

# **Implications of the Course of Study Reforms on English Language Teaching in Japanese Secondary Schools Toward Teaching English as an International Language**

Yutaka Fujieda

## **Keywords**

English teaching methodology, communicative language teaching, English teaching license, EFL education, World Englishes

## **Abstract**

Many universities in Japan have been offering the teaching certificate programs to train highly qualified teachers. Even though graduate schools have set up programs for more disciplinary courses for English language teaching (ELT), few have been developed at the undergraduate school level. Thus, pre-service English teachers can only learn about ELT pedagogical issues in English Teaching Methodology courses. Moreover, ELT in Japan still adheres to a principle of English speakers' norms and aims for native speakers of English for communication partners. Since English has become an international language or a lingua franca in the globalized society, prospective English teachers must recognize the growing importance of English language variations to teach English as an international language. This paper focuses primarily on pedagogical issues to teach in English methodology classes in accordance with the future reforms of the teaching-training program. To do this, discussions include revision of the Communicative Language Teaching approaches and application of World Englishes into ELT at the secondary school level.

## **Introduction**

The system for obtaining teaching certificates in Japanese higher education is set to undergo a major change. A new teacher-training program will be implemented in the 2020 academic year, as per the proposal of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). All universities that provide teacher-training courses will undergo a review process due to revisions to the School Education Law (MEXT, 2017). The English teacher-training program includes the core curriculum and

has several required classes to reinforce professional English instruction for elementary school students and to further the communication abilities of secondary school students.

Many universities have been offering the teaching certificate programs to train highly capable and qualified teachers. Even though graduate schools have established programs for more disciplinary courses for English language teaching (ELT) (Hino, 2017), few have been developed at the undergraduate school level. Especially, pre-service English teachers can only learn about ELT pedagogical issues in English Teaching Methodology courses. Furthermore, English teachers are required to improve communicative teaching skills with four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) drawn from the concept of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT helps learners improve their language skills, but several critics have discussed ways to incorporate the CLT approach into language teaching more appropriately (Byram & Hu, 2013; Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). Moreover, ELT in Japan, overall, still adheres to a principle of English speakers' norms, targeting native speakers of English for communication partners. Since English has become an international language and is used as a lingua franca in the global context, prospective English teachers need to recognize the growing importance of English language diversity and teach English as an international language (EIL) (McKay, 2002; Matsuda, 2012, 2017a). To do so, the English teaching-training program encourages pre-service teachers to realize the importance of EIL and to understand it is important "not merely to acquire new skills and techniques but rather to embrace an entirely new way of thinking about English language teaching and learning based on a newly acquired set of knowledge" (Matsuda, 2017b, p. xiv-xv).

This paper addresses pedagogical issues in accordance with the future reforms of the teaching-training program. The purpose of this paper is to guide aspiring English teachers to adopt flexible ways of teaching EIL through English Methodology courses. First, this paper begins by contextualizing the process of becoming an English teacher to explain the reasons behind the proposed changes to the course of study for foreign languages. The next section discusses the background of English educational in Japan and reviews the concepts of English as a foreign language (EFL). Then, the current predominant approach to English instruction in Japan, CLT, is covered to revisit how the concept has become the foundation of second language (L2) education. The following section highlights the increasing need to adopt to the notions of World Englishes (WE) and to apply it into ELT at the secondary school level. Finally, this paper concludes with a summary and the future state of English teachers.

## 1. Transformation of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages

The Japanese education system allows undergraduate students to study for a teaching license in a particular subject in any department. Students who want to receive a license must take extra classes for teacher training and complete the disciplinary classes for their chosen subject. For instance, prospective students of English teachers are required to take educational courses (e.g., theory, ethics, and principles of education) as well as language and pedagogy courses (e.g., linguistics, literatures, English philosophy). Although the curriculum requirements for a teaching certificate vary by university, the required credits are mandated. When students have finished their teacher-training courses, they can graduate with a certificate that allows them to teach at the secondary school level. During the recruitment phase, all prospective teachers must attend a renewal course for teacher certificates and teacher training so that they can contribute professionally (MEXT, 2007).

MEXT complies with the educational guidelines and reviews them approximately every 10 years. The EFL course of study has been revised to adapt to the age of globalization. Previously, English education in Japan emphasized language accuracy by learning fundamental linguistic structures. The language instruction helped students improve their literacy skills and employed the grammar-translation approach (Seargeant, 2011). However, little attention was paid to listening and speaking. Such limited instruction hindered the development of students' communication abilities and resulted in a lack of practical language use.

The revision to the course of study in 1989 included a concrete goal to develop positive attitudes of communication. As the communicative approach was emphasized in the early 1990s, an Oral Communication class was adopted in the high school curriculum (Okada, Blenda, Shimabayashi, & Ehara, 2015). In the current field of English education, the term, "communication" provides the key to push English educational reforms and has adhered to a policy that serves to bolster the development of communicative skills. Furthermore, with globalization across the world, the Japanese government suggested a plan to nurture a citizenry that can flourish in the globalized societies. To achieve this domestic goal, the government argues that English education is essential to helping people adjust to globalization (MEXT, 2007). Thus, the government designed the plan, "Promotion of Global Human Resource Development," which included the key educational points: Strengths of practical English education, promotion of study abroad for high school students, and development of qualifications and abilities of English language teachers (MEXT, 2012).

Currently, MEXT is aiming to further enhance English education policies. The

first major reform is that English classes will be introduced in earnest from the fifth or early grade starting in 2020. Several elementary schools have already started to teach English from the fifth grade so that students can interact with English through listening and speaking activities. The purpose of these classes is for students to become familiar with English by hearing the sounds and pronunciation through songs and games, lowering resistance to the language from an early age. From 2020, English will be offered as a subject in the fifth-grade curriculum using a government-authorized textbook. As such, students' English performance will be evaluated and graded; they will also learn English for approximately 70 hours a year (MEXT, 2017). The second major change is that English-medium instruction will be initiated at the secondary school level. English classes need to be conducted in English to facilitate classroom tasks, communicate effectively with students in junior high school, and pursue sophisticated language performance in high school. Such English-medium teaching has raised important concerns among in-service teachers, such as students' lack of understanding, classroom management, and teachers' difficulty in explaining in English (Hashimoto, 2013; Patrick, 2017; Rose & McKinley, 2017). Even though the policy causes confusion in schools, MEXT seeks to increase the profile of the English teaching policy by conducting class in English.

As MEXT facilitates communicative approaches in ELT as the language policies, teaching and English methodology classes should encourage pre-service teachers to emphasize speaking proficiency based on CLT. The next section revisits CLT approaches in Japanese EFL contexts appropriate to the new era of English education at secondary schools.

## **2. EFL Education and CLT**

In EFL settings, the use of English is quite limited in daily life. From the educational viewpoint, the purpose of EFL is to understand various language differences and improve the language skills to adapt to specific situations (Gebhard, 2017). Students learn English to develop their language proficiency, use it in business situations, or to pursue degrees in foreign countries. In many EFL contexts, ELT regularly teaches to the test. While students have to gain English strategies and knowledge to prepare for the exams, teachers need to provide more language knowledge so that students can succeed on high-stakes exams and develop their overall language accuracy.

Japan is one of the countries where English is learned as a foreign language. Traditionally, the audio-lingual and grammar translation approach was preferred in teaching; however, CLT is currently emphasized so that students have the opportunity to interact with English inside the classroom. This communicative approach serves to

counter the negative publicity of lower-level speaking proficiency; Japanese people cannot speak English and Japanese English education overemphasizes the grammar-translation approach rather than the common practices of English conversations. CLT has been the predominant approach for ELT in Japan since the 1990s due to the fundamental reforms to educational guidelines. Even though CLT includes the word “communicative,” the goal of the method does not only foster the development of face-to-face communication. The specific goals of CLT reflect the needs of language learners in a particular setting, since a pillar of the approach is “the understanding of language learning as both educational and a political issue” (Byram and Hu, 2013, p. 136).

To adapt the CLT approach to be more inclusive, teachers should encourage students to use English in various situations and for a variety of purposes. Historically, CLT has aimed to develop learners’ sociolinguistic competence based on Hyme’s notions (1972). While Chomsky’s language competence was dominant, the focus of language learning shifted from competence to the use of language appropriate to a given situation. CLT actually deals with vocabulary or grammatical components, but it does not focus exclusively on the language itself, but rather emphasizes the function of the language. Thus, English education based on CLT methods needs to be revisited to suit the language needs of Japanese secondary schools. In the course of study proposed by MEXT, communicative competence is the core of learning a foreign language. The term “communicative,” does not simply refer to speaking proficiency, but includes discourse competence. Thus, MEXT encourages comprehensive communicative ability by understanding oral and written discourse and fostering output with four skills in the course guideline (Okada, et al., 2015).

CLT is expected to provide students with the chance to improve their linguistic performance in various situations. Farrell and Jacobs (2010) suggest eight elements, with respect to the CLT paradigm shift, to gain further understanding and use of them. The brief descriptions of the elements are as follows.

- *Learner Autonomy* is significant for making learners independent and establishing learner-oriented classes.
- The *Social Nature of Learning* requires collaborative interactions and accelerated learning with people inside and outside of the class.
- *Curricular Integration* is a way of L2 teaching that “fuses knowledge from different disciplines to create more meaningful contexts for overall learning” (p. 9).
- *Focus on Meaning* encourages students to clarify their learning objectives

and understand what they study.

- *Celebrating Diversity* raises awareness of learners' differences, not only in their languages but also their sociocultural backgrounds, to make students aware that there is no standard ELT.
- *Expand Thinking Skills* means that the learning process stresses the importance of enhancing the cognitive performance, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflection skills.
- *Utilize Alternative Assessment* gives learners a chance to evaluate "themselves, peers, and 'how' and 'what' of their English as a second/foreign language learning" (p. 11).
- *Teachers as Co-learners* views teachers as collaborative members of the classroom community through joint learning with students.

In Japan's English education, communication ability seems to be overemphasized with reflection from the past grammar-focused instruction. Many pre-service and even active teachers have misconstrued communication skills and the CLT approach as the mere development of speaking aptitude, understanding correct pronunciation, and mimicking the ways of speaking by native speakers. Such a misconception problematizes the expectations and policies of the course of study because the CLT approach "seemed congenially implemented given the constraints faced by an individual teacher without understanding what exactly the CLT approach means" (Farrell and Jacobs, 2010, p. 13). As the study guideline suggests, more nurture of comprehensive communication skills is significant by teaching four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Teachers need to reaffirm the concept of CLT to help students exercise their ability developed in their actual practice and in different situations.

### **3. Awareness of World Englishes (WE)**

Drawn from the concept of World Englishes (WE), English is divided into three types: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle (Kachru, 1992). The Inner circle, where English is spoken in English-speaking countries, views English as the standard. English in the outer circle areas (e.g., Singapore, India) is used as a second language; but that of the expanding circle countries (e.g., China, Japan, Russia) is a foreign language.

Traditionally, approaches to English teaching targeted an achievement of learning with norms of the inner circle countries. Language practices were conducted by "using the native speaker as the yardstick for measuring proficiency, positioning the native speaker as the future interlocutor for English learners and assuming that learners

will use English in Inner Circle cultures” (Rose, 2017, p. 169). In this sense, the central goal of developing students’ English abilities was to communicate with English natives rather than with people from around the world. As the use of the English language has become worldwide and common in international contexts, the native-oriented approaches have provoked critical discussions in ELT. Therefore, the pedagogical purpose of English needs to address practicality and feasibility to be rooted in a local learning setting (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

To utilize English abilities in a globalized society, it is imperative to introduce the concept of WE and to reconstruct flexible teaching methods (Matsuda, 2017a). As ELT in Japan is set up as a foreign language, models of native English, especially American English, are socially expected and accepted. Such “native speakerism” has remained in English education to express thoughts clearly: Mimicking pronunciation and speaking like native speakers (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Looking at global contexts, English has been seen as a language for those who speak it across the world, not just those of English native speakers. The widespread dissemination of English on a global scale has brought about the mainstream recognition of English varieties used in different areas. Especially, English in outer circle countries enhances the international standing equivalent to that of the inner circle countries. Moreover, the increasing number of nonnative speakers has shattered the notion of English, especially the term of “EFL” (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2017). The critical concept of WE places a high priority on EFL because many EFL learners “feel a sense of ownership toward that language that they do not claim for any other language other than their own L1” (Bayyurt and Sifakis, 2017, p. 5).

This shift from native English-centered teaching is predisposed to penetrate into ELT curriculum at secondary schools. Even though more challenges or concerns will be raised, applying WE into pedagogical efforts in the secondary school curriculum contributes to an understanding of intercultural communication from an early age (Lee, 2012). As Kubota (2012) argues, learners should be aware of the existence of English diversity used in the world. By doing this, the variations learners are exposed to are “valued as legitimate modes of communication” (p. 56). To fulfill the demand for global communication, students have a chance to be more exposed to diverse types of English with the specific purpose of communications rather than relying on conventional native-English norms. This WE paradigm proposes the challenging but valuable language instruction for intelligibility and communication in English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2009; Kubota, 2012).

Several concerns about introducing WE at the junior and high school levels

need to be addressed before implementing changes in methodology classes and ELT. Materials are a major concern when it comes to facilitating the introduction of WE. Although the diffusion of WE has been increasing, many published textbooks for ESL/EFL classes retains residual beliefs about English teaching. Many materials emphasize target grammar in the dialogues, development of vocabulary skills, and include content relating to the culture of inner circle (McKay, 2012). McKay clarifies several principles of materials for EIL. In particular, authorized Japanese-English textbooks need to include the following three points that McKay suggests; EIL materials should (1) be relevant to the domains in which English is used in the particular learning contexts, (2) include examples of the diversity of English varieties used today, and (3) give full recognition to the other languages spoken by English speakers. Thus, the purpose of the current predominant English instruction style is to meet the expectations and purposes of specific learning contexts (p. 81).

Finally, assessments of students' proficiency need to be considered to adapt to WE approaches. In English education in Japan, evaluations take place in the form of school exams (mid-term and final) to mark. The grades are important for students in terms of enrollment in high school, college, and university. However, as the future course of study shows, concrete systematic reforms like entrance exams will be implemented. In university exams, not only paper-based tests but also language performance (e.g., an oral interview or a presentation) is measured to achieve comprehensive and holistic evaluations. Such an exam transformation inevitably leads to a focus of learning on language output. Lowenberg (2012) presents the foresight into the future language assessment:

Equally important to the testing of English proficiency will be the use of assessment instruments to measure students' readiness to engage in interactions across varieties of English, including not only students' comprehension and interpretation skills, but also their abilities to adjust attitudinally to the inevitable communication breakdowns that they will encounter (p. 98).

MEXT has underscored the significance of flexibility in English usage in the context of globalization as one of the goals of English education. To gauge learners' language proficiency from the WE perspectives, a review of the assessment process is an urgent matter for consideration.

Applying WE into English instruction is challenging at secondary school levels. To do it does not mean that native English should be marginalized or avoided in English classes. To begin learning a new language requires the learner to understand the features of the language such as pronunciation and linguistic structures. Yet, in Japan or



expanding circles, native English varieties are taught as “the only legitimate instructional model” (Matsuda, 2017b, p. xv). Currently, speakers of non-native English outnumber those of English natives, giving rise to English as an international language or as a lingua franca (Fujieda, 2012). Even though scholars define the concept of WE in various ways, English diversity needs to be seen as valuable and to implement some teaching approaches with WE suitable for the local teaching contexts.

#### **4. Summary**

This paper mainly discusses the pedagogical implications for ELT for prospective English teachers in Japan due to major reforms to teaching-training programs at the undergraduate level. Since pre-service teachers can learn fundamental ELT issues only in English Methodology classes, this paper reports the highlights of the content in an methodology class and suggests aspiring teachers to consider various methods for teaching flexibly and purposefully. MEXT suggests a transformation of the course of study for foreign languages and the program for teaching certificate. ELT in Japan requires communicative abilities gained via the current approach commonly used for English instruction, CLT.

To implement an effective CLT approach, teachers must deepen their understanding of the concept of CLT to help students perform their language actions in local and global situations. Finally, ELT should focus more on English as an international language, whereby prospective teachers become aware of variations of English and incorporate notions of WE into ELT from an early age.

The Japanese education system will undergo a period of drastic change. Especially, in English education, a fundamental overhaul will be explored to foster success in a global society as MEXT has proposed. Historically, the English course of study has been revised to fit the times. Yet, the education changes have also conflicted with in-service teachers and yielded only marginal improvements in language learning. English education in Japan has been called an entrance exam preparation course. However, entrance exams for universities will also undergo a significant transformation from 2020, focusing not on memorization of vocabulary or grammar but language meta-ability. Thus, prospective English teachers should take a flexible stance towards ELT and think about teachability in terms of feasibility of practical language use inside and outside of the classroom so that learners can see themselves as “successes, achieving things as L2 users that are out of reach of monolinguals” (Cook, 2016, p. 188).

Finally, a key for pre-service and even in-service teachers is thinking about how they develop themselves as language teachers. Teachers face some challenges while teaching, such as time management, material use, and interactions with students.

To improve their teaching, professional development is essential for (re)shaping their professional attitudes and (re)constructing their identities as teachers (Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Farrell, 2015). Professional development is important to “develop not only their knowledge of the subject matter, but also their knowledge of pedagogy” (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 385). As such, promoting reflective teaching also promotes the self-development of language teachers. Teaching is a life-long process and so is learning. English has created the borderlessness of language and has become rapidly diversified through globalization. To adapt to new and emerging situations, future teachers should respond to ELT in a positive manner.

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## 要旨

### 学習指導要領の改定から中等教育の英語教育を考える

#### 国際言語としての英語を目的とした指導へ

藤枝 豊

日本の大多数の大学が教職課程プログラムを設置し、各教科の教員志望学生に対し、様々な講義を提供している。中学校および高等学校の外国語（英語）の教職課程において、専門的な英語教育に関する授業が大学院で開講されている一方、大学では専門的な英語教育科目は十分ではない。特に「英語科教育法」が中学校および高等学校での英語指導を考察する科目であり、昨今のコミュニカティブ中心の指導目的から「Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)」に基づいた指導法が一般的である。そのため、英語教育は、ネイティブ英語話者の発音や表現方法に従い、語学力を高めることに依存している。伝統的な英語指導から脱却できず、新しいアプローチで、言語運用力を育成する指導法を展開するまでに至っていない。昨今のグローバル社会において、英語は「国際言語」や「共通言語」と認識されていることから、英語教員志望者は、英語の変化や多様性を深く理解し、国際語としての英語に基づいた英語教育を中心に指導法を考察する必要がある。

本論文は、改訂される学習指導要領の内容から、CLT 指導の見直しと、World Englishes（世界諸英語）の概念を導入した英語教育の所見を述べる。