledge about language strategies that are aimed at developing student's English proficiency and help students actively utilize the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in the classroom and throughout their lives by the time of graduation? 4.How can you become a change agent and motivate other teachers to embrace the BOE's effort of English education reform in order to meet the learning needs of the students?	**Main Focus: Dream** 3.I know you work extremely hard to develop the student's English proficiency and help students actively utilize the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). What could happen that would make you feel fully engaged and energized about the education reform process? What growth have you seen in your use of the strategies and structures of the education reform in your teaching? 4.What would it take to create change and motivate other teachers to embrace the English education reform in order to meet the learning needs of the students?

A comparison of the interview questions in figure 1 highlights the opportunities that can be discovered and how improved practices can be implemented. Carefully analyzing the questions shows that the problem-based questions though open-ended

seems very narrow and can evoke a defensive response as seen in the sample group meeting. In the meeting Tina tried to justify her answers rather than proceeding along a framework of inquiry. This reveals that the problem based interview is less likely to result in individual or organizational improvement.

In contrast, the AI interview questions focus on the discovery and dream phases and opens the responder's mind more by stimulating extensive reflecting thinking and more creative responses. Additionally, the scope of the questions matches the needs being addressed; the discoveries that are being pursued. Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) posits that the appreciative interview is grounded on discovery. At the discovery phase every question is positive allowing people to study what makes them the best, analyze and map their positive core and investigate their root causes of success.

Following the discovery phase is the dream phase and as seen in the formulated AI questions, "interview stories and insights get put together to constructive use; people listen carefully to moments of organizational life at its best and share images of their hopes and dreams for their collective future" (Cooperrider & Whitney ,2005, p. 27). These questions would generate images of possibility and potential. In the negotiation process a positive attitude of AI would allow us to focus on "what we want for the education system in Japan" rather than "what we don't want". Stakeholders will be able to work as a collaborative team, due to the influence of the organization's need to succeed, to identify aspirations and desired results that will create a compelling vision of the future using the best of the past and also inspires and challenges the status quo. Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) adds that after the strategic focus or dream is articulated attention is turned to developing the ideal organization (appreciative organization), the design and destiny phase in relation to its world.

Conditions for Success

Questions one and two of the AI approach incorporates what Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) identifies as the "freedom to be known relationship" (p.56). The teachers are treated beyond the role of just being a teacher to that of "human being" (p.56). The teachers will therefore feel as part of a team equipped with the power to influence change that will result in organizational improvement. The second freedom, the freedom to be heard is highlighted in the third AI question. This question aids listening and hearing and allows the teachers to recognize that they are appreciated, heard and recognized. The question highlights empathy, "I know you work extremely hard to develop the student's English proficiency and help students actively utilize the four language skills…which is quite inviting and will prompt teachers to provide information and ideas that can catapult change and improvements.

Furthermore, question four addresses the freedom to act with support. The AI framework provides opportunities for employees to be free to act with support. The teachers can recognize that others truly care about their work. This will then motivate them to become cooperative and innovative whilst feeling safe to experiment. Additionally, this drive will see them performing at optimal levels in the organization and embracing the well needed change.

Methodology: Organizational Description

AI's Applicability: Shizuoka Prefectural Board of Education

The Prefectural Board of Education (BOE) is a representative council established to oversee matters related to education in accordance with the Act on the Organization and Operation of Local Educational Administration in Japan (MEXT, 2017). The main role of the BOE's education center is to provide quality teacher training. Currently, in increasing efficiency the center provides in-house training as opposed to outsourcing for trainers which increases profit margins. The education center of the BOE like most Japanese working environment predominantly has a culture that surrounds openness, therefore engraved in the organizational processes is an established culture of openness and collaboration. The education center provides a range of services which includes training rooms, meeting rooms, teacher-training programs, test-recordings, administration support, ICT support, resource library and video conferencing.

The primary mission of the education center is to promote proper education in response to changes in Article 1 of the Japanese society, Act on the Organization and Operation of Local Educational Administration which states that "Education must be provided with the aim of fully developing the individual character… to cultivate a people that is sound in mind and body and imbued with the qualities that are necessary in the people who make up a peaceful and democratic nation and society" (MEXT, 2017).

The education center goals and strategies are based and focused on the understanding of its mission. Consequently, for example, it provides teachers with a broad general education, training and development along with advanced knowledge and practical instructional skills aimed at providing students with the best education. It persistently seeks to provide continuing professional development for teachers and the wider school community, operate as a meeting center for the local school community, promote lifelong learning, conduct educational research and provide guidance on specialist matters concerning education.

The education center has a productive team that works hard. This comprises of individuals who are intrinsically motivated, certified and knowledgeable about educational practices globally. The entire staff are qualified trained teachers who are now consultants with the BOE. There is also a variety of cutting-edge technology ranging from computers to software that aids in the production of high quality and interactive training seminars.

Findings

Using AI for Educational Reform Shizuoka Education Center

Developing the AI interview questions for the education center during the period (2017-2018) required immense thought and was no easy feat and required critical thinking and reflection. According to Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) the AI interview process generally follows the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Process. The discovery phase, which is the first phase in the model consists of participants interviewing each other

and sharing stories about their peak experiences. The AI interview questions are structured to address organizational issues and problems from a more constructive perspective by reframing problem statements into statements that focuses on strengths and successes. Bushe (2013) characteristics of AI interview questions was used as a guide in ensuring the right path is followed. It was ensured that the questions were:

- surprising, causing people to reflect and think.
- touching people's heart and spirit.
- forces to look at reality from varied perspectives.

When employees are open and cognizant of the AI approach powerful positive questions can be asked for example at the Board of Education:

- What is our proudest achievement in the last year or two at the BOE?
- What do we do or provide that is world class for our stakeholders, employees and industry?
- What new skill do we need to move forward as trainers?
- How can we best meet the needs of teacher, employees and the school community?
- What strategic initiative would support our aspirations?

At the BOE these questions generated images of possibility and potential. In the negotiation process a positive attitude of AI allowed us to focus on "what we want for the BOE" rather than "what we don't want". We were able to work as a collaborative team, since we were influenced by the organization's need to succeed, to identify aspirations and desired results that would create a compelling vision of the future using the best of the past and also inspires and challenges the status quo.

Discussion and Conclusion

AI is essentially a research method that seeks to unravel the strengths of the organization and discover the organizational factors, that create success in the past and then build on those factors to help the organization create a positive future. Appreciative Inquiry is referred to as a both a philosophy and a methodology for positive change. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI can be considered an alternative approach, framework or mindset that focuses on highlighting and affirming personal success factors within an organization that is utilized with existing organizational development interventions such as strategic planning, organizational design, restructuring or project evaluations.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach to learning, change, planning and implementation. Using AI as a process to reform education in Japan will produces organizational learning opportunities and creates the conditions for a remarkable implementation. Applying AI to organizational change involves the 4D cycle which includes: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Through this process change can occur. Through AI, educational transformation can occur as all stakeholders will be involved in the 4D process hence they are involved in creating and implementing the transformation based on personal and collective strength. Using AI will definitely ensure that the purpose of reform which is to implement changes in English education in order to improve the speaking proficiency of Japanese students is fulfilled.

AI is so organized that it engages employees to recognize and co-create an organization's future. Understanding and applying appreciative inquiry can affect the influence and change process as educational leaders and decision makers to approach educational problems with skills and perspectives that are informed by thought that address the context, complexity and significance of organizational situations. It addresses organizational issues and problems from a more constructive perspective by reframing problem statements into statements that focuses on strengths and successes. It is recommended that educational institutions in Japan get on board in utilizing the strengths of AI. The Appreciative Inquiry process engages large groups of people in dialogue and deliberations about their individual and collective strengths, their hopes and dreams for the future, as well as opportunities and plans for collaborative action.

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